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THE TRUTH AND OTHER IRRELEVANT ASPECTS OF NUKULAEAE GOSSIP

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THE QUESTION of whether all societies share the same understanding of the nature of truth has played an important, if often unrecognized, role in anthropological thought since the inception of the field. What constitutes the truth for members of different societies, the extent to which it is a universal or relative notion, and how it is animated, constructed, and negotiated in daily life are fundamental concerns in discussions of the nature of belief systems, rationality, and social action. For example, as Lewis points out (1994:565), underlying the age-old contrast between beliefs in magic and scientific knowledge is the underexamined judgment that mere belief is untrue, unreliable, and irrational, while knowledge is the opposite. Nevertheless, until recently, these epistemological assumptions and others like it had been confined to backgrounded positions in the study of social formations and cultural systems, thus escaping systematic scrutiny.

In recent years, issues relating to ethnophilosophical understandings of the nature of truth have become more visible, along with closely related concepts such as disclosure and concealment (George 1993; Petersen 1993), secrecy (Bledsoe and Robey 1986; McNaughton 1982; Piot 1993), and lying and deceit (Anderson 1986; Bailey 1991; Basso 1987; Biebuyck-Goetz 1977; Gilsenan 1976; Goldman 1995; Lewis and Saarni 1993; Nachman 1984). Petersen's analysis of *kanengamah* (reserve, restraint), a personal quality held in high regard in Pohnpei in Micronesia (1993), is a pertinent example of the way in which issues of truth are typically treated in this burgeoning ethnographic literature.

Pohnpeians view *kanengamah* as a prerequisite for individuals' success in social and political endeavors. The quality manifests itself, *inter alia*, when

an individual carefully avoids revealing the truth all at once, and knows the art of “managing the release of information” (Petersen 1993:343). Yet, for Pohnpeians, *kanengamah* is not the opposite of being truthful but rather goes hand-in-hand with it, because a socially mature person both displays *kanengamah* and has access to the truth. As a result, Pohnpeians view certainty as a rare and ephemeral commodity, and indeed a suspicious one, which leads them to be wary of any authoritative claim to truthfulness, that is, any assertion of raw authority. Petersen’s analysis typifies contemporary anthropological approaches, which demonstrate that the truth is a sociological, and hence inherently relative, category, rather than a phenomenological or “objective” one. Thus different societies give different values to the truth, contrast it with different categories, and evaluate it in terms of moral standards and norms of social relations (cf. Just 1986). Pohnpeians simply do not appear to adhere to Grice’s maxims of quantity (“provide as much information as is necessary, and no more than is necessary”) and quality (“state only what you believe to be true”) in the same way that the average Westerner does, or perhaps they attach different meanings to notions like “necessary” and “believe to be true” (Grice 1975; cf. Duranti 1993).

To date, most ethnographic works on local conceptions of the truth have tended to characterize it as a sort of Durkheimian concept that informs all aspects of the lives of communities. For example, Petersen’s analysis depicts Pohnpeians as being subject to a more or less invariable set of norms regarding concealment of information across all contexts of social life. The assumption underlying such works is that members of a social group articulate a specific theory of truth through their actions and reflections, and that an ethnographer can characterize the general philosophical “climate” of a society. However, notions of what counts as true may differ across contexts of social life, sometimes substantially so. For example, in Western legal settings such as courtrooms, a great deal of time and effort is spent arguing over whether specific pieces of evidence can be used to support the truth of a particular account. The legal criteria for establishing the truth can also be considerably more subtle and covert: Conley and O’Barr (1990) demonstrate how American judges and attorneys favor certain narrative structures over others in courtroom depositions, and how these biases lead them to accept the accounts of certain litigants and witnesses as legitimate testimonies and to reject those that do not conform to their unstated normative expectations. Such works demonstrate that an investigation of philosophies of truth in particular societies must take on an aggressively context-sensitive approach.

Furthermore, recognizing the inherent relativity of ways of conceptualizing the truth across and within societies does not constitute an end in and of

itself. Rather, the aims of an anthropology of truth must strive to understand why the truth has the characteristics that it does for particular groups and subgroups, and should identify the implications of particular ways of defining the truth for social processes and cultural constructs. Outside of anthropology, Foucault's work is most prominently associated with these endeavors (especially 1980, 1982). Claiming that definitions of the truth are regimented by and subservient to the interests of powerful institutions and of individuals associated with them, Foucault demonstrates that the pivotal issue is not so much *what* counts as true or not true but the very *criteria* that determine such. Controlling the criteria for truth is a considerably more subtle and effective way of exercising domination than simply controlling the truth. Truth and power thus stand in a circular relationship of legitimization, which Foucault terms "regimes of truth." The diffuseness of this relationship makes both truth and power particularly difficult to recognize and challenge.

The variability of the nature of truth across contexts is one example of this diffuseness. Because the criteria for truthfulness shift from one setting to the other, many fail to apprehend them. Power can then be understood as the ability to control these shifting criteria. This ability is not "owned" by individuals but is associated with the social positions that they occupy. The relationship between truth, power, and knowledge is most clearly visible in contexts that are elaborated into institutions. Not surprisingly, Foucault's writings and those that his work has inspired have focused on the most formalized and institutionalized social events that societies have to offer: prisons, courtrooms, hospitals, and other bureaucratic, scientific, and educational institutions. Within anthropology, for example, Lindstrom's (1990) analysis of the relations among power, knowledge, and regimes of truth on Tanna (Vanuatu) centralizes formal oratory and interviews, religious discourse, songs, and debates as social events through which these relations can be most fruitfully investigated.

This article does not use a Foucaultian model of the truth, although it is inspired by it. Rather, my analysis addresses two issues traditionally underexamined in works inspired by Foucault's writings. First, though Foucault does help us understand how the truth is constituted in everyday contexts that are not obviously dominated by institutions like the state, he does so only in relation to these institutions. In the everyday existence of individuals, truth inherits the characteristics that are formed in institutions. However, I will argue here that, while everyday definitions of the truth do refer to institutional definitions, they can also depart from them in significant ways. Second, the way in which individuals manipulate definitions of the truth in everyday contexts can open the door to resistance. This stance differs from

Foucault's view: While he does not deny the possibility of agency-based resistance to the depersonalized power of institutions, Foucault maintains that "resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (1978:96), that is, counterhegemonic action ultimately never escapes institutional power, and in fact contributes to its constitution. I will demonstrate here that the regimes of truth imposed from above can be challenged in social contexts, such as gossip, that are least subject to institutional control.

The approach I will argue for may appear at first glance to be pushing relativism and particularism to an unworkable extreme: Not only does the truth differ in nature from one society to another, but it does so from one setting to another within specific societies. Ways of defining the truth in one context are, of course, not completely unrelated to ways of defining the truth in another. Indeed, this article argues that the criteria of truthfulness across social contexts are intimately related to one another on at least two dimensions: through the connection between these criteria and power and prestige, and through the relationship between truthfulness and aesthetic values. However, the criteria at play in one context are not necessarily subsumed by the criteria extant in another.

I will focus on issues of the truth in one social context, namely gossip, about which a few preliminary words are in order. As many analysts have demonstrated, gossip is a complex phenomenon: It can be a political tool, an instrument of community cohesion, a genre of oral performance with aesthetic value, a context in which personal biographies are constructed, a locus where community history is produced, and a way of displaying and manipulating cultural norms.¹ Most relevant here is the fact that gossip frequently emerges as a prime site of political resistance whose mundane setting and apparently innocuous nature make it particularly difficult to control and stifle (see Bailey 1971; Harding 1975; Scott 1985; Szwed 1966). In the ethnographic setting that this article focuses on, gossipers often ridicule the deeds and words of individuals whose ambitions are too conspicuous or who are in positions of power (Besnier 1991, 1993). Derogatory statements, spoofs, irreverent words, and scandal-provoking stories are the bread-and-butter of kitchen-hut conversations and late-night whispers on the shore of the lagoon.

Nonetheless, little research has focused on the mechanisms that make gossip such an attractive weapon of everyday resistance. Insights into this question can be gained only through an investigation of gossip in its natural social context that focuses on the details of how interaction is constructed, which few researchers have attempted. Yet the importance of grounding any investigation of politics in the fine-grained analysis of talk has been amply demonstrated (e.g., Briggs 1992; Duranti 1990; Gal 1989; Hill and Irvine

1992; Irvine 1989; Myers and Brenneis 1984). Talk always presents an occasion when multiple meanings can materialize, and careful attention to talk often reveals that political action is considerably more complex (and sometimes quite different in nature) than it appears at first glance. Political processes and talk are constitutive of one another (Brenneis 1988), in that talk both reflects and creates political processes. I will now investigate the political dimensions of a very brief excerpt from a gossip session and explore what provides resistant qualities to a seemingly innocuous stretch of gossip.

Nukulaelae Atoll

Nukulaelae atoll is a small, relatively isolated community in the Tuvalu group in the central Pacific. The atoll's 350 residents are for the most part monolingual speakers of the Nukulaelae dialect of Tuvaluan, a Polynesian language. Nukulaelae was first sighted by Westerners in 1821 and converted to Christianity by Samoan missionaries in the 1860s at a time of accelerated and traumatic social change. The contemporary inhabitants of Nukulaelae organize themselves in approximately sixty-five households (*fale*), each of which is headed by a person called a *matai*, usually but not always a man.² Households comprise about thirty landholding groups of kin (*pui kaaiga*). Both of these organizational units vary widely in composition and size across time and space.

Today, the atoll is under the political leadership of a Council of Elders (*taupulega*) headed by an elected chief (*ulu fenua*), to which all *matai* in the community theoretically belong. The exact function of the council and the chief, and the extent of their authority, are hotly contested topics (Besnier 1991). Briefly, much of the controversy surrounding leadership and authority on the atoll can be traced to the complexities of its inhabitants' political ideology. Two broad strands can be discerned in the Nukulaelae prescriptive schema for political organization. On the one hand, one finds a yearning for an iron-fisted leadership that, when it operates legitimately, brings prosperity, harmony, and "beauty" (*gali*) to the community, an ideology that strikes a familiar chord in the Polynesian region (cf. Marcus 1989).

Yet there are simply too many ideological factors that argue against the full actualization of this yearning. Indeed, Nukulaelae Islanders also articulate a fierce spirit of egalitarianism, according to which everyone in the community is on the same footing and no one is entitled to exert authority over others. Not surprisingly, egalitarianism is most explicitly articulated in off-stage, private contexts, echoing comparable dynamics reported even of hierarchy-conscious Polynesian societies. However, egalitarianism is a much stronger and more overt force in Nukulaelae society than in most other

Polynesian societies, in that it permeates not just behind-the-scenes talk and action, but also on-stage political maneuvers.

The resulting ideological schema presents severe problems for political action because it leaves little basis for the successful exercise of power and authority. Positions of power, authority, and prestige are temporary and fragile. Politically ambitious agendas are frequently derailed by the community (see Besnier 1993), and power is particularly difficult to locate in Nukulaelae society. For example, the chieftainship, where one would expect power and authority to be concentrated, constantly finds its authority challenged in more or less subtle ways by the rest of the community. The pastor is accorded enormous prestige, but his authority is carefully bounded, and any attempt on his part to partake in the secular affairs of the community is quickly and thoroughly squelched (Besnier 1994). Other candidates--such as the holder of the office of island president, the member of parliament, better educated individuals, or people who have amassed some form of capital outside the community--are constantly marginalized in one way or another, to ensure that they do not develop ambitious designs.

Oratory

Nevertheless, one pattern emerges among holders of positions that are at least good candidates for exerting power and authority over the rest of the community: A skillful control of oratory is useful in lobbying for key political positions. Oratorical skills are particularly important because, without them, one cannot make one's voice heard in public: To open one's mouth in political meetings, at feasts and dances, in church, or at family feasts, one must control the details of oratorical performances lest one be laughed off the stage. Furthermore, one cannot aspire to positions of power, prestige, and influence without at least paying lip service to the spirit of egalitarianism that pervades the community's political ideology, one of the major tenets of which is the establishment of consensus. Thus, an ambitious individual will strive to become the voice of consensus as often as possible and to emerge as the person best able to become the mouthpiece for the truth that most will agree with, while skillfully inserting, of course, a perspective that will benefit him- or herself (cf. Lindstrom 1992:112). Without oratorical skills, one cannot assume this responsibility.

These observations must be qualified by several remarks. First, a minor but significant detail: Oratorical skills are necessary to vie for positions of influence, power, and prestige but alone cannot insure success. Thus, certain individuals may be good orators but other social traits (e.g., their being too overtly ambitious, or simply the fact that they are women) may thwart

any political ambition from the start. The relationship between oratorical skills and politics also has an important implication: Persons who cannot manipulate oratory are simply left out of the limelight and hence out of the race for key political positions.

Second, the exact characterization of skillful oratory is an ambitious project and should be the subject of a different study. Suffice it to say here that Nukulaelae Islanders do not have the highly developed canon of oratorical references, similes, and conventionalized allusions that one finds in, say, Samoan and Tongan oratorical styles. What “proper” oratory consists of is considerably less rigid and open to creativity. However, because the discussion that follows relies on an understanding of what skillful oratory *is not*, a few words about speechmaking are in order.

Oratorical styles are highly fluent, rhetorically well-formed, *recherché*, and replete with parallelisms and synonymous or near-synonymous doublets (e.g., *fakamaaloo kae fakafetai*, “thank you and thank you”;³ *viikia kae taavaea*, “praised and glorified”; *fekau mo gaaluega*, “duties and tasks”; *tuu mo aganuu*, “customs and traditions”). Oratorical texts are framed by more or less elaborate opening and closing formulas, called *fakalagilagi*, and often contain metalinguistic references (e.g., *au e faipati atu*, “I am speaking to you”). Oratory is flowery, “exuberant” (Becker 1988), and “articulate” (McDermott 1988). Indirectness, a salient characteristic of oratorical language, is achieved by drowning meaning in the sheer quantity of words. In contexts that call for oratorical performances, much value is placed on texts in which a lot of form is dedicated to expressing little referential meaning.⁴ Skillful oratory is aesthetically appraised as *gali* (“beautiful”) and *taaua* (important), and is most closely associated with the *maneapa*, a large community house strategically located at the center of the village, in which feasts, meetings of the Council of Elders, and other community-wide functions are held (see Goldsmith 1985 for a general discussion of the *maneapa* in Tuvalu). The *maneapa*, sometimes alluded to as *te fale o muna* or *te fale o pati* (the house of words), is the seat of “high culture,” of every event valued as power-laden and special. Speaking in the *maneapa*, in keeping with the gerontocratic basis of this society, is theoretically restricted to *matai* (although this feature of the “old order” is increasingly being challenged today).

Third, a crucial characteristic of Nukulaelae oratory is its intimate connection to the truth. Like members of other Polynesian societies (cf. Firth 1967 on Tikopia), Nukulaelae Islanders spend much time talking about the truth, and they talk about it in ways that centralize repleteness of information and exuberance of form. In oratorical contexts and other forms of formal language, the verb or noun *tonu*, “truth, true” (etymologically related to

ttonu, "straight"), frequently co-occurs with the word *kaatoatoa*, "complete, whole," with which it forms a doublet, *tonu kae kaatoatoa*, that is, "true and complete." The frequent association of these two terms is not simply a rhetorical device but is symptomatic of a conceptual linkage central to Nukulaelae communicative ideology: What is true is also complete and whole (for further discussion of this point, see Besnier 1994).⁵

Finally, a few words are in order regarding how skills, such as oratorical skills (or rather the lack thereof), are defined in this community. The biography of a member of the Nukulaelae community, including what the individual is good at or not, begins before the person is born. In particular, one inherits one's *pona* (stigmata) from one's parents and grandparents. A *pona* is a negative personal trait, usually of an interactional or social nature (e.g., lying, gossiping, avarice), known to everyone in the community and frequently invoked in everyday discourse as an explanation for behavior. A *pona* is an attribute of both families and individuals; the latter inherit their *pona* through bilateral kin ties, be they through filiation or adoption. Thus, whenever an individual's *pona* is mentioned, Nukulaelae Islanders immediately attempt to relate it to the kin group's *pona*. Indeed, local discourse about personhood primarily consists in finding links between people's conduct and the *pona* associated with their family. Although one can inherit positively valued skills and attributes, these are considerably less interesting to everyone than the negative traits that run in families. This model of personhood does not preclude the possibility that an individual will break the familial pattern; however, to do so, the individual must work awfully hard to "prove" to the community that *pona* do not *always* run in families, because, at the slightest slip, everyone shakes their heads knowingly. The relevance of this economy of personal traits will be made clear presently.

Gossip

The particular form of interaction and political action that I focus on here can be characterized as "gossip." Gossip is generally defined as a negatively evaluative and morally laden verbal exchange concerning the conduct of absent third parties that takes place within a bounded group of persons in a private setting, the gist of which is generally not intended to reach the ears of its victim. This definition works reasonably well for Nukulaelae. As do members of many other societies, Nukulaelae Islanders regard derogatory talk about third parties as devoid of value, an attitude that is nicely invoked by a common metaphor for gossip, *pahi agina i te matagi*, literally, "words blown around by the wind," that is, statements that have little social anchoring and no credibility. At the same time, gossip is also viewed as a reprehend-

sible and potentially disruptive activity in that it potentially undermines the values of *feaalofani* (mutual empathy), *fiileemuu* (peace), and *gali* (“beauty”) that ideally characterize people’s actions. Indeed, gossip on Nukulaelae can thoroughly undermine on-stage political processes. Furthermore, gossip in this community is extremely pervasive, so much so that everyone on the atoll regularly engages in it, even though many would defend themselves vigorously against such a characterization.

The label “gossip” is not without problems. The most important caveat is that its boundaries do not correspond to those of any named category in Nukulaelae society. The word that most closely resembles “gossip” is *fatufatu*, literally, “to make up [stories].” Needless to say, there is little consensus about when a particular story is “made up” and when it represents “the truth,” and thus the label *fatufatu* can potentially be applied to a broad range of talk. The term is also most clearly associated with men’s evaluations of women’s interactional activities. When men engage in what an outsider might recognize as gossip, they are said to *sauttala* (chat); labeling their chatting as *fatufatu* would implicitly question their masculinity, even though men’s *sauttala* resembles women’s alleged *fatufatu* in many respects. The characterization of women’s communicative activities as reprehensible and unwholesome gossip and of men’s as morally neutral talk is a common phenomenon cross-culturally, and it enables men to denigrate women’s social activities and thus justify gender hegemony. Yet the situation I will focus on presently can be described as gossip even though its protagonists are men, because it does fall into a category of interaction that Nukulaelae people ultimately characterize as illicit, counterhegemonic, potentially disruptive, and difficult to control, characteristics that it shares with social events labeled “gossip” in many other societies.

Nukulaelae gossip is intimately associated with liminal and devalued settings, such as kitchen huts, which Nukulaelae people view as dirty and smoky, construction sites (barely domesticated areas), and the beach, which serves as the community’s toilet and where one thus always runs the risk of stepping on feces. The locus of gossip is constitutive of gossip itself, in that members of this community denigrate talk that takes place in such settings, partly because of the nature of its physical setting. Gossip is not *gali*, in sharp contrast to oratory, for a number of reasons: It takes place in ugly contexts; its purposes are potentially disruptive of the “beauty” of the community, in which everything from social relations to the physical appearance of dwellings and bodies is tidy, orderly, and aboveboard; and it is disorderly in form.

Despite its devaluation, gossip has a clear social organization (cf. Brenneis 1984; Goodwin 1990). Gossip commonly takes place among a group of

“regulars” that maintain some compositional consistency over time. The composition of these groups bears only a tenuous relation to the kinship or factional structure of the community: While members of the same family or network tend to socialize together, gossip groups commonly cut across family and network boundaries. In addition, the composition of gossip groups is in a constant state of subtle flux, and this fluidity generally prevents these groups from turning into well-defined political factions. At any given time, gossip conversations are dominated by a *principal speaker*, who addresses a relatively uninterrupted flow of talk to one or, more commonly, several *principal interlocutors*; the talk is also meant to be overheard by a *secondary audience*. Certain people emerge as particularly adept gossipers, a characteristic that is the *pona* of particular families, and these individuals often take the role of principal speaker in gossip groups. Women and men have a tendency to gossip in segregated groups, although it is also common for women to take the peripheral role of secondary audience in men’s gossip groups and vice versa. Membership in gossip groups, be they composed of women or men, is constitutive of friendship ties between adults: People come together to gossip because of friendship, and gossiping is one of the main means of strengthening such ties.

The Ten-Dollar Piglets

In 1985 I spent approximately eight months on Nukulaelae, conducting field research on a variety of issues including emotionality, political life, and gender. Among the materials I collected figured gossip interaction, a form of interaction on which I had already focused my attention during previous field sojourns. To record gossip, I would place a tape recorder in the corner of a kitchen or storage hut and remain next to it to observe whatever was taking place. This practice quickly became accepted as yet another of my strange activities and interests, but some people at the same time enjoyed the complicity of stimulating juicy talk among the conversationalists present. The kitchen hut that belonged to the kin group with which I am associated on the atoll was an ideal site for my enterprises, because its strategic location by the lagoon-side path on the edge of the bush made it a favorite venue for socializing. After warning those present that the tape recorder was on, I would let the interaction take its course. Nukulaelae being very small in both size and population, it was well known on the atoll (if not terribly well understood) that I used these tapes for ethnographic work. The collection method worked so well that it enabled me to obtain what appeared to be a highly naturalistic sample of the most informal of Nukulaelae interactions.

Yet, despite the appearance of extreme naturalism, my presence with a tape recorder was problematic on at least one occasion.

I would first listen to the tapes to make sure that they did not contain any material that could potentially backlash against the conversationalists involved. Dealing with recordings of gossip requires care in a tightly knit society whose attitude towards gossip is full of ambivalence and complexity, and where privacy is limited in large part to what one does not say. After screening, I would hand over my tapes to my research assistant, whom I will call Mafa,⁶ a Funafuti Islander who helped me transcribe (and frequently obtain) these tape recordings. (The social organizations and dialects of Funafuti and Nukulaelae are virtually identical.) Mafa, a complex person in many ways, was well known and generally appreciated on Nukulaelae, where she had joined a kin group headed by Vave, with whom she had kin ties, for the duration of my fieldwork.

Late one afternoon, I recorded a gossip session that, at first assessment, appeared rather banal. In my view at the time, nothing particularly scandalous was uncovered, and the tape contained more silence than talk as the participants lounged around, enjoying the late afternoon coolness that, despite the lack of a breeze, provided a break from the oppressive heat of the day. Present were the “regulars” of that period, consisting of Fousaga, the head of the household; Maika, Fousaga’s *tuaatina*, classificatory mother’s brother (MFBS in this case); Fousaga’s younger brother Taatia; and myself. We sat around in the platformed area of the kitchen hut, while Tagi, Fousaga’s wife, and Sose, Taatia’s wife, were making dinner at the other end of the hut. Smoke from the cooking fire filled the air.

A brief excerpt of what I recorded turned out *not* to be as banal as I had originally thought. This excerpt, narrated principally by Maika, concerned an economic transaction between Vave, my research assistant’s host and kinsman, and Teao, an old friend of his. Vave, in his early fifties, is an ambitious and upwardly mobile father of two. Along with his spouse, he had become a Baha’i a few years earlier. This religious conversion is highly significant, in that until recently all Nukulaelae Islanders adhered to the Congregationalist Protestant Church of Tuvalu, a modern-day product of nineteenth-century London Missionary Society enterprises (see Munro 1982 and Goldsmith 1989 for further historical background). Since the early 1980s a few individuals have either become Jehovah’s Witnesses or converted to the Baha’i faith. Leaving the congregation to which everyone else belongs is considered an act of extraordinary boldness in Nukulaelae society, which constantly stresses communal action, unity of purpose, and oneness of spirit in all arenas of social life.

Why Vave took that step is a very complex question that merits careful analysis but is beyond the scope of this essay. Briefly, Vave himself proposes that the seed of nonconformity had always been in him, and he explicitly links his attraction to a *talitonuga foou* (new belief system) to his nonconformist tendencies. His principal explanation for leaving the church was his displeasure with what he saw as the highly materialistic basis of Nukulaelae Christianity, which he feels is inappropriate for a religious denomination. The atoll's pastor, in Vave's opinion, receives far too great a share of the community's resources. Indeed, the pastor is the recipient of a substantial flow of goods and services, which he reciprocates with symbolic resources, by praying for the well-being of the community in particular. Needless to say, as monetization and capitalist principles are gaining more and more prominence in the economic life of an island with no direct access to a steady source of cash, this system of reciprocity is increasingly becoming the target of criticism and discontent; but few dare to be as vocal in their criticisms as Vave. Because of the complex associations between religious life and economic life on Nukulaelae, leaving mainstream religion seriously compromises one's role in the socioeconomic life of the atoll. As a result, Vave and his wife, as the sole adherents of the Baha'i faith, were quickly marginalized from exchange networks and eventually became the victims of constant, microscopic forms of harassment. Their economic autonomy and the new off-island networks associated with their religious affiliation helped them cope quite comfortably with social marginalization, but this further fueled general resentment. As an outcast, Vave is frequently an object of ridicule and a favorite target of gossip, along with a couple of other marginalized members of the community.

The gossip fragment in question was yet another example of the type of private discourse targeting Vave in the mid-1980s: It assumes implicitly that all participants share the same attitude towards Vave, made up of a mixture of condescension and envy. Immediately prior to the beginning of the fragment, the principal speaker, Maika, had been jokingly discussing with Sose and Fousaga his (fictitious) plans to purchase ducks. The fragment then begins with an analogical change of topic, in which Maika, seizing the slightest opportunity to gossip about Vave, invokes a recent event in which, according to Maika, Vave had offered to sell to Teao a pair of piglets, for which he eventually asked ten dollars each. Even as they are rapidly becoming more common, financial transactions other than monetary gifts play an uneasy role in Nukulaelae society, and they are not commonly engaged in without a certain amount of embarrassment. For example, Nukulaelae people frequently avoid asking directly for the price of items, preferring

indirect means of doing so such as by subsequently sending a child to ask how much money is due. Sometimes, what begins as a monetary transaction becomes a gift, particularly when recipients find themselves unable to meet their debts. But one thing was clear in 1985: No one asked twenty dollars for two piglets, an enormous sum of money for animals that might not survive. In the gossip excerpt, Maika and his interlocutors squeeze out of the incident every confirmation they could find of Vave's avarice and antisocial behavior. Teao, according to Maika, had paid up, being too ashamed to return the overpriced piglets, and was thus duped by the gullibility that had led him to do business with an untrustworthy character. To add insult to injury, one of the piglets promptly died, while the other was barely hanging on to dear life.

When my research assistant, Mafa, heard the recording, she became incensed. She already had been irritated by another of Maika's gossipy pranks, during which he had jokingly voiced his suspicion that Mafa regularly spent the night in my hut "fanning" me, a remark with inappropriate sexual undertones given the close personal and professional bonds between Mafa and me. She dropped her work (I was fishing at the time) and went straight to Vave to report what she had heard, urging him to go and confront Maika. Vave's and Mafa's version of the dealings over the piglets was that Vave had offered the piglets as a present to his old friend Teao, who had insisted on paying for them at a rather inflated price. This interesting insistence may have been motivated by any number of factors, not the least of which being Teao's desire to distance himself from Vave. What is clear is that payment is a violation of accepted norms, according to which a loose system of gift reciprocity is the only morally viable way of conducting business between old friends.

What happened next is a little opaque. Mafa told me in 1985 that Vave had gone to Maika and had *faipati fakallei* (spoken properly) with him; "speaking properly" is a method of conflict management in which parties go over conflictual events, forgive one another, and ostensibly put the past behind them (cf. Besnier 1990a). Vave told me in 1990 that he had talked to Teao semi-informally, ostensibly to minimize my direct involvement in the affair. My own view is that the first version is closer to what took place at the time. The long and short of it all is that everyone was greatly embarrassed. Maika abruptly stopped his late-afternoon visits to Fousaga's kitchen hut and did not resume them for several weeks. Not knowing how to handle the situation, I did my best to avoid him. But the person who ended up with most egg on her face was Mafa, whose precarious position as a stranger and a Baha'i made her a particularly easy scapegoat. According to subsequent

gossip (some of which I simply overheard), she had misinterpreted Maika and overreacted. In any case, gossips pointed out, Maika had told the story to *fai fakkata*, that is, "to make jest." Why did she fail to recognize a funny story that was not meant to be anything more than that? No one seemed to blame Maika for having lied, and no one talked about his intentions other than to underplay the seriousness of his actions. A well-socialized adult on Nukulaelae must always take life in stride and maintain a benign attitude towards the rest of the world; she or he must be jovial, noninterfering, and gentle. There is no greater compliment than to be characterized as displaying a *mata katakata* (laughing face) and a *mata fiafia* (happy face). A good human being is *fiilemuu* (peaceful), one who knows how to control his or her anger at all times. By having reacted the way she did, Mafa fit none of these ideals.

The events following the tape recording reveal tensions between various social categories. First, the events highlight a contrast between people who gossip lightheartedly and people who take life too seriously, or, more generally, between adequately and poorly socialized individuals. There also emerges a conflict between individuals who can perceive boundaries between social situations and understand how norms differ from one situation to another, and people who, like Mafa, apparently cannot. Finally, on a more subtle level, the contrast between Baha'is and "real" human beings (i.e., adherents to the only "true" religion) backgrounds the entire affair, as it had come to background all interactions between Vave and the rest of the community.

The Excerpt

I now turn to a close analysis of the gossip excerpt. Texts of all kinds (and the contexts in which they are embedded) must be understood in terms of the complex array of cultural constructs of which they are constitutive. Interaction fragments, particularly where narrative plays a central role, both articulate and are articulated by the relations among agents, interactors, and the "facts" established through narratives (cf. Bauman 1986; Bauman and Briggs 1990); they rest on and develop (reproduce, modify, add complexity to) the biographies of agents and interactors; and they assume a place in the culture's moral evaluation of interactive acts, giving them various values with respect to truth, beauty, and importance. In short, texts are to be understood in terms of the community's social aesthetics (Brenneis 1987), that is, the standards by which events are evaluated for accountability, effectiveness, and style. I now turn to the transcript of the gossip excerpt, and analyze some of its formal features, evaluating what these features tell us about

- fakafoki te: :- peelaa iaa
ia e:- muna ake loo hoki, e
nofo fua peelaa, ko te lima
40 taalaa. Iaa ia e hai ki ai
i puaka a: :, (.) a Isa ne
ttogi i ei, (2.5)
- FOUSAGA** Mm: = *Hm.*
- MAIKA** = taki lima taalad. (4.0) *Five dollars each. But*
45 Naa a ko ia hoki laa hEE: : *then he didn't even ask how*
ssili atu hoki laa me: :, me *much the pigs were going*
e fia te ttogi o puaka. *for. This done, he goes*
(4.0) (oti n)aa, a(e) *off, and grabs himself a*
(h)ano ia, (.) puke mai *pair of pigs. While that*
50 tena avaa puaka, ((semi- *guy's got three pigs*
falsetto)) kae llei eilaa *[left].*
e- e lua ana puaka. A ko
ia teenei e: tolu ana
punuaa puaka. (4.0) ((low
55 voice))
() ()
[]
- SOSE** ((to N)) Niko koe naa *Niko you're gonna choke on*
maa ausia. *the smoke.*
- 60 **NIKO** llei. = *'t's all right.*
SOSE Mm. *Hm.*
= []
- MAIKA** Naa laa, puke aka ana: *Then he grabs himself a*
avaa puaka, (.) vau ei ia, *couple of pigs, comes back,*
65 *feppaki mai mo: : :* *[and] runs into Vave's boy,*
ttamaliki teelaa a Vave, *he tells that boy Faauga to*
fai (atu) ei kia:- .hhhh *go and (have a look) if*
(.) Faauga kee (hano o *Vave's come back [to ask*
aasi) kee vau ia: :- (.) *him] how much the piglets*
70 Vave me fia ttogi o:- (.) *cost. () the piglets*
punuaa puaka. (4.0) () *to- to the village, and*
a puaka kia:- ki fale, a ko *then I come along again and*
au e toe fanatu koo muna *he tells me that they cost*
mai me e lua- e: : sefulu *twen- ten dollars, ten*
75 taalaa, taki sefulu taalaa *dollars for each pig.*
i te puaka. ((high *What?? [I] tell [him] to*
falsetto, very fast)) *return the pigs but he's*

- 80 Taapaa eel! (.) koo hei *already brought the pigs-*
 laa (o) fakafoki eiloo *I say to him, "You made a*
 puaka i puaka koo oti ne *mistake. You should've*
 aumai nee:- (6.0) Aku *taken those pigs, those*
 muna, "koe e ssee. Moi *larger pigs,"*
 puke pee(laa) koe i puaka
 teelaa:-, puaka kolaa koo
 85 llasi,"
 (3.0)
FOUSAGA Koo fua ei. *And they [should] be*
weighed.
- 90 **MAIKA** [Peelaa a puaka kolaa : *Pigs like that*
FOUSAGA Mm:. *Hm.*
MAIKA kolaa eeloo: koo ssao:- *the ones that have already*
made it-
FOUSAGA A koo fua ei. = *And they [should] be*
 95 = Koo fua ei, kae hano (mo) *weighed then.*
MAIKA = Koo fua ei, kae hano (mo) *And they [should] be*
 au puaka kolaa : *weighed, and you [only]*
 (4.0) *take those pigs tha : : t*
- 100 **FOUSAGA** Teena te faiga, maasei maa *That's the way to do it,*
 puke i punua me: : see iloa *it's no good taking piglets*
 me e oola me e mmate. *cuz you don't know if*
they're gonna live or die.
- 105 **MAIKA** [oo: : : *Right.*

[Gossip, 1985:1:B:258ff]

It should be noted first that the text is generally difficult to follow, even for native speakers. This opacity is strategic and is in fact typical of gossip on Nukulaelae as elsewhere: As Donald Brenneis notes about gossip in Bhatgaon, a Fiji Indian village, "it is often difficult to reconstruct underlying events on the basis of [gossip] texts themselves" (1987:244). Nevertheless, the text exhibits several interesting features. First, the story is highly incidental. The topic is raised as a casual and rather unlikely analogy; in lines 1 to 5, the affair is introduced as a new topic with the comparative *peelaa m-m-mo* (like, as if).⁸ The analogy is followed by several seconds of talk during

which Maika informs his interlocutor that one of the piglets is dead and the other is not doing well. In these lines, Maika moves away from the main story line and would perhaps have continued doing so (or at least he gives his audience that impression) had Fousaga not rekindled the gossip in lines 17-18, with "*Kae fia ttogi?* (And how much did they cost?)." It is also relevant that Fousaga already knows the answer to this question, since he had already provided it in lines 7-8; his question thus does not simply function as a request for information. By line 11, the narrator has done little other than drop a hint, make an allusion, and laugh about it (in line 5). As in Bhatgaon, "one is rarely told why a story is being told, and the links between the account and preceding discourse are not made clear" (Brenneis 1987:244).

Second, the performance is highly dysfluent, even by the standards of informal and unplanned conversation. (It is certainly recognized as such by native speakers.) The narrator hesitates a great deal (e.g., lines 2, 15, 41, 46, 85-97), repairs himself many times (e.g., lines 23, 68-69, and 74), and pauses at syntactic junctures where pauses are least expected (e.g., between three prepositions and their objects in lines 67-71). Several utterances are never carried through to completion (e.g., those ending in lines 38, 50, and 81), and what appears to be the most significant element of several utterances is left unsaid. When he snorts and clears his throat (in lines 1 and 33-34), he does not pause, and the words that follow are colored by the snorting and throat clearing. At the level of phonology and prosodics, Maika's delivery is breathy and creaky (see lines 4, 5, 9, and 67). He switches to falsetto or semi-falsetto voice in several instances (e.g., lines 50-51 and 76-77), a common characteristic of highly informal talk, which never occurs in oratory and similar contexts. Throughout the extract, he voices oral stops in words. Nukulaelae Tuvaluan, like most Polynesian languages, does not have a phonemic voiced-voiceless contrast in stops, and the contrast can be exploited for purely affective purposes. Thus, in line 3, he pronounces the phrase *punuaa puaka* (piglet) as, phonetically, [bunua: buaga], and later on (e.g., line 64) even utters the /k/ sound in *puaka* (pig) as a voiced velar fricative [yy] (i.e., phonetically, [buaɣa]). The voicing of stops is characteristic of very casual talk, and it gives the impression that the speaker is too uninvolved to pay much attention to the contrast between voiced vowels (which always follow consonants in this language) and voiceless stops. Finally, he uses Nukulaelae dialect forms in /h/ throughout, which are devalued compared to the corresponding standard Tuvaluan forms in /f/ or /s/. In one instance (line 49), the /h/ sound is almost imperceptible.

Third, the text is rhetorically poorly formed. It is common for Nukulaelae narrators to "ground" narratives in a great deal of background detail; thus the invocation of many names, in lines 32-42, of individuals playing mar-

ginal roles in the development of the story itself is not unusual. But the narrative in these lines, and in lines 63-85, is highly unfocused. Maika clearly is not concerned with producing an elegant rhetorical performance in the degradation ceremony he is orchestrating.⁹

Finally, the responsibility for providing moral evaluations of the story falls on the all-too-willing audience, not on Maika. For example, it is Fousaga who utters the interjection of scandalized outrage “*taapaa ee!*” in lines 21-22 and the interjection “*ttee!*” in line 11, which have approximately the same meaning (translated here as “You don’t say!”). The audience is highly involved as coauthor of the discourse and is primarily responsible, like the chorus of a Greek dramatic performance, for the affective component of the text. The immediate result of this coauthorship is that a shared complicity in the degradation ceremony emerges, which both diffuses responsibility and binds the interactors together (see also Besnier 1989; Brenneis 1984; Duranti 1986). In short, the victim’s public biography, woven out of many strands, has more than one weaver. The evaluative statements that the narrative contains (e.g., “*koe e ssee* [You made a mistake]” in line 82) are carefully framed as directly reported speech; the utterance is thus deeply embedded in the story world, which makes it particularly resilient to scrutiny (cf. Besnier 1992; Briggs 1992; Hill 1995).¹⁰

Gossip as Antipoetics

Maika’s performance, which epitomizes Nukulaelae gossiping styles but pushes their characteristics to an extreme, contrasts sharply with what is considered “beautiful” and important as canonically embodied in oratorical performances that take place in the *maneapa*. As mentioned earlier, oratorical talk is fluent and well formed, rich in parallelisms and other poetic devices, and framed by elaborate opening and closing devices. Maika’s gossip is characterized by the opposite: It is dysfluent, fragmented, and disorganized; its phonological and rhetorical structures are sloppy; and it is poorly linked to the previous conversation. As such, Maika’s gossip falls squarely in local perceptions of gossip in general: Gossip is the antithesis of beauty because of its physical location, purpose, and form. On the basis of this local characterization, I describe talk that is most antithetical to poetically valued speech as *antipoetic*, that is, talk whose formal features and context place it in the most devalued regions of Nukulaelae social aesthetics. Although this term does not correspond to any particular descriptor in Nukulaelae Tuvaluan, the category it denotes clearly has social validity in local practice.¹¹

It is significant that Nukulaelae Islanders do not have an explicit theory

of oral poetics. Nor do we find in their society the sort of genre elaborations in oral and sung performances that are found in other societies of Western Polynesia (e.g., Tonga), where each genre is associated with highly formalized rhetorical strategies. To be sure, certain formal features recur in valued texts and performances, as described above, but these features are not articulated in an aesthetic self-consciousness. Yet, despite the absence of local theories of verbal aesthetics, one can still speak of a Nukulaelae sense of poetics and verbal aesthetics, to which antipoetics is contrasted. Nukulaelae audiences can discriminate between good orators and poor rhetoricians: they can be moved by the form and substance of particular oratorical performances or by the lyrics of certain songs, even though they do not generally reflect explicitly on the basis of their appreciation (in contrast to, say, the audience of a Tongan song-dance performance).

Earlier, I described the relationship between aesthetically valued rhetoric, truth, and completeness. Extending this model further, a tripartite constitutive link emerges between the truth, completeness, and verbal aesthetics. Because of its formal repleteness and exuberance, formal oratory is maximally truthful; I have also shown elsewhere (Besnier 1994) that church sermons and written texts in general are even better candidates for maximal truthfulness. In oratorical and related performances, the truth is maximally thematized, and it is thus not surprising that only older men, who alone have the authority to assert what is true and what is not, are allowed to talk in these contexts. In contrast, the truth is minimally relevant to antipoetic performances. Because such performances leave much unsaid, understated, or waiting to be filled in by the audience, they lay few or no claim to truthfulness. Thus, by forming his talk as the antithesis of aesthetically pleasing talk, Maika attempts to suspend evaluative criteria of truth that apply to formal talk. In other words, the truth is diffuse in Maika's gossip. First, it is diffuse in terms of what actually gets said, which the performance style makes it difficult to decipher. Second, it is diffuse in terms of who assumes responsibility for what gets said, as the audience is a highly coconspiratorial entity.¹²

Thus, to return to the Foucaultian model of the truth outlined at the beginning of this article, Maika's success rests on his ability to produce a gossip excerpt whose formal characteristics place it outside of the regime of truth articulated in the community's formal institutions. Had the tape recorder not been there, Maika's agenda would probably have been successful: His audience would have enjoyed his performance, dismissed it as unimportant talk, but also retained one of its basic messages--Vave is not to be trusted. However, the tape recorder was there, and suddenly someone placed Maika's diffuse text against criteria for the truth appropriate to orthodox social contexts, an action that effectively derailed the gossipier's agenda.

Antipoetics, Prestige, and Resistance

So far, I have asserted that performances of the type analyzed here are devalued in contrast to oratorical performances. However, this characterization must be qualified. To the extent that the gossip fragment discussed here is representative of most Nukulaelae everyday interactions (and is in fact a superb example of successful gossip, until the derailment), it cannot be completely valueless in the moral economy of Nukulaelae communicative repertoires. Rather, its value lies at the fringe of the community's social aesthetics, in the areas of an already unelaborated social aesthetics that are least explicitly recognized as belonging to an economy of aesthetics.

To understand the value of Maika's performance, some information about the gossipers public persona is necessary. Maika was an elderly man with little overt political or social status in the community. Rather poor, he never developed the *gravitas* in public settings that most of his age-mates cultivated. In Nukulaelae eyes, the synecdoche for this lack of a public presence is the fact that Maika was an extremely poor rhetorician. Judged to be incapable of speaking up in public though his status theoretically entitled him to a voice in contexts such as feasts and political meetings, he differed from most elderly men, who were generally eager to display their oratorical skills. He is reputed to have inherited this complete lack of rhetorical confidence from his forefathers, and his children continue the tradition; it is his family's *pona*. Its symptoms are simple: When members of that family try to make a public speech, they begin to tremble and cry (*e tagi kae polepole*) and can no longer string words into sentences. The family has had this trait *mai mua i lotou tupuga*, "since the time of their ancestors," as one of my consultants put it. Maika's and his kin group's *pona* is a manifestation of a "weak heart" (*loto vaaivai*) and was even compared by one of my interviewees with an illness (*masaki*).

In accordance with Nukulaelae's fiercely egalitarian ideology, any man past a certain age is free to engage in rhetorical performances. At the same time, the ability to do so is not accessible to all, in that some people have an inherited inability to speak beautifully. This seemingly contradictory situation is a perfect example of the classic distinction between equality of means and equality of ends (see Flanagan and Rayner 1988). For an elderly man, the consequences of being literally voiceless in public are grave. Indeed, prestige and, to a large extent, social standing in general depend crucially on one's ability to deliver a complex and elegant rhetorical performance on the spur of the moment. Oratory is one of the few means through which one can acquire prestige and thus lay claim to some form of power.¹³ Even this process is never straightforward, as the competition is fierce. Talking a lot in

public places an individual in the running; talking *well* in public opens the door for prestige accrual.

This prestige is in turn closely linked to power and leadership. Thus, the most important role of the island's *ulu fenua* (chief), an elected rank that theoretically any adult member of the community may fill, and arguably the most powerful and prestigious social role in the society, is to *fakafeagai* (face) the island community, visiting dignitaries, and representatives of island-external powers like the national government. Crucial to the ability to *fakafeagai* is the ability to manipulate high rhetoric. For example, when asked why women are rarely elected as chiefs, Nukulaelae men invariably explain this exclusion in terms of women's assumed inability to speak well.¹⁴ Echoing arguments made in many other societies to justify the exclusion of particular groups from positions of power (Besnier 1990b:434-437; Brenneis 1990:121-124; Lutz 1986:294), they maintain that women, in contrast to men, are great gossipers (although women hold contrary views), have little sense of *mmalu* (dignity), and lack self-control in their interactional habits.

Women themselves acquiesce with some of these judgments, at least in their public relations with men. On the rare occasions when they are called upon to speak in public, they frequently ask for forgiveness for their alleged inability to speak; *e valea te gutu*, "my [literally, the] mouth is unsocialized, ignorant," they claim, sometimes in the process of delivering a beautiful rhetorical performance. (As Scott would predict, the "hidden transcripts" they produce in other contexts often represent reality in rather different terms [1990:70-107].) Voicelessness in public contexts, be it constructed or not, guarantees that one will never have much of a claim to any form of prestige or power.

Thus there is little room in the competition for prestige and power for such voiceless men as Maika, who, unlike women, cannot even justify their voicelessness by invoking gender. Being excluded from orthodox forms of public politics, Maika had become an expert in heterodoxy. Among other things, he had become in his old age a confirmed trickster, adopting a role to which his seniority entitles him in Nukulaelae society, as it does elsewhere in the Pacific. Throwing decorum to the wind, he would engage in antics that blatantly violated Nukulaelae propriety. For example, he would periodically squeeze his genitals between his thighs and, lifting his loincloth from behind, display the result, particularly to women. This sort of behavior provoked very ambivalent responses. It outraged adult men, while women were torn between being horrified and choking with laughter. It is in the context of the persona that he had developed that one should also understand how Maika emerged as a valued conversationalist in kitchen huts and by the

lagoon. Everyone gave him as much conversational floor as he wanted and took delight in listening to his subversive gossip, even if he was thought to go too far on occasion. Maika thus had a strong and loud voice in private contexts, even if his verbal antics could easily be as devalued as his nonverbal ones. Instead of capitalizing on the poetic manipulation of language in public contexts, Maika capitalized on an antipoetic performance style, thereby laying some claim to prestige, albeit prestige of a different kind from that which his age-mates fought over in the *maneapa*. I refer to this type of prestige as *alternative prestige*.^{1 5}

The fact that certain communicative practices can potentially subvert the sociopolitical status quo is certainly not exclusive to Nukulaelae society. In many communities across the world, talk is a principal means through which the underprivileged, the downtrodden, and the powerless resist, and sometimes manage to undermine, structures of inequality, as demonstrated in the growing literature on resistance that pays attention to communicative practices (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1986; Briggs 1992; Ong 1987; Radway 1984; Willis 1977). For example, in rural Lebanon, young men with little social status capitalize on verbal skills “where more solid resources are lacking” (Gilsenan 1976:193), constructing fantastic narratives of their exploits at the expense of agents of their oppression, narratives that are told in dramatic performances to small audiences of their peers. Scott (1985) describes how Malay peasants employ obsequious flattery and religious discourse in their interactions with unpopular landlords and engage in gossip about these landlords as a coded form of coercion.

The Nukulaelae material I have described differs from these other situations in that inequality here does not correlate with patterns of differential access to material resources that delimit clear society-internal boundaries between groups and persons. Indeed, despite accelerated socioeconomic change, land remains the principal measure of economic power, but this resource is distributed roughly equally among kin groups. Rather, inequality rests in large part on individuals’ self-claimed access to symbolic capital, and oratorical skills play a central role in these claims. Not surprisingly, oppositional discourse on Nukulaelae takes a form that differs from the form it takes in social contexts with more dramatic patterns of inequality. In contrast to the theatrical narrative performances of poor young rural Lebanese men, in contrast to the appropriation by Malay peasants of the rhetorical tools of religious obligation in interactions with landlords, the more insidious (and most successful) forms of Nukulaelae gossip capitalize on the *absence* of verbal skills, on inarticulateness, and on one’s ability to place one’s utterances outside orthodox regimes of truth. A good Nukulaelae gossip story such as Maika’s depends crucially on its evasive, marginally

coherent, and dysfluent style. These are the very features that give it subversive characteristics.

On Nukulaelae, and probably in many other communities, the efficacy of the performance as a counterhegemonic act depends crucially on its relation to the truth. As demonstrated here, many formal features of the gossip performance converge on one purpose: that of making truth irrelevant to the quality of the narrative, in order to extract the text from potential scrutiny, for truth according to its locally defined criteria. By doing so the gossip thus escapes, at least at the moment of performance, potential accusations that he is lying.¹⁶ Indeed, the more adept at making the truth become irrelevant to a performance, the more appreciated an individual is as a performer and the greater the alternative prestige.

Making antipoetic discourse one's trademark has important social implications. Since adult men compete for social status through oratorical performances, the gossip's alleged rhetorical incompetence means that he has little or no access to overt forms of power and prestige. This case is thus an example of how devalued discourse is exploited to create and maintain prestige of an oppositional nature. It documents how one individual attempts to cope with social facts that place him at a marked disadvantage in the competition for social status. The strategies he adopts enable him to confront the very processes that place him at a disadvantage and turn these inside out in an insidious, sabotage-like fashion. At the same time, the gossip chooses his victims well: By focusing on the actions of an already marginalized individual to nurture his own alternative prestige, he helps reproduce the structures that marginalize this individual, thus lending further legitimacy to his own search for alternative prestige. Working within the bounds of orthodoxy, since he is gossiping about an individual already bracketed for attack, enables him to engage in his self-serving heterodoxic enterprise (Bourdieu 1977:164-171; see also Abu-Lughod 1990; Briggs 1992). Nukulaelae gossip is thus both a strategic resource used to advantage by some and a form of political action constrained by a variety of historical, sociocultural, and communicative consequences. At play here is the complex linkage among styles of discourse performance, regimes of truth, and the construction of persons as social entities (gossip and victim). Gossip, as the meeting ground for (anti)poetics and politics, is an ideal setting for the unraveling of this linkage.

However, the alternative prestige gained through antipoetic performance is even more fragile than the type of prestige one can claim through overtly valued rhetorical performances, for two major reasons. First, alternative prestige on Nukulaelae depends crucially on certain social boundaries being kept intact. Indeed, when one's antipoetic performance is tape recorded and

heard by others, the performance can be challenged; it can be scrutinized and placed again in a universe of discourse in which truth and lying are again relevant, as was the case in this incident. In such cases, the alternative prestige structure collapses and loss of face ensues. As in other cases of sociopolitical action initially intended to challenge structures of social inequality, but which ultimately promote these structures (e.g., Merton 1957: 421-436), the gossip is reminded that communally sanctioned structures are powerful and not easily challenged.

Second, alternative prestige depends on antipoetic performances that can be characterized as degradation ceremonies (see Garfinkel 1956). In these degradation activities, the actions of individuals with high claims to prestige in public contexts are denigrated, and individuals who are already marginalized, such as Vave, are further ridiculed. As shown earlier, this is done subtly, with as few signs of personal involvement as possible; rather than voicing overt value judgments, the performer carefully lets the audience express negative affect towards the topic of discourse. The reasons for this are simple: Denigrating others is subversive of two of the most important values in Nukulaelae society, *fealofani* (reciprocal empathy) and *fiilemuu* (peace), values constantly invoked in public discourse (e.g., in the *maneapa* and in interviews with the anthropologist). Gossipers must thus depict their victims in a negative light while appearing not to threaten communal empathy and peace (Besnier 1990a). This dilemma is the principal motivating force behind the use of antipoetic discourse strategies. But alternative prestige remains dangerously associated with the subversion of what are perceived as foundational values in society at large, and is thus vulnerable.

Maika's political strategies represent one extreme of a continuum (or perhaps of a series of continua) of strategies that members of the community may adopt at different times and in different contexts to maximize their chances of having a voice--and thus their social resources and their share of power, prestige, and status--while remaining within the bounds of "acceptable" behavior, or perhaps while negotiating what these bounds are. It is suggestive to compare this strategic approach to communication and micro-politics on Nukulaelae with what Brady describes as "strategies for survival" for Tuvalu in general (1970). The limited resources of atoll environments engender many "crunches," for land, food, and, increasingly nowadays, monetary resources. A fruitful way of coping with these crunches is to maintain flexibility in the kinship structure, land-tenure system, and residence patterns. A flexible kinship structure, for example, allows adoptive relationships of various types to play an important role in descent and inheritance, thus enabling members of the group to improve their access to economic

resources (see also Brady 1974, 1976). The patterns I have described in this article, though of a very different nature from the type of socioeconomic manipulations described by Brady, nevertheless offer interesting parallels. Gossip, like the maneuvers to gain access to economic resources that Brady describes, is a prime locus of the interplay between structure and agency created by agents' attempts to handle structural constraints, to find ways of circumventing aspects of the structure that places them at a disadvantage.

Most agents in that community will bank on various resources, varying and adapting them according to the context in which they find themselves. Few will, like Maika, bank so radically on one type of resource like insidious gossip. What is interesting about Maika's case is precisely its atypicality. Maika's marginal status in Nukulaelae society helps us locate the outer edge of the agent's struggle to deal with preexisting structures. The tools used in that struggle exploit aspects of a system that otherwise places the agent on the boundary of society. Yet, as I have shown here, much can go wrong in the process, and the results often represent a rather meager reaping, in that Maika's strategy depends for its success on its being bound to a small social scale. Indeed, the instant this scale is enlarged by the presence of an ethnographer and his tape recorder, the sabotage ceases to work properly.

A Note on Ethics

I have implicitly touched on a number of other issues in this article of which space precludes a fuller discussion, but which nevertheless deserve some mention. First, the story I related here raises general questions about the relationship between the ethnographic observer and the object of ethnographic observation. The situation (and others like it) has destroyed any illusion I might have started with regarding the possibility of "distance" between the community who "generates" the "data" I write about and myself as observer and recorder. With my tape recorder, innocuous at first glance, acting as a powerful instrument of social disruption, I became the agent of what Stewart aptly terms the "contamination" of the observed object (1991).¹⁷ Thus, rather than searching for a solution to what sociolinguists call the "Observer's Paradox" (Labov 1972b), that is, the fact that observation distorts what is observed, one must treat the observer as inextricably entangled with the object of observation.

Furthermore, the incident related in this article raises complex ethical questions relating to the ethnographic enterprise. Despite the conspicuousness of the tape recorder in the kitchen hut and the fact that I drew everyone's attention to it before recording, the reality of "data gathering" receded

from interactors' consciousness as the gossip progressed. In a sense, the tape recording became surreptitious, and all the ethical discomfort associated with such recordings (see Larmouth, Murray, and Murray 1992) quietly emerged. Where is the boundary between clandestine and consensual tape recording located? Alternatively, as Harvey aptly asks (1992:81-85), are the ends of any ethnographic work ever explicit from the perspective of those being observed?

In a provocative essay, Harvey describes how, during fieldwork in a Peruvian Andes village bilingual in Quechua and Spanish (1992, also 1991), she made clandestine tape recordings of people talking while drunk. The villagers, who appeared docile and compliant when sober, became loquacious and defiant when inebriated. In drunken talk, villagers voiced complex emotions about their oppressed status as poor peasants, which never surfaced otherwise. Had she failed to take into account drunken talk, Harvey would have presented villagers as passive victims devoid of agency, thus providing a distorted depiction of their ideological stance. In the same fashion, failing to take into account the microscopic forms of prestige seeking that Maika engages in while gossiping would not do justice to the complexities of his position in Nukulaelae society, and of Nukulaelae society in general. Although recognizing the contentious nature of her methods, Harvey questions the extent to which her taping practices were more problematic than any other anthropological method: "it is the relationship between researcher as member of a particular and powerful social group and that of the researched as members of less powerful groups that constitutes *all* data collection, covert and overt, as problematic" (1992:81, emphasis in the original; see also Dwyer 1982:255-286).

I would take Harvey's point further, suggesting that anthropological methods that base ethnographic analyses on *impressionistic re-creations* of what is said during a drunken episode or a gossipy moment are more abusive of scientific authority than methods based on the microscopic analysis of a transcript of what is said, without ignoring, of course, the ethnographic authority embedded in the transcribing process (see Tedlock 1983). Meaning (in the most general sense) resides not just in the strings of words that make up an utterance, but also in the form of words, in the organization of interactions, and in the positioning of interlocutors vis-à-vis the text and context of the interaction. To derive an analysis of social relations solely on the basis of a re-created and translated representation of what the ethnographer (who is often an unskilled listener of the interactors' language) thought was said fails to do justice to the social dynamics at play even in the most inconspicuous interactions. Clearly, the ethics of fieldwork are considerably

more complex than they may appear at first, and this complexity cannot be simply resolved by relying on such tools as "informed consent," as some have suggested (e.g., Fluehr-Lobban 1994).

Conclusion

This article was based on an analysis of the linguistic and rhetorical characteristics of a brief gossip excerpt. These characteristics, which give to the text a diffuse quality, assign the text to a particular place in the community's social aesthetics, one that can be described as "antipoetic," that is, as the antithesis of the clarity, order, and articulateness associated with socially and aesthetically valued discourse where criteria for truthfulness are established and maintained, and regimes of truth instituted. Because of the constitutive links between verbal aesthetics and the truth, the gossip extract evades, momentarily at least, local regimes of truth. That this particular gossip fragment should have these characteristics is not haphazard. Successful Nukulaelae gossip in general has antipoetic characteristics that suspend scrutiny for the truth.

To return to the broader questions posed in the introduction, this article contains several implications of theoretical import. I hope to have demonstrated that the truth as it is defined and reiterated in institutional contexts may have more limited applicability to mundane contexts such as gossip than predicted by the Foucaultian model. Gossipers can more or less successfully dodge regimes of truth regimented in institutional practices, and yet their gossip can have powerful implications for institutional politics (cf. Besnier 1993). It is true that the dynamics of gossip (e.g., its aesthetics, prestige value, and truthfulness) are largely defined in negative terms, but these negative terms can become important enough in the conduct of social interaction that they acquire a centrality of their own. The case study presented here calls into question the extent to which regimes of truth are as uniform across social contexts as they are generally depicted to be.

Furthermore, this article has again demonstrated the importance of gossip as an instrument of resistance, an importance that is now well documented. However, in contrast to most other works on the topic, which have often simply asserted the counterhegemonic potentials of gossip, this study offers a detailed demonstration of how resistance "works" in a particular society and thus opens the door to potentially fruitful comparisons with other societies. This article further differs from other studies of gossip as oppositional practice in at least one important way. Research that has demonstrated the resistant dimensions of gossip has typically focused on situations in which subjugated individuals gossip about their subjugators, thereby

accomplishing a variety of goals ranging from consequential character assassination to the vicarious pleasure of saying derogatory things about ones oppressor. Although Nukulaelae people do engage in this sort of practice against those in power or those who aspire for power, Maika does not choose as his victim a particularly powerful person, and certainly not someone who subjugates or oppresses others. Vave is already marginalized, a potential victim of everyone's scorn. Yet issues of power and prestige are at stake in Maika's gossip performance. The role of power can only emerge through a microscopic analysis of the gossip text and the context in which it is embedded. This article thus demonstrates that the counterhegemonic nature of gossip can take unexpected forms and provides an illustration of the richness that a microscopic approach to social interaction, combined with a thorough understanding of social structure, can uncover.

NOTES

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1. There is a sizable body of anthropological, sociolinguistic, and sociological literature on gossip, of which Merry (1984) provides an excellent summa?. However, few works on the topic are based on transcripts of naturally occurring gossip interactions (Bergmann 1993; Brenneis 1984, 1987; Goodwin 1990; Besnier 1989, 1990a), largely because such data are difficult to obtain. Analyses based on elicited gossip (e.g., Haviland 1977), on translated or re-created interactions (e.g., Brison 1992), or on general impressionistic accounts (e.g., most ethnographic writings on the subject), although useful in many respects, cannot capture the complexities that emerge in the analysis of spontaneous interaction.

2. The term *matāi* is borrowed from Samoan. However, what the terms denote on Nukulaelae and in Samoa differ significantly. Samoan *matāi* are commonly characterized as "titled holders," whereas on Nukulaelae the category has little more meaning than "head of household." There is no system of chiefly title on Nukulaelae.

3. The first of these terms is compounded from a borrowing from Samoan, while the second is a native Nukulaelae term.

4. Nukulaelae values regarding oratorical styles are thus in direct contrast, for example, to "place stories" among the Western Apache (Basso 1984, 1988), that is, place names that can be simply mentioned to invoke complex historical and moral narratives associated with the locations named. The Apache value these names for their power to invoke multiple networks of meaning through simple mention of the name.

5. The question of what details are necessary and sufficient for an oratorical performance or a stretch of similar discourse to be true and complete entails complex issues of authority and entitlement that I cannot discuss here. Furthermore, a concern for completeness does not preclude creative variation in retelling. Some orators are better tellers than others, usually on account of their claims to authority over particular oratorical narratives because of genealogical links to the protagonists, and sometimes because they are particularly skilled in varying details within the bounds of accepted constraints (compare Rosaldo's 1975 remarks on Ilongot rhetorical creativity). History (an important feature of oratorical performances) on Nukulaelae is usually seen as "owned" by kin groups or individuals representing kin groups; Nukulaelae Islanders are reluctant to go on record by retelling narratives that do not "belong" to them or their kin group, and risk being sharply criticized by others if they do so. Owners of narratives control what completeness consists of for particular narratives.

6. All names mentioned in this article have been changed, and some details have been either changed or left out in an attempt (largely in vain, I realize) to protect the identity of those concerned.

7. The orthography used throughout this article is based on phonemic principles, in which double graphemes indicate geminated segments. Geminated oral stops are heavily aspirated, and other geminated phonemes are articulated for a longer time than their ungeminated equivalents. The letter *g* represents a velar nasal stop, *l* is a central flap, and all other letters have their approximate International Phonetic Alphabet value. The transcription conventions are adapted from those developed by Conversation Analysts (see Atkinson and Heritage 1984), a key to which follows.

(1.2)	length of significant pause in seconds
(.)	untimed pauses (less than 1.0 second)
word-	abrupt cut-off
<i>word</i>	forte volume
WORD	fortissimo volume
<i>hhh</i>	audible exhalation
<i>.hhh</i>	audible inhalation
wo::rd	nonphonemic segment gemination
?	rising pitch (not necessarily in a question)
'	slightly rising pitch
.	falling pitch (not always at the end of a sentence)
!	animated tempo
=	turn latching
[]	beginning and end of turn overlap
((text))	information for which a symbol is not available

<i>((high))</i>	dominant pitch level of utterance string
<i>((creaky))</i>	voice quality
()	inaudible string
(word)	conjectured string

8. The expression is made up of the adverbial or verbal deictic *peelaa* (thus), which has a variety of meanings (it appears repeatedly in the transcript with the place-holding meaning of the hesitation marker “like”). As a comparative expression, *peelaa* takes an object marked *mo*, which in other grammatical contexts functions as a coordinator (“and, with”). The object marker *mo* is repaired twice here. The line structure of the transcript has no analytic significance but rather is an expedient way of referring to details in the text. There is no evidence that casual gossip on Nukulaelae is structured in lines or in any other comparable way.

9. The gossip fragment is structured at some level of analysis, like any conversation. Indeed, the audience punctuates the narrative at strategic locations with a response or a prompt of some sort. As a fragment of conversation, Maika’s and Fousaga’s interaction exhibits all the fine-grained organization that ethnomethodologists have described in other communities. But the excerpt lacks a clear rhetorical structure on a more overt level. In that the story line is interrupted several times and the order in which details are provided fails to follow the expected order a Nukulaelae audience expects of a well-formed narrative.

10. Note that the coda of the fragment is about how to choose pigs, not about Vave. Vave’s reputation is confirmed dead, and what is left to do for the accomplices is to learn how to keep clear of the likes of Vave.

11. Many scholars have demonstrated that informal conversations have an aesthetic structure, which resides in the spontaneous use of such features as parallelisms and repetitions (Jakobson 1960; also Silverstein 1984). I emphasize here that I am talking about local definitions of what is aesthetic and what is not. I also want to suggest that Maika’s performance has few, if any, of the features that Jakobson and his successors identified as the locus of poetics in everyday interaction, and that not *all* everyday interaction is necessarily poetic, even in the broadest sense of this term. This hypothesis is obviously in need of further scrutiny, which space consideration precludes here.

12. The strategic use of diffuseness in establishing a particular relationship between a text and the truth is, of course, not an exclusive characteristic of Nukulaelae gossip, as Terry Eagleton shows:

Many modernist literary works . . . make the “act of enunciating” the process of their own production, part of their actual “content.” They do not try to pass themselves off as unquestionable, . . . but as the Formalists would say “lay bare the device” of their own composition. They do this so that they will not be mistaken for absolute truth--so that the reader will be encouraged to reflect critically on the partial, particular ways they construct reality, and so to recognize how it might all have happened differently. (1983: 170)

13. Contrast the considerably more stratified case of Tikopia, where “social status is a more useful prerequisite to oratory. . . than a knowledge of the fine points of public speaking” (Firth 1975:38).

14. A woman, Looine, was *ulu fenua* for a brief period in the 1950s. The mention of this fact is invariably followed by the narrative of her inability to *fakafeagai* with the captain of a New Zealand ship that called at Nukulaelae during her tenure because she did not speak English. In addition to high rhetoric, some knowledge of English helps in positions of social salience.

15. The terms *covert prestige* and *negative prestige* have acquired some currency in the Variationist school of sociolinguists (see in particular Labov 1972a and Trudgill 1974). I find these labels problematic, because the qualifier "negative" implies that prestige cannot be actively constructed and because "covert" implies that "overt" forms acquire prestige in easily recognizable ways.

16. In "public" discourse, including most discourse directed at the anthropologist, Nukulaelae people frequently invoke the notion of "lying" (*loi, ppelo*). Islanders, who assume outsiders to be infinitely naive when it comes to social life, frequently warn me against believing what others have told me or what I overheard. But "lying" is never invoked as a relevant category during gossip itself, or in in-group interactions following gossip performances.

17. However, I have not adopted in this article a hermeneutically inspired postmodernist approach (e.g., Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Although that approach calls for a healthy critical stance on the myth of the ethnographer's invisibility (preferably in other people's work), I am dubious that a focus on the ethnographic eye would be helpful in capturing the social processes that shaped and were shaped by the events narrated here. Indeed, the patterns of inequality that placed Maika at a social disadvantage, and his attempts to deal with these patterns, existed independently of my presence as an ethnographer in the community and thus can be analyzed without focusing on my presence.

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