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Gossip and Scandal

by Max Gluckman

IT HAS TAKEN the development of anthropological interest in the growth and break-up of small groups to put gossip and scandal into their proper perspective, as among the most important societal and cultural phenomena we are called upon to analyse. Perceptive anthropologists dealt with these phenomena from the early days of field observation. Paul Radin, in his *Primitive Man as a Philosopher* (1927:177–8), described the way in which

primitive people are indeed among the most persistent and inveterate of gossips. Contestants for the same honours, possessors of the sacred rites of the tribe, the authorized narrators of legends, all leave you in little doubt as to the character and proficiency of their colleagues. “Ignoramus,” “braggart,” and not infrequently “liar” are liberally bandied about.

Radin commented that therefore “some observers have drawn the conclusion that not love, kindness, and forbearance, but envy, slander and hate are the dominant atmosphere of a primitive community.” He argued that this was incorrect, because the “unkind and slanderous remarks so frequently bandied about do not engender feuds and that often the principals concerned are on very good terms.” Radin dismissed the idea that this contradiction was to be explained by “suppression or sublimation”; but he fell back on a meagre psychological thesis, that tribal society has a theory of freedom of expression which gives “every

individual... the same right to indulge in slander, gossip, outbursts of conceit, jealousy, etc., that he has to give vent to the more respectable emotions.” Radin’s theory was thus much less acute than his observations of gossip. He may have confused the maintenance of a surface of good relations between leaders with actual good relations, but he clearly detected how they competed through gossip, without being able to weave this into a theory. This is partly understandable in terms of the background of analytical ideas at the time he wrote, though a year earlier, Malinowski had presented his theory of myth as a social charter for existing social arrangements on the basis of a man’s boasts that he had the privilege to tell a certain myth (*Myth in Primitive Psychology*, 1926).

In his study of a *Trinidad Village* (1947:185), Herskovits probed much more deeply into gossip as a cultural phenomenon. He discusses how prosecutions and jailing of a sect called the Shouters “give rise to gossip about the events that led to the suppressed meetings, tales that are told and retold with a mixture of relish and sympathy.” He proceeds to show how popular attitudes and points of view influence this gossip, so that “fantasy supplements or even supplants fact in order to weave more closely a new motif into the old pattern of grievance against discrimination.” Thus oft-repeated gossip blamed the local minister for a first series of arrests of Shouters, for it was alleged that he was piqued because the Shouters had drawn away his own congregation. Prominent laymen of a recognized church were accused in gossip of leading the police to a Shouters’ meeting. Herskovits relates this gossip to allegations by those of lower socio-economic position that the discrimination of larger and wealthier denominations had achieved the passing of the ordinance forbidding the Shouters in order “to suppress a dangerous rival in the quest for souls.”

In another study Herskovits connects gossip with the maintenance of morals. In his *Life in a Haitian Valley* (1937:74f) he analyses songs sung at the working-bees—the *combites*:

At the combite a man not only learns all the gossip of the day, but enjoys learning and singing the songs which caustically comment on the shortcomings of neighbours, or evaluate the hospitality of those who have called combites, or detail scandal, phrased with sufficient directness to allow the reference of the song to remain clear, but warily, so as not to give the individual grounds for direct recrimination.

As we shall see, all the lessons of successful scandal-mongering are compressed in Herskovits’ few words.

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Gluckman’s main publications are on politics and law, including a series of books and essays on the Barotse and a number of essays on the Zulu, as well as collaborative work on the Rhodesian Tonga and Lamba. Also, he has published general theoretical work, including *Custom and Conflict in Africa and Rule, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society* (in press), with contributions to *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations* and *Closed Systems and Open Minds: The Limits of Naivete in Social Anthropology* (in press), both of which last he edited. A collection of his essays has just been published under the title *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa*.

Max Gluckman’s paper is the third in a series, edited by Francis L. K. Hsu and Alan P. Merriam specially prepared to honor Melville J. Herskovits. The entire series, when completed, will constitute a new type of *Festschrift* (CA 4:92).

He goes on to explain how this makes the leader of the songs feared, for as one Haitian expressed it, "The *simidor* [leader] is a journalist, and every *simidor* is a Judas!" Herskovits—anticipating here the analysis on which I shall mainly depend—gives examples of these songs to show how they find favour "among a people to whose natural love of gossip is added a patterned relish for oblique public statement of individual shortcomings." He then cites songs which scorn inhospitality and meanness, a love affair between two first cousins, and an impending quarrel where a suspicion of magic practices entered, and finally a song which was a challenge in which the singer boasted of his equality with another.

The connection of gossip with the maintenance of the unity of groups and their morality was taken a step further by James West in his study of *Plainsville, U.S.A.*, (1945:99–107, 162), a Middle West town; and this is the first beginning of an analysis which demonstrates the pervasive role of gossip in community life.¹ West describes vividly the "loafing and gossip" groups of Plainsville, and creates the suggestive title "gossip cells." There are groups of old men and old women, and men can only enter the store where the old women sit by indulging in a joking-relationship, marked by sexual innuendo. He also describes younger cliques, one of young married women and one of four "fast" young married couples. He says that in the groups of old people there is exchanging and garbling of all news, though the old men are kindlier than the young women think. He states, too, that these groups are on the whole against progressive developments. Finally he (p. 162) writes that

religion seems to permeate the air . . . as a vital concern with the negotiations on moral conduct which the churches set up. The religious control of morals operates mainly through gossip and the fear of gossip. People report, suspect, laugh at, and condemn the peccadilloes of others, and walk and behave carefully to avoid being caught in any trifling missteps of their own . . .

Taking these passages in conjunction with the book as a whole, one begins to get a feeling of a community which is partly held together and maintains its values by gossiping and scandalizing both within cliques and in general. We must give West full credit for his great pioneering achievement; but perhaps because he was a pioneer he was not able to grasp the full importance of his own discoveries. He did not bring out that gossip does not have isolated roles in community life, but is part of the very blood and tissue of that life.

Before I examine a study which demonstrated this fully, I glance in general terms at our problems. Their importance is indicated by the fact that every single day, and for a large part of each day, most of us are engaged in gossiping. I imagine that if we were to keep a record of how we use our waking-time, gossiping would come only after "work"—for some of us—in the score. Nevertheless, popular comments about gossip tend to treat it as something chance and haphazard and often as something to be disapproved of. It is

against the canons of the Church. Yet it is possible to show that among relatively small groups, gossip, in all its very many varieties, is a culturally determined process, which has its own customary rules, trespass beyond which is heavily sanctioned. I propose to illustrate the social affiliations of this process and to suggest that gossip, and even scandal, have important positive virtues. Clearly they maintain the unity, morals and values of social groups. Beyond this, they enable these groups to control the competing cliques and aspiring individuals of which all groups are composed. And finally, they make possible the selection of leaders without embarrassment.

The one theme of my argument was clearly expressed in Jane Austen's novel, *Emma*, that penetrating analysis of the small village of Highbury in Surrey. You may remember the passage when the elite of the village were to gather for Christmas dinner at Mr. Weston's house. Among them was Mr. John Knightly, who had left Highbury to practise law in London. As he was driven through the snow to Mr. Weston's, he grumbled to his companions:

A man must have a very good opinion of himself when he asks people to leave their own fireside, and encounter such a day as this, for the sake of coming to see him. He must think himself a most agreeable fellow; I could not do such a thing. It is the greatest absurdity—actually snowing at this moment! The folly of people's not staying at home when they can! If we were obliged to go out on such an evening as this, by any call of duty or business, what a hardship we should deem it;—and here we are, probably with rather thinner clothing than usual, setting forward voluntarily, without excuse, in defiance of the voice of nature which tells man, in everything given to his view or his feelings, to stay at home himself, and keep all under shelter that he can;—here are we setting forward to spend five dull hours in another man's house, with nothing to say or to hear that was not said and heard yesterday, and may not be said and heard again tomorrow. Going in dismal weather, to return probably in worse; four horses and four servants taken out for nothing but to convey five idle shivering creatures into colder rooms and worse company than they might have had at home.

Five idle creatures were being taken that night to spend their time in idle gossip with other idle creatures. That day they had chatted the same idle gossip. And on the following day, they would engage in the same idle gossip. Now, obviously, in the kind of society described by Miss Austen—the country upper circles of early nineteenth century England—gossip was not idle, though the creatures were. In fact the more idle the creatures, the less idle was the gossip. These were people living on land, rents and gilt-edged shares, marking themselves off from others by talking about one another. And talking about one another was what helped maintain them as a group—an elite—in the wider society in which they lived. Mr. John Knightly had left this society to practice law in London; hence he was intolerant of its gossip. His more intelligent, and very high-principled brother, joined in the gossip with interest, for he was still fully absorbed in the social life of the village. But the right to gossip idly was severely restricted even within the circle; so that Mrs. Elton, the Rector's bride from Bristol, was pert and impertinent when she joined in that gossip too freely and too quickly. The novelist Frank Swinnerton pointed out that

¹ I draw attention to Simmel's brief reference to "gossip" as important in the nuances of human interaction, but he is led off from analysis by emphasising the betrayal of secrets, even though this is most important in community gossip (*The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 1950, p. 334).

Jane Austen uses gossip as a means of interrelating her characters in a common social intercourse so skillfully, that Mr. Perry, the apothecary, never once appears in person during the course of the book, yet in the gossip of others we see him as an individual, influencing their dealings with one another (1939:16).

Gossip of this kind is one of the chief weapons which those who consider themselves higher in status use to put those whom they consider lower in their proper place. Huntin', fishin' and shootin', in themselves, as expensive recreational activities, may have been—and may be—among the chief symbols by which certain sets in England mark themselves off from others. But with the activities goes a large measure of gossip which makes huntin', fishin', and shootin' a constant and endurin' bond between those who practice them—against those who do not. The *Sphere*, the *Tattler*, and other magazines bear witness. The gossip which accompanies these activities is interwoven with a separate technical language. I remember taking up the sports of riding and sailing, and having to struggle to acquire these new technical languages which help make one a member of the fellowship. But when it came to riding, I was never able to acquire the gossip among those who rode—even in the small circles of Johannesburg—and I always felt lost in the group. I was glad when the time came for me to slink away with my horse to carry out my field research in Zululand, until there again I found myself excluded from groups because I did not know enough gossip. Gradually I learnt the gossip; but I never acquired enough certainty in knowing when and, more importantly, when not to use it, ever to become a member of Zulu society.

The more exclusive the group, the greater will be the amount of gossip in it. There are three forms of social group which test this hypothesis. The one is the professional group, like lawyers or anthropologists, whose gossip is built into technical discussion so tightly that the outsider cannot always detect the slight personal knockdown which is concealed in a technical recital, or the technical sneer which is contained in a personal gibe. This is, therefore, the most irritating kind of group to crash into, because one has no clue to the undercurrents, no apparatus for taking soundings. And this is why old practitioners of a subject can so easily put a comparative newcomer into his place, can make him feel a neophyte. They have only to hint in a technical argument at some personal fact about the person who advanced the theory discussed, to make the eager young student feel how callow he is. Again, the more highly organized the profession, the more effective is the role of gossip here.

I have glanced already at the second type of highly exclusive group—that feels it has high social status from which it wishes to exclude parvenus. But we must notice that these groups tend to become hereditary; and once they are, it means that each group comprises not only the present members of the group, but also the past dead members. And here lies great scope for gossip as a social weapon. To be able to gossip properly, a member has to know not only about the present membership, but also about their forbears. For members can hit at one another through their ancestors, and if you cannot use this attack because you are ignorant, then you are in a weak

position. Gossip here is a two-edged weapon; for it also means that you have no ancestors in the group to be attacked through—in short that you have no ancestors. And each time that someone in your presence refers to a scandal about another's ancestor, or even his own ancestor, he is gently rubbing in the fact that you have no ancestors and do not belong properly to the group, and are a parvenu.

The third type of exclusive group is that which has exclusiveness thrust upon it—either by being in a minority, by isolation of locality, or by other distinguishing criterion which the members cannot overcome. I shall illustrate the function of gossip and scandal in this type of group in detail, since here (as far as I know) these important phenomena were most fully subjected to an illuminating anthropological investigation. This was in Elizabeth Colson's study of the *Makah Indians* (1953). I have selected her study for its detailed presentation of my central theme, and of some of the complicating peculiarities that enter into the gossip of each type of group, because she made manifest to me that gossip and scandal have their virtues.

The Makah Indians were a small group of Red Indians resident in the Puget Sound area at the tip of Cape Flattery, opposite Vancouver Island. It was estimated that in 1780 they numbered some 2,000 people. A century later, smallpox and other vicissitudes had reduced them in number to under 700 and in 1942, when Dr. Colson studied them, there were 400-odd on the tribal roll. The Makah belonged to the Northwest Coast group of American Indians, famous in anthropological literature for their performance of the *potlatch*. A *potlatch* was a ceremonial feast to which one group or individual invited social rivals in order to demonstrate family prerogatives. The host aggressively asserted his and his family's ownership of particular property in resources, titles, songs and ceremonial privileges while feasting and making presents to the visitors. The visitors then had to give a return feast on a bigger scale or lose face.

Before the Makah came under American protection and care by treaty they lived in five villages, divided into longhouses in which dwelt extended families. The people were divided into chiefs, commoners, and slaves.

The American Indian Service set out a century ago to turn the Makah into American citizens—agriculturalists in an environment suitable only for fishing, hunting and collecting; Sunday School addicts, aware of the value of money and averse to destroying their own property, living in houses by small families, wearing clothes, eating off tables and the like. Children were taken by compulsion from their parents and sent to boarding-school to cut them off from their parents and Indian tradition. All things Indian were prohibited by the local agent of the Indian Service. This process of indoctrination was kept up until 1932, when the policy of the Indian Service changed, and it began to encourage the development of Red Indian cultural individuality within the general American pattern.

Colson tried, in her study, to assess how far this process of Americanization had succeeded. She found that the Makah in practice had made a satisfactory

adjustment to the modern American world. From the beginning, they had paid their way economically, unlike the Plains Indians, who had been put on Government rations after the destruction of the buffalo. The Makah were protected in a part of their ancient territory by their treaty with the United States Government; and from their Reservation they had been able to earn a living first at sealing, and then at fishing for halibut, and also by working for the lumber company exploiting the forests on the Reservation.

By this time the tribe had ceased to be pure-blooded. Not only were there many half-breeds in it, but many members of the tribe had considerably more white blood than Indian blood. Most of the younger and middle-aged people spoke English and few had a good knowledge of Makah. The overt practice of Makah custom and ceremonial had died out. More than this, most Makah were subject to the intensive propaganda of what are technically called, "mass media communication," i.e. cinemas, radio, newspapers, magazines. They were also in intensive contact with Americans. Some of these Americans lived in the Neah Bay settlement into which all Makah had moved. Many Makah continuously, if periodically, moved out of the Reservation and scattered in the cities and farmlands of the West Coast where they earned their living in the same ways as any other Americans of parallel skill. In 1942, Neah Bay was filled by additional Whites, come to the wartime naval base and associated constructional activities. Again, the Makah were on good terms with many of these Whites. Indeed, in many cases Dr. Colson found it impossible to detect whether a man was Makah or White by his surface relations with others. Many Makah were Christians and associated with Whites in worship.

Colson saw that the Makah were able to adapt themselves to the new conditions and that this was possible because they were able to earn a good living from the sea and from work on their Reservation as well as outside it. Yet they still cling together as a group, partly because they have economic interests in being Indians. As wards of the United States Government, they cannot be taxed by State or local authorities, either directly or through purchase sales tax, entertainment tax, petrol tax, etc. They are not subject, while on the Reservation, to certain processes of law, such as garnishee orders on their wages or attachment of goods acquired by hire purchase and taken on the Reservation. They are entitled to free dental and medical treatment, and their children to free lunches at school as Whites are not. There are many advantages in being an Indian and also in being a Makah. This entitles a man to free rights in the Makah Reservation and ultimately to a share in the proceeds when the Reservation or parts of it are sold as provided in the Treaty. Therefore the Makah collectively and theoretically strive to keep their numbers low in total, in order that shares shall be greater, though in practice individuals will try to insure that the descendants of their own relatives are on the tribal roll, whatever their parentage, while they try to keep the descendants of others off.

I have summarized a beautifully presented argument and analysis to give a background to Colson's perception of the virtues of gossip and scandal among the

Makah. Here we have a very small group (400 people) set against the mighty mass of the American population. They are hostile in many ways to the Whites with whom they associate. They feel that the Whites have robbed them of a culture and a way of life that was theirs, that the Whites have despoiled them and their Indian brothers of land, and so forth. One would expect that they would array themselves in unity in order to maintain their independence and their identity as Makah. Far from it. They are torn by internal dissension and struggles for status and they constantly use the tongue of scandal to keep one another in proper place.

Colson, knowing that the Makah had previously been divided into chiefs, commoners, and slaves, sought to establish the nature of this ranking in the past. She found great certainty about the rules as expressed by various people. But, unfortunately, some rules contradicted others, and the application of each was always uncertain. Someone would tell her that chieftainship was determined absolutely by birth, both on father's and mother's sides; and add, of course, that he was thus descended. Others would corroborate these rules, but would point out that the first informant was descended from a Nootka slave woman, and therefore was low class. Then others would say that birth was of some account, but it was more important that a man, to be high-class, should achieve something himself, by being a doctor or whale-hunter, or the like, and of course his father was a great whale-hunter or doctor or the like. Yet others would then run down these pretensions. Again, under the *potlatch* system, a man had had to give feasts to show his greatness; so today a man ought to be generous if he is to be esteemed. But now that anyone can earn money, if a man gives feasts his rivals can say that he is a *nouveau riche* trying to cover his low-class and that the real high-class people do not need to do this since their status is well known. Others will then accuse them of meanness, inappropriate to high-class, until they become prodigal, when they are *nouveau riche*. Finally, you can always down another by alleging that his family is addicted to sorcery (poisoning). And to use sorcery means that one is of low class—for the man or woman who is secure in social position does not need to use sorcery to secure his ends. Everyone is likely to accuse others of being sorcerers and to be accused in turn.

Thus Colson says (pp. 204–5) that hardly had she been in the village a week, when she heard that there was a class system

... and it was highly important. 'We Indians are just like Whites. We class up. There are high-class people and middle-class people and then real low-class people. Most people here come from the lower class though they don't like it to be said. You can tell the difference though when you meet people. Only the high-class people know how to act. The others naturally don't know anything about how things should be done. They had no old people to teach them. Just certain families know.' Each person saying this then said, of course, that his family was of upper-class status and had been so from as far back as Makah tradition went, and proceeded to warn me against families which he called low class.

These in turn warned her against the others. Dr. Colson sums it up:

So it went from person to person until I found that everyone in the village accused others of being low-class and not entitled to speak for the Makah or to hold up their heads in front of the really good people.

The result is that in Neah Bay today a class system theoretically exists, but it is impossible for the observer to place any single person in his proper class because there are no generally accepted standards as to what constitutes a valid claim to class status. Nor is there any generally accepted placing of individuals in various classes recognized by all Makah themselves. Yet, they are conscious of class and it enters into their thinking with references to other Makah to an extent that is incomprehensible to a newcomer. Each individual claims high-class status for himself and his immediate ancestors; each usually derides the claims of other Makah unless they happen to be close relatives—and even a close relative is not safe since his claims to status can always be derided on the ground that through some line not shared with you he descends from low-class people, or it may be claimed that he has not achieved enough to justify his equal position with your own.

Makah also attach great value to the theory that kinsmen should help one another, and for pride's sake to maintain their social standing; they go out of their way to assist distant kin. So that the poor Makah who runs a store or restaurant is compelled to give credit to his kin, and they do not feel it necessary to pay their debts. He cannot, on the other hand, make a living out of people who are not related to him; for unrelated people will not buy from him because if he becomes rich he will rise in status. They prefer to buy from Whites and make Whites rich. Similarly, when the Makah try to run any political activity, those who take the lead are sniped at by vicious scandal, to undermine their rise in status, until they abandon the activity. This has happened to the President and other officers of the Makah Tribal Council instituted by the United States Government. Scandal also attacked and drove from public life a number of Makah who tried to run an Annual Makah Day, during which so-called traditional Makah dances and ceremonies were staged.²

Historically, it is easy to see how this situation arose. In the old days the chiefs' status was validated by their control over economic resources and over their subordinates. This status was periodically demonstrated through ceremonial prerogatives exhibited in *potlatch* feasts. Today anyone can pay his way by earning money and can give feasts. Lines of ancestry are blurred by intermarriage and connections outside of marriage with Whites and other Indians and ultimately, all Makah are probably interconnected by blood with each other. At the moment, there are certain groupings of closely related kindred but new marriages and new births may change the alignment. Hence it is impossible to demonstrate status by reference to the past. That the Makah should still put so much energy into this factious struggle for class status may largely be a relic of the former ranked *potlatching* competition. It may also be the intrusion among them of American class-ideas. But I venture to go beyond Colson's analysis and suggest something more.

Colson concludes her discussion (p. 228):

² Colson contrasts the situation of the Makah with the situation described by V. Barnouw in "Acculturation and Personality among the Wisconsin Chippewa," *Memoirs American Anthropological Association*, No. 72 (1950).

The whole picture of rivalry for position gives the impression that the class concepts of the Makah are completely unconstructive and work only to disrupt the smooth functioning of the group. That is not entirely true. The desire for prestige and for social position contributes something to tribal life. Indeed, the incessant gossip and back-biting which goes on can be viewed as an important feature holding Makah in a set of social relationship which is distinctive within wider American society.

It would be too simple to characterize the bickering and sniping as 'in-group aggression' [as Barnouw does among the Chippewa] and let it go at that. The Makah criticize others in terms of a set of values which operate within the group to govern the behaviour of members of the group. The constant criticism, gossip and backbiting is a reassertion of these values, which today can be expressed in no other way. If they repressed the gossip and back-biting, the values themselves would disappear, and with them much of the feeling that the Makah are a distinct people.

To some extent the back-biting itself has become an end in itself, a system of behaviour into which the Makah have thrown themselves with a zest and a determination, which have brought the art of verbal denigration to a high peak. Certainly the malicious statements of their fellows give rise to hatred and to unhappiness and to a retreat from public view, but from the zest with which they recount their experiences in the field of slander, it is apparent that they have developed this type of behaviour into a game with its own rules and interest. [She footnotes: "Makah were experts in 'Lifemanship'" before this art obtained general recognition."] Like all artists, or sportsmen, the Makah delight in playing with their technical skill. And only others of their own community have the technical knowledge to compete in the game, or to appreciate the skill with which a point is scored.

In this analysis Colson clearly establishes the important point that specific and restricted gossip within a group marks it off from other groups, both like and unlike. The gossip and scandal which are so biting in Makah life unite them into a group outside of general American society. And, as she points out, since this gossip and scandal involve the criticism and assessment of people against the traditional values of Makah society, they maintain the tribe as Indians against Whites, and as Makah against other Indians. These Makah values and traditions largely persist in the gossip and in no other way. To be a Makah, you must be able to join in the gossip, and to be fully a Makah you must be able to scandalize skillfully. This entails that you know the individual family histories of your fellows; for the knowledgeable can hit at you through your ancestry, and you must be able to retort in kind. You have also have got to have some knowledge of the old ways of the Makah tribe.

In the specific situation of the Makah, it seems also that their biting scandal is used to maintain the principle of equality between all members. What the group seems to be unable to do is to admit that one person is superior in any respect. The Makah fought a Washington State law to protect the breeding of fish, by claiming the right to fish out of season in a certain river on the grounds that they fished there when the Treaty of the Reservation was signed. To win their case, they had to admit that one family had hereditary

³ Stephen Potter, *Lifemanship* (1950) and *One-Upmanship* (1952).

rights in the river. They preferred to lose their case. It appears to be in the nature of their situation, that they refuse to admit to Americans any inequality among themselves—nor dare they claim it publicly as individuals. They are a small group, whose members move with equal freedom in the large American society. The group is too small to sustain any division of status within itself, and none of them in their dealings with other Americans would admit that a fellow is his superior. What they are clinging to is the status of Indians, as wards of the United States Government with the privileges of wardship, and the status of Makah, with its rights in the Reservation. To maintain this status, they have all to be equal, lest anyone who acquires superiority gets more than his share of privilege. Old traditions and present ambitions drive individuals to assert themselves and their status; Makahship, through the weapon of scandal, keeps them in practice equal.

The desire to remain Makah, with its attendant advantages, explains why people do not try to break away from the group. Otherwise, it seems that at least the lighter-coloured Makah could disappear into the American population: probably many have in fact done so. But this desire is felt by the individuals and extended families which make up the Makah tribe. And the interests in the Reservation are competitive between them, because if it is sold it will bring in a limited amount of money. Hence, I suggest, Makah gossip does not show merely that general interest in the doings, and the virtues and vices, of others, which characterizes any group. The gossip passes beyond this stage and becomes vicious scandal, aimed at demonstrating that the other parties are not worthy to be Makah. The different groups and individuals in the tribe fight an unceasing battle to demonstrate their own true Makahship, as against the failures of others to attain Makahship. But this involves them in a continual process of remaining Makah, which (as Colson says) gives high importance to the scandalizing itself, as a mechanism for maintaining the Makah as a group encysted in the American nation, whose other members are excluded from this war of scandal. And the practice of this scandal is developed to a high art, culturally defined. Scandalizing is one of the principal means by which the group's separateness is expressed, even though it is also the principal manner in which internal struggles are fought. This combination of functions of scandal makes the hostility itself a mode through which the tribe remains united.

This analysis of gossip passing into scandal brings out some of the general characteristics of gossip, as a culturally controlled game with important social functions. It also shows that in different kinds of groups the role and function of gossip will vary with their specific histories and their situations in the larger society. Colson's penetrating study has lessons for us all as observers of life around us. We learn from it that gossip is not idle: it has social functions and it has rules which are rigidly controlled. Ronald Frankenberg has applied Colson's analysis to a Welsh village (1957) which was struggling to remain a community, though most of its men now go to work in a town some miles away.⁴ The villagers ran a series of

communal activities which symbolized this desire to be a community: village choir, brass-band, dramatic society, football club, carnival. These activities were run in succession, not at the same time. For it seems that each activity in time became so bedevilled by the internal group and personal feuds in the village that it could no longer be pursued successfully without leading to irremediable breach of relationships between villagers. Therefore as the brass-band failed, the choir was started; as the choir failed, a football club was founded; when that failed, an annual carnival was instituted. And as each failed, the villagers felt they could make a fresh start, with old animosities purged with the failing activity. But the animosities continued into the new activity. This is a fascinating story in itself. But what I want to emphasize here is that the struggles between villagers are not fought openly in committee meeting until crises are reached. Instead, differences of opinion are fought out in behind-the-back tattle, gossip, and scandal, so that many villagers, who are actually at loggerheads, can outwardly maintain the show of harmony and friendship (cf. Radin above). They remain a community, despite the verbal cut-and-thrust in the dark, where they try to advance their separate causes against their ostensible friends who are their enemies. Some accommodation is thus reached. In this gossip they evaluate people as leaders, as good villagers, and the like, so that gossip also serves to bring conformity with village values and objectives. Eventually, when a crisis is reached, a stranger⁵ to the village is thrust into the position of appearing to take the decision which forces one party out of the current activity; and gossip can blame this stranger for destroying village unity: "We would be happy if foreigners did not make trouble!" After one such crisis, when a stranger had proposed the critical, and "objectively" sensible, motion in open committee, a woman said: "All strangers should be shot!"

Here, too, the outsider cannot join in gossip. The poor anthropologist, before he understood this, got into trouble. His landlady and some friends, after a whist drive were criticising the play of a certain woman. The anthropologist after a while joined in with an example. His landlady turned on him and reminded him that he was referring to her prospective son-in-law's grandmother. He was often rebuked for criticising distant cousins. Thus, though the villagers were kind and friendly, he was reminded often that he was a foreigner. He sums up by saying that "villagers did not hesitate to make accusations against and ridicule their friends and relatives, but outsiders were not allowed this privilege." Frankenberg found, as Colson had among the Makah, that the constant criticism of those who tried to run village affairs punished anyone who appeared to get too much prestige as a leader. The members of the village were equal against the overwhelming onslaught of the modern industrial world. The brass-band could not

Tradition and Change: A Study of Banbury (1960), with some attention to the restricted circulation of gossip, but without full analysis.

⁵ The definition of "stranger," and the difference between "strangers" and "outsiders," is a very complex problem, discussed at length by Frankenberg. The critical proposal may be put forward by a "stranger" to the set of social relationships involved. I have to simplify in order to compress.

⁴ "Gossip" is mentioned in studies such as those of Williams, *The Sociology of an English Village: Gosforth* (1956), and Stacey,

run, though they had the instruments, because neither of the conductors in the village dared tell his fellows how to play. A local lad could not captain the village football team as he did not dare give orders to his mates: they had to import a West Indian from a nearby town to be captain. Again the anthropologist has been able to show that despite these disputes, quarrels, gossip and scandal, and the restricting of the privilege to talk thus, have the effect of maintaining the village as a village and of preventing it from becoming a collection of houses, like a housing estate. Town planners are very anxious to turn housing estates into communities: they should develop scandal in them. Perhaps it is their duty to provide cause for it.

Gossip and even scandal unite a group within a larger society, or against another group, in several ways. Firstly, all groups try to thrust their roots into the past; scandal by creating a past history for the members in relation to one another, into which newcomers have to be inducted if they are to be full members, achieves this; Secondly, no groups are completely undifferentiated. All of them consist in the first place, of individuals, and, secondly, most consist of smaller groupings of individuals, cliques. These individuals and cliques may be competitively aligned against each other. They struggle for status and prestige. These struggles have to be kept within bounds, while the general values of the group are asserted, if the group is to survive. The values of the group are clearly asserted in gossip and scandal, since a man or woman is always run down for failing to live up to these values. But the struggles to fulfil those values by individuals and cliques are also restrained because the methods of achieving them are defined by gossip and scandal: and these themselves punish any excess. For they control disputation by allowing each individual or clique to fight fellow-members of the larger group with an acceptable, socially instituted customary weapon, which blows back on excessively explosive users. For the battle of scandal has its own rules, and woe to him who breaks these rules. By the act of carrying his scandalizing too far, he himself oversteps the values of the group and his scandal will turn against him, will prove that he or his small clique is unworthy of the larger group. And the scandal will in fact redound to the credit of the person attacked, since he will have been unfairly assailed. Colson tells (233–34) the story of two Makah women who were on bad terms. On one occasion one woman in the streets hurled strings of insults at the other, who kept walking along, singing, “The bear went over the mountain.” “Both women knew that one was behaving like a ‘low-class’ person, the other like a ‘high-class’ person, and the advantage lay with the one who ignored the insults.” Thus the gross scandalmonger overreaches himself and is hoist with his own slander. (Similarly, gamesmanship is the art of winning games without actually cheating.)⁶ In this way, the internal struggles within the group are fought with concealed malice, by subtle innuendo, and by pointed ambiguities. Yet all of these have their own moral norms, which must not be overstepped. The main moral norm is that you must scandalize about

an opponent behind his back, if your allegations are at all open, to his face, you must be delicate and never give him ground to state that you have insulted him. For insults of this kind, if open, make impossible the pretence of group amity. Similarly, misplaced behind-the-back gossip may force the group either to expel the person slandered or to turn on the gossipier. More than this, the process of scandal enables a group to evaluate people for their work, their qualities of leadership, and their moral character, without ever confronting them to their faces with failures in any sphere. Thus animosities between individuals and cliques are built into the larger social order through the cultural techniques of gossip and scandal.

I beg of you, therefore, if you are convinced by this analysis, not to feel that it is easy to fulfil the important obligation that lies on you to scandalize about your fellows. As Colson says, it is an art and a skill and a technique. We do need “a school for scandal”—as Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Education have seen. I found in the *London Times* of October 13th, 1954, the following:

A recommendation that children in West Riding schools should be encouraged to gather in small groups for ‘gossip’ sessions, as an aid to learning English, is made by the Education Committee Inspectors, who have concluded an inspection of modern secondary schools throughout the country. They make the recommendation in a memorandum on ‘the teaching of English in secondary schools.’

The inspectors claim that emphasis on oral expression can be achieved by allowing children to talk naturally about things which interest them

Thus early begins this interest of ours in our fellows, and a mark of that interest is our willingness to talk about them. To Gamesmanship and Lifemanship we must add Gossipship. The rules of Gossipship are somewhat as follows:

The important things about gossip and scandal are that generally these are enjoyed by people about others with whom they are in a close social relationship. Hence when we try to understand why it is that people in all places and at all times have been so interested in gossip and scandal about each other, we have also to look at those whom they exclude from joining in the gossiping or scandalizing. That is, the right to gossip about certain people is a privilege which is only extended to a person when he or she is accepted as a member of a group or set. It is a hallmark of membership. Hence rights to gossip serve to mark off a particular group from other groups. There is no easier way of putting a stranger in his place than by beginning to gossip: this shows him conclusively that he does not belong. On the other hand, if a man does not join in the gossip and scandal, he shows that he does not accept that he is a party to the relationship; hence we see that gossiping is a duty of membership of the group. That is why it is good manners to gossip and scandalize about your dearest friends with those who belong, even though it be their dearest friends—but it is bad manners—which is a moral judgment and hence a sanction—to tell unpleasant stories about your friends to strangers. For when you gossip about your friends to other mutual friends you are demonstrating that you all belong to one set which has the duty to

⁶ See Stephen Potter, *The Theory and Practice of Gamesmanship, or The Art of Winning Games without Actually Cheating* (1947).

be interested in one another's vices as well as virtues. When you gossip about your friends to strangers you are either showing the strangers that they do not belong, or you are admitting them to a privilege and to membership of a group without consulting the other people involved. So that if you want to run down a friend to a stranger you should first ask that friend's permission. You do not need his permission to run him down to mutual friends—provided that they are in the same set of relationships with yourself. I think it would be bad manners to run two people down to one another, even though they are mutually acquainted, if you are not associated with them in the same way. So it would be bad manners to gossip about your University fellow to a member of another University, even if the two of them lived in the same village. For scandal is only virtuous if its aim be to demonstrate some kind of social unity. Scandal when directed by members of a group against another group is unifying in another, and an obvious, way—it asserts the superiority of the scandalizing group.

I am sure that if you reflect on your own experience you will realise how sound Colson's analysis is. Its significance emerges most clearly if we consider the way in which a new member of a group is inducted into the group. He may learn the rules of technique which keep the group in being, and he may be on excellent terms with the other members of the group, but he does not belong to the group until it is impossible for him to be rude to one of its members unintentionally. That is, he must know so much about each of the members' histories and likings and dislikes, that he will never say something which is hurtful to anyone unless he wants to hurt him (or her). Correspondingly, the badge of membership is that a person can quite allusively, and apparently naively, cut another member to the quick by a seemingly innocent statement. And of course, it is important that the person offended knows that the allusion is intended but not be able to pin it down, and that the injurer should know that the offended knows, and that the offended should know that the injurer knows that the offended knows—and so on *ad infinitum*.

Therefore a most important part of gaining membership of any group is to learn its scandals: what you can say with apparent innocence and what you may say by indirect rude allusion. Anthropology is a very tightly knit profession: it is one of the few professions which still has an initiation ceremony. You must have studied some exotic community. We maintain our tight bonds of friendship by a vast store of scandal and gossip as well as by legends. A most important part of my duty in training research workers is to teach them the scandals. I believe I am not alone among senior anthropologists in finding it more interesting to teach students about anthropologists than about anthropology. It is worth noting here that the Greek Lexicon defines "an anthropologist" not as "anthropos plus logos," a "student of man," but only as "a scandalmonger;" and in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle—who anticipated us all—says of the great-souled man: "He is no scandalmonger (*anthropologos*): he will not talk either about himself or another person."

What applies to anthropologists, applies to all professions. Lawyers are supposed to talk shop and to be

very exclusive. I grew up among them, and woven into their legal shop is a considerable amount of scandal about other lawyers. Colleges at Oxford and Cambridge are similar. In some Oxford colleges there is a taboo on talking at dinner about work or women—the sanction at Exeter College is that the offender must try to drink 5 pints of beer at one draught. If he fails, he pays for that beer and for a refill of the large scone which is passed around the table. Talk of women introduces an element into College life that is hostile to its united monasticism, expressed in the ritual of commensalism; talk of work divides members of the College according to their academic interests, and the College as an association is hostile to organization in terms of common scholarship.

I am, of course, aware that gossip and scandal will not contribute to the cohesion of a grouping of persons, unless these persons are united by a sense of community which is based on the fairly successful pursuit of common objectives. In his study of a housing estate in Coventry (*Living in Towns*, 1953), Leo Kuper and his colleagues noted that the new settlers in the estate were afraid of, and resented, the gossip of their neighbours. This can be related largely to bad design of the houses: the two master-bedrooms in the semi-detacheds lay back to back, without a soundproof wall between, so that each couple was bound to overhear practically everything done by their neighbours, a source of great embarrassment. Moreover, each house looked into the other's livingroom. There was constant trespass on the essential intimacies of family life. No group life could emerge here. I was told by the wife of a University lecturer that in a better designed estate in Newcastle neighbours formed themselves into gossip cells which got along very happily—except for her. Foolishly she thought that there were more important topics than personal gossip; and she was sent to Coventry—metaphorically, I mean. In a housing estate in Essex where I lived, gossip cells were again determined by the sociometric rules of neighbourliness—plus a complicated evaluation of social status—and together we formed a happy and united scandalizing community, with constant fights going on between our secondary modern schools to emphasize our overall unity. Here I observed gossip and scandal building up community life.

When a group, even one with a united history, begins to fail in its objective, gossip and scandal accelerate the process of disintegration. Anthropologists have analysed how if joint families and subsistence villages increase their numbers they are bound to disintegrate or hive off segments. This process is often accompanied by charges of sorcery and witchcraft. African customary judgments assert that as this occurs scandal and back-biting increase. Hence as Junod reported many years ago for the Tsonga, the barrier of magic to keep out the witch is breached by internal gossiping and grumbling.⁷ These processes within the group make possible the entry of an outside witch, though in Tsonga society witches do not directly kill their own kin. In Central Africa, witches do kill their own kin and here gossip and back-biting are additionally dangerous. In his analysis of *The Yao Village* (1956:1328) Mitchell writes that:

⁷ *The Life of a South African Tribe* (1927; reprinted 1962).

An interesting variation of the danger of sorcery is the belief that sorcerers take the opportunity of squabbles within a matrilineage to kill one of its members. The rationale behind this is that the diviner's instruments are unable to detect the origin of the sorcery beyond the immediate cause. A diviner will indicate that the cause of death of, say, a child is sorcery, but that the witch is obscured behind the quarrelling words of some relative. Consequently, danger to a matrilineage ensues when one of its members goes to an outsider [note: to an *outsider*—bad manners indeed] and grumbles to him about the family squabbles and quarrels. The outsider then takes the opportunity of using this squabble to introduce his sorcery into the lineage. The Yao greatly fear backbiting [as Mitchell translates the Yao word, *miseci*] because of their dread of sorcery and none dreads it more than a village headman, a warden of a sorority-group, or a person in the position of having to keep a matrilineage or section together. These people are constantly adjuring the women under them—for it is the women who are believed to be the main culprits—not to fight among themselves; and if they do, not to take their complaints to an outsider but to the senior member of the matrilineage. The Significance of this in relation to lineage unity is plain enough.

Later (p. 170) Mitchell recounts during the history of a long dispute within a lineage, how a woman's friendship with another woman was frowned on because friendship leads to gossip and this might open the way to sorcery by the member of the opposing group.⁸

I note finally that I have discussed gossip only within small groups. Gossip about royalty, by the lower classes about the upper, and the upper by the lower, has to be related to other areas of social relations. I think we can say that men and women do wish to talk about personal matters, for reasons on which I am not clear, and in the great conurbations the discussion of, for example, stars of film and sport, produces a basis on which people transitorily associated can find something personal to talk about. Frankenberg reports that when he was studying the Welsh village, the first time he went to buy a loaf of bread he was back in five minutes. His landlady said scornfully: "Back already? It takes me an hour to buy a loaf of bread." When Frankenberg had been in the village for some time, as soon as he went into a shop, the tea-kettle was put on the fire: after all, as *anthropologos*, he was the scandalmonger par excellence. And I myself have found through my interest in soccer and cricket, that I have steadily expanded my commercial transactions with shopkeepers into warm friendships, even into a kind of blood brotherhood, in which our ritual alliance moves jerkily from elation to despair with the fate of our city's teams, and our county eleven at cricket. To buy a

packet of tobacco may take me twenty minutes. But this field of gossip and scandal still awaits study of the kind deployed by Colson upon the Makah. Meanwhile, for small groups alone, my conclusion is that we might formulate a law to say, the more exclusive a social group is, the more will its members indulge in gossip and scandal about one another. And the more persistently will they repeat the same gossip again and again and again without getting bored.⁹ We are back in the carriages driving through Highbury to Mr. Weston's house.

Outsiders frequently complain that anthropologists are able to find that anything social has a useful function and they may therefore conclude that anthropologists approve of everything. Thus it has been argued that the criminal classes are as important as the police for the maintenance of law in a society; they provide people who commit crimes but who can easily be caught by the police and publicly tried. Their trials demonstrate to the society at large, and particularly to its growing youngsters, not only that crime is wrong—which is true, but also that crime does not pay—which is not true. Amateur criminals, less easily caught, are not so useful. But this does not mean we approve of crime. We argue only that the commission of a crime, provided that the criminal is caught, tried, and punished, serves useful ends in maintaining the law, and therefore society. My argument about gossip and scandal is similar: if I suggest that gossip and scandal are socially virtuous and valuable, this does not mean that I always approve of them. Indeed, in practice I find that when I am gossiping about my friends as well as my enemies I am deeply conscious of performing a social duty; but that when I hear they gossip viciously about me, I am rightfully filled with righteous indignation.

⁹ Richard P. Werbner has supplied me with the following beautifully illustrative passage from Carl Carmer, *Stars Fell on Alabama* (1940, p. 12):

"Aside from these the main diversions of the Alabamians are love-making and gossip. The constant social chatter dealing in personalities at first annoys and bores the stranger. Gradually, however, as he picks up the threads of the relationships through which it sometimes seems that the entire state is bound into one family, he becomes not only tolerant but an eager participant. The proportion of malice in this talk is not greater than in other communities. There are the usual Mrs. Grundys and meddlesome scandalmongers. But the majority of Alabamian gentfolk take a strong interest in people that is not unlike that of a novelist. They are entertained and instructed by the antics of their fellow-beings—they like to speculate on motivations. And talk about an individual takes on added zest when (as frequently happens) he is a cousin in whom flows the blood of a common ancestor.

As for love-making, it is the accepted basis of all social activity. Even very little boys are trained to be gallant and the ambition of every daughter's mother is that her girl shall be a belle."

⁸ Contrast this sophisticated approach with Kluckhohn's simple treatment of the relation between gossip and witchcraft in *Navaho Witchcraft* (1944).

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Erratum: Vol. 3, No. 5, Dec. 1962, top of p. 479. The last sentence beginning in column 2 and ending in column 3 should read, "I sometimes get the feeling these days that we have entered a stage of evolution which can be identified more or less directly with a revivalist cult whose practitioners claim to be able to transform a theist into a materialist by the very rapid turning of the pages of *Ancient Society* to the accompaniment of suitable incantations."