

Cursing and Context in a Grenadian Fishing Community

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RÉSUMÉ

Le but de cet article est d'examiner l'usage des jurons, une offense criminelle mineure, tel qu'il apparaît dans un quartier de Gouyave, une petite ville sur la côte ouest de Grenade, dans les Antilles. C'est un cas où on peut analyser les rapports des normes d'un groupe avec la loi. Cette étude conclut à l'unité de la structure normative de Grenade, où les perspectives différentes de la classe inférieure et de la cour sont reliées entre elles et où il existe un consensus sur la supériorité du comportement et des normes de la classe moyenne.

One of the paradoxes of the anthropological study of law is the fact that the offences that a society considers minor are often the most frequent, and hence the most important with respect to the functioning of its correctional processes. In societies where elaborate written codes have reference to most areas of human conduct, many offences fall within the province of law despite acknowledgement of their relative triviality by both the legal and the folk systems. The purpose of this paper is to examine cursing, a minor criminal offence, as it occurs in the fishing sector of Gouyave, a small town on the west coast of Grenada, West Indies. It is hoped that the data will help to illuminate certain aspects of Grenadian social organization, as well as adding to our evidence concerning the interaction of law and informal norms in societies with formal legal institutions.

That some laws are much more frequently obeyed than others, has often been noted; but anthropological explanation of

this variance is dependent upon the assumptions made about the nature of "law" and its relation to norms — a thorny and generally unprofitable issue. For example, Bohannan's well-known interpretation of laws as reinstitutionalized, or doubly institutionalized norms suggests that, despite the tendency for laws and norms to be always mutually "out of step", their essential nature is one of imperfect correspondence (Bohannan 1965). This interpretation has been challenged by Diamond, who asserts that the "relation between custom and law is, basically, one of contradiction, not continuity" (1971:117), and that law, as a historical product of emerging state organization, is "the antonym and not the synonym of order" (1971:138).

While each of these approaches illuminates some aspects of the legal institutions of some types of society, neither appears entirely appropriate to deal analytically with the relationship between laws and customs in West Indian societies; nor is either approach particularly helpful in understanding situations in which a law whose normative correctness is widely accepted, is nonetheless broken with great frequency. Comparable phenomena of widespread departures from accepted norms are commonplace in the West Indies with respect to mating and family organization, so that this sort of "patterned deviance from societal values" (R.T. Smith 1963:44) indeed poses a fundamental problem for students of the area.

This paper is restricted to the consideration of a single category of actions, called "cursing" by members of all classes in Grenada, and referred to as "obscene and insulting language" in the statute that renders it criminal. Cursing is verbal behavior, and verbal behavior in general has been held by some scholars to be a "focus" of interest and value judgment in West Indian societies (see, e.g., Abrahams and Bauman 1971). A few helpful sociolinguistic studies of the area exist (Abrahams and Bauman 1971; Reisman 1970), and it is interesting to note the convergence in some respects between the findings of these scholars and my own. However, my interpretation is not dependent on the verbal nature of the behavior studied, nor is the semantic structure of cursing my main concern. The theoretical perspective guiding my choice of subject matter is one in which folk forms possess more

than merely expressive and symbolic significance; and in which existing forms of stratification and differentiation between social segments in the West Indies result from their continuing inter-relations rather than merely from the presence or absence of folk traits among them.

My observations are presented rather more fully than has recently been common in studies of non-kinship behavior in the West Indies; my intent is to allow the reader at all times to evaluate the ways in which my interpretations were derived. The data were obtained by observation, supplemented by directed discussions of observed behavior, rather than by the use of questionnaires or other formal eliciting schemes. The advantages as well as the disadvantages of this approach should be apparent. The paper is divided into five parts. First, the population and the subject are introduced; second, variations in the context and significance of cursing are described, and a hypothesis to account for these variations is proposed and examined; third, cursing is compared with behavior in the related areas of obscenity and insult; the fourth part discusses the behavior of the court in cases of cursing; and the fifth, the responses of the population to the court. Data were obtained between June 1970 and March 1971.

INTRODUCTION

The town of Gouyave had 2500 inhabitants, according to 1960 census figures. 1970 figures have not yet been released, but recorded trends indicate that little change is anticipated. Grenada's west coast as a whole is relatively economically depressed, and Gouyave's principal local source of employment is in fishing. Employment is also found in the massive nutmeg processing plant and in a banana "factory" opened by Geest Industries during the period of study; both of these employ mainly women, and work is irregular or part-time. Agricultural labor is rarely significant among Gouyave fishing people.

Fishing is concentrated in the "Lance" (Fr. *l'anse* = bay) section, where the majority of boats are beached and the majority of fishermen have their homes. The boundary between the Lance

and the older, more prestigious part of town is expressed today mainly in the "bad reputation" of the Lance, the tendency of Grenadians from other districts to identify all of Gouyave with the Lance and hence with its reputation, and in frequent expressions of mutual resentment and social distance between persons identifying with either section.

Despite the existence of a precise boundary, the Lance itself is far more a social category than a geographical one. Its core is composed of fishermen and vendors, most though not all of the latter being women. These categories themselves are continually shifting in membership, being subject both to regular seasonal fluctuations and to less predictable fluctuations in actual working activity.

Many fishermen do not live in the Lance section, and some live within walking distance outside the town boundary altogether; but this need in no way interfere with their identification as Lance people. Shopkeepers and the few boatowning entrepreneurs who live on the Lance are not so identified, although they inevitably have close and often cordial links with fishermen, upon whose fortunes their own economic well-being is dependent. Such relationships are asymmetrical, and the difference in status is taken for granted by both groups. The same is true of those households which, though situated on the Lance, have as little to do with fishing people as possible except for incidental kinship and neighbor relationships. As one proceeds "downstreet", the proportion of fishing people's residences decreases, and the density of relationships to them declines; they are less often seen in informal interaction or at rumshops, and the economy of downstreet businessmen is less dependent on their custom.

It is this complex, open-ended social field, including some 350 adults, that is the subject of this paper. This field is centered geographically in the Lance, and socially in the population of fishermen and fish vendors. Its boundaries are indefinite, and membership is as much a function of self-identification, mutual acceptance and maintenance of numerous cross-cutting ties to other members, as it is of overt economic activity. The social status of persons in this social field may be described simply as

lower class, despite internal differences in esteem. This identification is accepted on both sides of the status boundary, and fishing people clearly comprise the bulk, and the only cohesive portion, of the lower class residents of Gouyave. It is less simple to place these persons in relations to other lower class segments of Grenadian society, particularly agricultural workers, few of whom live in Gouyave.

In Gouyave, the fishing industry has not yet been subjected to organized governmental attention, and neither production nor marketing have yet been affected by large-scale entrepreneurship or rationalized development. Fishermen, whether or not they own their own boat, are relatively free of the subordination, dependency and asymmetry intrinsic to traditional employer-laborer relationships in Grenada (M.G. Smith 1965). This fundamental independence undoubtedly contributes to the bad reputation of the Lance, which is described by others primarily in terms of departures from norms of propriety, respectability and respect for authority, norms that the rural lower class, as well as the middle class, is expected to meet. This evaluation is keenly felt and resented by Lance people, who view their reputation, correctly, as exaggerated, and whose own self-estimation usually appears far more favorable.

The economic roles of Lance men and women bind them together in complexly overlapping networks of interdependency. At the same time, the marked fluctuations and inequalities of the catch set limits to the rewards of cooperative activity, and encourage a high degree of impermanence and flexibility in most economic associations (see also Archambault 1967; La Rose 1969, among others). Relationships such as vendor partnerships, crew-captain and captain-owner links, vendor-crew associations, and rumshop-client ties, are subject to frequent change, and disputes often arise within as well as between the groups formed by such relationships.

As might be expected, the sources and forms of Lance disputes typically contrast markedly with those characteristic of the Guyanese sugar plantation analyzed by Jayawardena (1963). Lance people possess no explicit egalitarian ideology; they do possess verbalized ideologies of solidarity based on occupational,

local-origin, and class-color identities, but these criteria cross-cut the population and do not unify it. Lance people are highly differentiated internally, particularly in their economic roles and abilities and in economic success; in local factional allegiances and in kinship or other ties to persons or communities outside the Lance; and in a host of associations involving kinship, sexual, religious and recreational activities. Most disputes involve economic aggressions and the withholding of a great variety of possible reciprocal economic activities; or the direct or indirect accusation of various misdeeds, whether true or false. Cursing is irrelevant to the causes of such disputes, and usually treated as trivial when it is involved. Cursing in such contexts represents a lack of anything more effective to say or do — the opponent may well congratulate himself if he reduces the other to helpless cursing, and he is unlikely to be, or to pretend to be, deeply offended by it. Most disputes are conducted without recourse to the courts at any stage; and, in view of the prevalence of minor violence and of opportunities for accusations of minor theft, cursing does not have the exclusive utility as the "people's action" in bringing private disputes before the court that it does in the Guyanese plantation (Jayawardena 1963:128). The motif of prestige-envy-equality does play a conspicuous part in Lance social behavior, as it seems to throughout the West Indies. It is the theme of much banter and teasing, and it does lead to disputes. Nonetheless, this motif does not have the central role that it appears to have in the Guyanese plantation, either as the foundation of internal social relationships or as the major source of conflict (Jayawardena 1963:104-116).

Obscene and insulting language is the single most common offence recorded at the police station in Gouyave. In contrast to assault, the next most frequent offence, cursing occurs as an everyday commonplace of great frequency, the vast majority of examples never reaching the attention of the legal authority. It is a significant element both of Lance residents' view of their own social environment, and of their interactions with the institutions of the larger society.

Police statistics were examined that summarize the numbers of cases brought, in each category of offence, for the entire district

of which Gouyave is the principal town. These must be interpreted with some caution, since they lump together the entire district of St. John, and include with obscene and insulting language certain other, rarer miscellaneous offences. They show an overall increase in obscene and insulting language, from 47 cases in 1964, to 170 cases in 1970; during the same period, assault cases rose from 33 to 115. Alongside of the general upward trend, there are marked fluctuations, from year to year and from month to month, within each category of offence. For example, in 1969, 260 cases of obscene and insulting language were recorded, exceeding the 1970 figure by almost 53%. Such fluctuations, however, are seldom consistent between categories of offences, except for a general peak in 1969 as against the succeeding year; no major change in personnel of police or court occurred during this year, and no other cause could be found for this peak. It is of interest that a comparable overall increase in crimes, particularly obscene and insulting language and assault, between 1959 and 1966, was recorded in an unpublished survey of St. Patrick's, a largely farming district whose principal town has a population about half that of Gouyave (Dyer and Warr 1968).

It appears likely that the patterns to be described are not peculiar to Gouyave, although they may well be less prominent in other Grenadian communities. Certainly, many Grenadians, from Gouyave and elsewhere, assert that cursing is especially common on the Lance; several persons from other areas gave this as the reason why they believed I should not conduct my research there, and the topic was repeatedly raised in the early part of my field work by Lance residents attempting to gauge my response or to disassociate themselves from the practice.

Cursing on the Lance gained additional significance through the appointment, at about the middle of the field period, of a new magistrate for the district, who quickly gained the reputation of being particularly zealous in discouraging this practice. By attending the court, which usually met twice weekly in Gouyave, I was able to evaluate Lance interpretations of the magistrate's actions, and it was often possible to trace the subsequent fate of observed offences.

THE CONTEXTS OF CURSING

All of the acts that are referred to as cursing, or that are classed by the court as obscene and insulting language, consist of the use of one or more of only five words. These words, listed in order of increasing seriousness, are "shit", "ass", "fuck" or "fucking", "cunt" and "mother cunt". The first of these is infrequent as well as mild; the last two are distinguishable in use and significance. Although all acts of cursing are thus readily identifiable, not all such acts are met with the same kind of response. Observations of responses to the use of curse words would appear to lend support to three mutually inconsistent generalizations.

First, *the use of curse words is regarded as a potent weapon*. People sometimes say they are "afraid" of some individuals notorious for their cursing; they try to avoid these individuals, or at least avoid provoking them. People may state proudly that their own cursing deters ill-treatment by others, or that they have cursed or plan to curse others as retaliation for ill-treatment or abuse.

The potency of cursing may also be indicated by occasional comments that consistently poor catches are a punishment for excessive cursing by fishermen. This opinion has been heard only from older women, and it is probably not generally shared. There are several alternative explanations for poor success at fishing; while each is suggestive of stresses experienced by some members of the community, none appears to have majority agreement.

Second, *the use of curse words is a trivial action, negligible or mildly amusing*. A boy of 2½ is encouraged by adults to say "haul your ass" and "fuck away"; he repeats the phrases, and is rewarded with laughter and praise. A young man complains that the police arrest people for saying "ass" but do nothing when serious trouble occurs. An elderly seine owner, working with his crew on net repair, joins in their joking heavily laced with curse words, remarking that since everybody is doing it, he has to start doing it too. An individual is described as "nice"; although he "uses a lot of bad words" he never uses them to "good people". A woman involved in a cursing exchange with another woman exonerated herself, saying, "I may curse but I never lie". A brief

argument involving curse words, between an unrelated man and woman, is ended with the woman's peace-making statement, "I have a bad mouth, and you have a bad mouth".

References to the characteristic Lance bad language are frequently prefaced by "only": Lance people are said to "only curse" but not to do bad things (like stealing or physical violence). On innumerable occasions, the occurrence of curse words embedded in a broader speech context is ignored and apparently accepted. These occasions include mutual exchanges of half-joking abuse; spontaneous solo exhibitions of dramatic, entertaining narrative or patter by a limited number of talented speakers; and brief flareups of anger between two persons. A few of these speech contexts will be discussed further below; broadly comparable speech acts are analyzed in Abrahams and Bauman (1971). The curse words occurring in these speech contexts are never singled out for creditable attention or favorable comment, but appear to be taken for granted.

Third, *cursing is wrong; it is unacceptable behavior*. A young woman, who has been fined for cursing, is widely said to have deserved the punishment and to be destined for prison because of her persistence in this behavior. Another young woman asserts proudly that she would never stay with a man who cursed her, and that she had determined to break with her previous mate after he called her "stinkass". A young man finally stops patronizing his regular rum shop, after repeated requests by the proprietor to stop his cursing, which consisted of liberal use of the adjective "fucking"; the proprietor's wife maintains that her husband acted correctly, and that the young man's drunkenness was no excuse since many others 'on't curse when drunk. A man engages in a fistfight with another man who has cursed a rum-shop proprietress and refused to leave when asked; his valor is widely praised, and the curser condemned.

From these apparent inconsistencies, it is evident that the response to the use of a curse word is dependent upon the speech context and the social context in which it occurs. Although Lance people do not acknowledge any positive value in curse words *per se*, these are sometimes accepted and even indirectly encouraged. It is possible to specify more generally the conditions under which

this occurs, and the significance that cursing has when it is not accepted.

In many instances where cursing is disapproved, it is regarded as an aggressive action against another person (cf. Swartz 1969). Such aggression is acceptable if it appears as an appropriate response to a wrong done to the curser; thus, it may be justified if it is provoked, or it may be cancelled out and rendered insignificant if it is mutually and voluntarily engaged in by two equally matched opponents, whether joking or in anger. The aggressive meaning of cursing is evident in all cursing directed at another individual, whether or not that individual is present to hear it. Such cursing is evaluated in terms of the relative appropriateness and fairness of that degree of aggression, or its perceived gratuitousness or malice. Thus, cursing is particularly shocking if directed against a parent or sibling, relationships that ought ideally to be free of aggression and competitive self-seeking; but an acceptable and common way of defending oneself against the competitive aggressions of others is to "give them words in their ass".

What is directly at stake in unjustified aggressive cursing is the cursed individual's autonomy — autonomy, that is, in the sense of his right to coexist with his fellows without assault on his integrity, or involuntary subjection to the will of others stronger or more ruthless than himself. Though I am reluctant to introduce unusual terms with culturally restricted definitions into this discussion, the word "autonomy" appears the most adequate to convey the notion of security in the conduct of social relationships, that I believe to be involved. While Abrahams and Bauman, in their discussion of the complex taxonomy of speech acts among St. Vincent peasants, refer to "associations of impulsive and anti-social activities" (1971:765) attached to some kinds of speech, the nature of these and other feared associations is not usually made explicit. Certain St. Vincent speech acts, primarily arguing, are said to be "regarded as violations of privacy and therefore as threats to one's identity and to the maintenance of social order" (1971:767-768). For the Lance, such a notion of the significance of privacy appears less relevant, and cursing must be viewed in a context of widespread public exposure of behavior, in which criticism, teasing and public quarreling are major means of social

control, and exaggerated responses, false rumor and malicious censure are everpresent risks.

A threat to autonomy may be present as well in talk that need not include cursing; bad talk is, next to poverty, the most frequently mentioned defect of life on the Lance, and it is the behavior most frequently meant when persons are said to be "bad" or "no good". Persistent, incorrigible cursing is feared and disliked for the same reason other bad talk is — its unrestrained malice; in either case, the same disregard of social context and lack of responsiveness to social opinion are shown. For extreme offenders, cursing is distinguishable mainly by its greater conspicuousness, and hence the implied greater defiance of the opinions of one's fellows, and lack of restraint.

The social context in which cursing is evaluated includes a second dimension, which must be distinguished from that of aggression and autonomy. It centers about notions of decorum and propriety, often referred to as "respect". These aspects of behavior are of considerable importance in Gouyave, as elsewhere in the West Indies, and as elsewhere are intimately bound up with relations of status and authority (see, e.g., Jayawardena 1963; Foner 1970).

Middle class persons do not normally use curse words in the presence of fishing people, although they may make "hurtful remarks". It is improper to curse in the presence of social superiors, for this shows no "respect" for them (cf. Rottenberg 1952:253). For example, one fisherman offered this definition of what he meant by saying he respects an elderly shopkeeper: if he were about to say "haul your ass" to Mary in the shopkeeper's presence, he would stop and not say it. Even worse, of course, would be the direct cursing of a person of superior status; no instances of this were observed, although several were reported. This behavior was usually rationalized by statements that these persons were bad and thus were not worthy of "respect". In general, the degree of avoidance of cursing in the presence of social superiors is extremely high, but this is in part a function of their personal popularity and of their distance from most situations in which cursing is likely. The force of this restraint may be illustrated by the fact that, after a month of field work,

I noted that I could not see what all the references to cursing were about, since the only word I had ever heard used was "ass"; during this period, an older fisherman told me, with obviously mixed delight, that my presence was forcing the fishermen to behave themselves. In addition to the relaxation of "respect" induced by familiarity, in situations where large crowds are present and interaction is intense, words are not always carefully watched. When cursing in these situations is not a deliberate disregard of the presence of higher status persons, it is not considered to be disrespectful; if it reaches a level of intensity or frequency thought to be offensive by others in the crowd, soft but penetrating calls of "respect!" are heard, and are usually effective.

Policemen are another important category of persons before whom one should not curse, not because of their individual qualities or their social class background but because of the authority of their office. Cursing in the presence of policemen is of course particularly likely to lead to arrest, and is considered particularly foolish or reckless. Prudence in this regard also usually results in highly effective self-censorship; but is made more difficult by the periodic informal interaction — drinking, "liming," etc. — of some policemen on the Lance, and by their appearance on some occasions when emotions are already high. A certain *quid pro quo* is expected as a consequence of this informal interaction; a "nice" policeman is expected to overlook minor cursing he may overhear, unless he is "really provoked"; at the same time, fishing people are wrong to expect apparent friendliness to override official duty, and should not tempt the policeman: "you may curse once [and get away with it], you may curse twice, but don't curse three times".

A policeman is not expected to overlook cursing directed at himself, and the individual who responds to a police caution or summons in this way has only himself to blame for the further charges against him that will certainly be made. For example, the behavior of a young woman just fined for cursing was indignantly imitated during a discussion: the police allegedly said, "Madam, you're under arrest". "What the fuck I care about that, you mother cunt", etc., she replied. After her sentence in court, she was said to have returned to the Lance still loudly cursing the

police. In this instance, behavior which might be merely foolish under other circumstances, was severely condemned, partly because of her extreme defiance of authority and partly because of her sex. In general, the inconsistency between policemen's social behavior and status, and the authority of their office, produces some ambivalence: some policemen are felt not to really merit the respect pattern that their authority requires. A policeman overheard saying "haul your ass" may be the object of critical comment, or he may be teased, "Can we go to the station and report you [too]?"

Cursing among social equals who are on familiar terms does not violate values of respect. Most cursing among fishing people is of this sort, but considerations of respect are relevant to the behavior of persons widely separated in age; of kinsmen and spouses; and of those whose ties to the local community are recent or temporary. Decorum requires different standards of behavior for men and for women. These are not absolute, and women who are well regarded may occasionally curse, but the contexts in which they do so are more limited. Standards of propriety for married women are considerably more stringent than for the unmarried majority (Macdonald 1973). There is no indication of a respect pattern towards women in general as the audience or the target of cursing.

If, as I shall try to show below, the magistrate's expressed standards are primarily concerned with the dimension of decorum and respect in cases of cursing, it should be clear at the same time that these aspects are also important on the Lance. On the Lance, however, they receive a distinctive emphasis and meaning. There, violations of rules of decorum involve disregard of the variability of appropriate behavior. Correct behavior is behavior that is sensitive to context. Respect in general requires that one behave according to one's station in life, and at the same time accord the appropriate recognition to the station of others with whom one interacts. Respect *per se* does *not* entail specific forms of behavior or speech, nor is it the exclusive value sphere of any particular age, sex or status group (cf. Wilson 1969). Few on the Lance could convincingly imitate middle class behavior, nor would they find this desirable; but even the humblest are expected

to have and to use appropriately more or less formal, more or less open, modes of expression and behavior. These modes are more likely to involve a patterned multiplicity, than a simple duality, of forms (for a "dualistic" view of Caribbean social organization, see especially Abrahams and Bauman 1971; Reisman 1970; Wilson 1969). Persons who refuse to acknowledge variations of sex, status, character and situation in their cursing are said to "have no good behavior"; it is not so much that they may occasionally behave badly, as that they cannot be trusted to behave well, that is condemned.

It would appear, then, that disapproval of cursing on the *Lance* is related to its significance as an expression of unrestrained aggression and of contempt for the opinion of others. Cursing, as a symbol of the unrestrained ego, is a threat to the social fabric which depends on the maintenance of complex networks of largely informal exchanges, and on the acceptance of prevailing forms of expression of social inequality. The meaning of cursing in the great diversity of contexts in which it occurs may be sought with reference to the factors of aggression, autonomy and respect. Thus, a toddler may be encouraged jokingly to curse, in the same way that he is encouraged to give and to take mock blows from adults; cursing of adults by an older child, however, is regarded as a serious matter. That cursing is aggressive is also indicated by its occasional use to ward off criticism for improper behavior; for example, a young man snatches a bunch of coconuts that have just been cut down from someone else's tree and runs off with them, replying to the protests of bystanders with a volley of curses.

If the foregoing view of cursing is adequate, it should help to explain the difference in the social response to the habitual cursing of two fishermen, both extreme in this respect. R., about 42 years old, frequently boasted of cursing persons of higher status whom he didn't like, and of being unafraid of the consequences. The observed targets of his cursing seemed indiscriminate, excluding only the few whom he favored at any given time. He frequently engaged in long streams of imaginative invective, highly dotted with curse words, directed against everyone passing or in his vicinity. This was especially marked during

intensely competitive group interaction, such as in distribution of fish to vendors or purchase of bait from a seine. In these and other situations, his cursing frequently took the offensive, purporting to prevent the anticipated misconduct of others by taking the initiative with a string of accusations and abusive remarks. These strings usually gathered momentum and expanded in reference to include uninvolved bystanders, whose anticipated unfavorable comment or interference was thus warded off. When met with an aggressive counterresponse, R. might persist briefly and complain of injustice but would rapidly subside. Though boasting of cursing, he also frequently denied cursing, and insisted that other people "lie" or are "no good" or deserved what he said about them (e.g., "I didn't curse her, I only said the fucking rum is no good").

R.'s behavior was usually tolerated by a small group of persons: mainly his cousins, girl friends, boat owner and crew mates, and a clique of about five drinking companions, of whom he was the oldest. These people would sometimes try to tease or persuade him out of some of his cursing, to no avail. Relationships of these and other kinds were unstable, since R. would antagonize or embarrass his associates and then respond to their displeasure with further curses. Although he began the ocean season in October as captain of a sailing boat, by January he had lost this position and one or two temporary ones that followed, could find no place on any crew, was on probationary status and facing two additional court charges for cursing, and had been rejected by his principal girl friend, who refused to cook for him, and his drinking clique, which seldom drank with him; he left the area during this period, allegedly because of fear of court action. The three court charges against him had been brought by an elderly, litigious part-time vendor, by a policeman who had been his frequent drinking companion, and by a rumshop proprietor.

It is likely that the gradual process of accelerating disapproval and control was a cyclical one, and that partial reform and temporary reacceptance had occurred before and would occur in future, for the rejection outlined was far from complete. The accelerating nature of the social controls exercised by his peers,

particularly active fishermen of 20-35, is especially noteworthy. In addition to increasing mockery, open anger, and aggressive taunting, these men, with more or less explicit defiance, began to refuse to sell him bait, or to leave his boat waiting helplessly in the surf while hauling up other boats arriving later. The meaning of these gestures was clear to observers, and they received much favorable publicity.

Verbal criticism of R. centered about the indiscriminateness of his bad tongue and its disregard of any kind of normative restraints, and hence its apparently arbitrary, unmanageable malice. Sometimes R.'s cursing appeared to be regarded almost as a force of nature whose dangers should be recognized and avoided since they cannot be controlled. For example, one woman who had been associated with him but claimed to be no longer speaking to him, nevertheless censured another woman as "unfair" for having interfered in a episode of cursing. The latter woman must have known, she reasoned, that R. would then certainly direct his cursing at her, and she would automatically have a pretext (which she did not use) for making another complaint against him at the police station. Another informant who knew him well and was "afraid of his tongue" thoughtfully explained his real fault as consisting in the fact that "when he feels to speak he will say whatever his mind tells him to say" (i.e., whatever comes into his head).

Equally unresponsive to correction was T., a man of about 55 with a severe drinking problem. When sober, T. was thoughtful and mild-mannered, and he was considered a capable and responsible workman. He drank frequently, however, and when very drunk would engage in displays of emotionally intense, uncontrolled behavior. This included endless repetitions of certain favorite curse words in a loud, shrieking voice; occasional wandering about in flight from some fancied pursuer; stripping of his clothing with lewd gestures and advances to women; or brandishing of his cutlass with loud threats to kill and to die on the gallows for it. While some people avoided him or brushed him off during these episodes, most would tolerate or humor him, with only occasional attempts to calm him if he became too violent, or remove him if his behavior might offend others of higher status. Sometimes people would egg him on or exploit his degradation,

though extreme forms of this (e.g., pouring a soft drink over his head and clothing) were said to be wrong.

In contrast to R., T. was highly sensitive to moral values, and concerned about the judgments of others. When half-sober, he would frequently recite in an aggrieved tone the bad things people say or believe about him ("but let them talk"), and would attempt to bolster his self-esteem by telling of his generosity and helpfulness to others, his many children, and the contrasts between the "real" or former T. and the spectacle he now presented. His son, also a fisherman, was plainly shamed by his drunken episodes, and when present would angrily try to control him. He as well as others, however, emphasized the contrast between T.'s behavior when drunk and when sober. In general, it was said that no one could stop him, and since he did it only when drunk it was futile to blame or punish him. A middle-class shopowner who once had charged him for cursing was considered to have acted meanly, and the former magistrate was said to be on cordial terms with him and to recognize that there was no point in fining him. He was said to be "the only man in Gouyave" who could say those words and get away with it. While the former magistrate no doubt knew T., and may have been unwilling to convict him, it is doubtful that the new magistrate could be relied on to dismiss charges, if any were made against T. However, as long as Lance people continue to accept T.'s cursing, and the policemen continue to be familiar ones, T. may continue to avoid court charges.

In contrast to R., T.'s cursing is not aggressive and is never directed against specific others. It may offend against propriety but bystanders would be foolish to take offence since T. is considered not to be able to help it. The evaluation of T. is also favored by his attempts to maintain cooperative ties with others when sober, and by his past history of stable relationships. At present, he is weak rather than aggressive, and though he may be an embarrassment he is more likely to be a victim than a threat,

R.'s cursing is highly aggressive, and because it manifestly serves R.'s egoistic ends and occurs whether he is drunk or sober, there is no reason to consider it unwilling. R. is said to have "no good behavior," while T. does behave well when sober. R.'s cursing is frequently embedded in highly offensive remarks or

accusations, while T.'s occurs without this kind of speech context. R.'s use of bad words shows that he has little regard for his fellows and is not constrained by their opinions, except as they directly affect himself. T. is responsive to the opinions of his fellows, and his moral judgments derive from socially shared rather than idiosyncratic or egocentered standards. These two examples appear to support the hypothesis that cursing is significant on the Lance primarily as a symbol of the aggressiveness of the unrestrained ego, and that this lack of restraint may be manifested by unjustified attack on the autonomy of others, or by willful disregard of contextual requirements of decorum. It appears, too, that where neither of these conditions applies, cursing is accepted by most Lance people.

CURSING, INSULT AND OBSCENITY

The statute under which charges for cursing are brought, refers to "threatening, abusive, insulting, obscene or profane language". Profanity, that is, the casual or irreverent use of words associated with religion, is not used by Lance people; and no convictions were ever observed for insults that did not involve the use of curse words. At the same time, of course, the five curse words being considered have primary meanings as references to sexual parts or activities; and they do not by any means exhaust the vocabulary of sexual terms in general use on the Lance. Yet Lance people do not label behavior or speech with the legal term "obscene," but they do label some behavior or speech as "insulting". Before discussing the actions of the court with respect to cursing, then, it will be necessary to examine briefly the areas of obscenity and insult in Lance behavior, and to indicate the relationship of each to cursing.

Obscenity. Speech or behavior that explicitly refers to sexual parts and activities is not usually labelled in any way,¹ but it is

¹ On only one occasion, I observed a woman criticized by other women for having used a "dirty word". The words, "menses," was used during a factual, all-female discussion of contraception. The speaker was highly unpopular and a notorious curser, and it appeared that this fact was responsible for the negative response.

strictly bounded by considerations of contextual propriety, and is overtly disapproved when it exceeds these boundaries. In ordinary, polite conversation, sexual matters are not dwelt on for their own sake, but are referred to where relevant by a variety of acceptable euphemisms. For example, the standard way of referring to intercourse is to "take" (someone); to "make love" is also common, as well as a number of more indirect phrases. There are, however, certain rather infrequent occasions in which sexual joking, banter or boasting occur; and then discussions of sex may be extensive, and euphemisms may be abandoned. It is convenient to apply the legal term "obscene" to speech on such occasions, for the purposes of this discussion.

Obscene talk may take the form of an individual performance before an amused and encouraging audience, or it may involve group participation. Although as a woman, I could not observe all-male interaction without altering its sex composition, I did observe all-female and mixed-sex groups in explicit and usually humorous references to such matters as male and female homosexuality, oral-genital contact, anal intercourse, bestiality, masturbation, and sado-masochism, as well as all of the more dramatic or laughable aspects of "normal" sexuality (among St. Vincent peasants, many of these topics are said not to be "joking matters" [Abrahams and Bauman 1971:767]). On such occasions, an apparent license prevails, but this license is in fact conditional on continuing group approval and participation. It is subject to continuing group assessment of the social appropriateness, in context, of even the most outrageous statements. It is rather easy to overstep the bounds of group acceptance, especially when the talk is restricted to a solo performer, when the audience is not sufficiently amused in proportion to the degree that it is shocked, and when an episode continues too long. It is particularly easy for women to overstep these boundaries, and women who are well regarded restrict the length and the frequency of their indulgence, and minimize the proportion of explicit words, favoring more euphemistic references to sex. In short, in the Lance phrase, they should not "overdo it". If a person's sexual talk does become embarrassing or inappropriate, he usually becomes aware of this quickly and stops at that point. If he or she persists, there will

be politely amused murmurs indicating that enough is enough; if this is not effective, the audience will gradually withdraw, leaving the speaker alone.

Regardless of whether or not the five curse words are used, obscene talk of this kind is not considered cursing; and in fact notorious cursers seldom indulge in it, if only because they seldom can muster an appreciative, cooperative audience, and hence cannot get properly started. Indulgence in obscene talk appears to be the privilege of those who normally watch their words and who are responsive to social context. Such persons of course differ individually in the degree to which they take advantage of this prerogative. For the minority who do not respond appropriately to social context, attempts at obscene talk are taken merely as further evidence of their bad behavior. When sexual talk is treated with disapproval, this is not because of the words used but because the speaker does not distinguish appropriately between proper and improper behavior, and between polite and licentious speech; hence his attempts to express himself are threatening or offensive rather than amusing.

Obscene talk, then, represents a temporary relaxation of the rules of propriety, during which behavior that normally is considered personal or shameful, may be exposed publicly and exploited for its entertainment value. Since this occurs in a context of group participation, boastful self-exposure, and dramatic overstatement, the use of curse words in their primary sexual reference is accepted as a means to an expressive end. Curse words in their primary sexual reference can, if not properly responsive to context, violate norms of propriety; but they are not aggressive and do not violate personal autonomy.

Insult. In contrast to sexual talk, insults are always taken seriously and are regarded as a wrong done to the person insulted. The recognition of speech as insulting is, of course, dependent upon context and the prior relationships between persons. Much abusive banter is not taken as insulting by the participants and must be excluded. Insults are unilateral, unprovoked and unjustified; and they express the moral or social inferiority of the person insulted. Aside from the content of an insult, the act of insult itself constitutes an injury, in that it im-

plies that the victim has so little worth that he may be freely treated this way at the whim of the insulter. Hence, as might be expected, insults are particularly resented when they come from social superiors, who are expected to conform to a code of interaction that protects inferiors from "hurt" while demonstrating their own elite identification. Insults need not be verbal, and may be interpreted with considerable subtlety. For example, a visiting middle class leader provoked hurt criticism for allegedly pouring the remains of his drink over other glasses that stood in a rum-shop sink and were being filled with drinks for some fishermen present.

Insulting one's social equal may lead to an immediate reply in kind, to physical fighting, or at least to a later recounting of the episode in tones of outraged indignation, emphasizing the injustice of the insult's content and the malice and impertinence of the insulter. Insults that thus arouse anger tend to be those containing statements that, by local standards, are self-evidently outrageous or unfair. If there is a chance the insult might appear true, there is little to be gained by making a fuss, and it is wiser to convert the remark into banter than to take offence (cf. Jayawardena 1963:81). Examples of insults between equals that aroused an indignant or furious response are the following: A woman told another that her arms are covered with "venereal disease" and that she had a "bad stink"; a woman accused a man, who was drinking with her common-law spouse, of "trying to buy friends"; a woman who had loaned a man her bathrobe as a carnival costume accused him of later lending it to his sister-in-law to wear in the hospital during childbirth. Much of the anger aroused by such insults tends to be expressed in discussions after the fact, and thus to dissipate at the verbal level, but even when it does so insults may lead to sustained grudges resembling Guyanese disputes in their dynamics and consequences (Jayawardena 1963). Sometimes people do not respond overtly to insults, either because they are unwilling to be drawn into open confrontation, or because they are weak or deviant individuals who tend to be the butt of contemptuous teasing. Such individuals do best to leave their defense to third persons who may "feel sorry" for them.

Although insults may contain curse words, the use of curse words in itself never constitutes an insult. What is more significant is that on a few occasions, insulting talk that was entirely free of curse words was referred to by the offended person as "cursing". Despite denials by the insulter or others present that cursing had occurred, these incidents do appear to indicate some overlap or ambiguity of boundary between the two concepts. In these instances, status inequality was present to at least some degree, and the insulter had violated a relationship of deference or equality that the other person believed should obtain. While insult tends to have status implications that may be uncomfortable for the person insulted, whether he is of higher or lower status than the insulter, these implications are evaded if the offence is said to be one of "cursing". An accusation of cursing is a way of making the insulter appear morally lax, while avoiding the admission that he has challenged one's relative social status. The overlap between cursing and insulting arises from the fact that both are forms of aggressive talk that attack the individual's social worth and autonomy. Both cursing and insulting are among the forms that bad talk can take (lying, "making confusion" and "making trouble" are others). Bad talk of all kinds is regarded as a serious matter, and is a threat to the maintenance and solidarity of informally regulated relationships.²

CURSING AND THE COURT

The intentions and values of the court can be apprehended only through the actual behavior of the court. The magistrate's court in Grenada allows almost unlimited discretion to the individual magistrate's interpretation of the law, within the limits of his sentencing power (cf. Hood 1962; Karlen 1967:49-50). Nevertheless, I do not believe that the main features of court

² It is my purpose in this paper to examine cursing in its behavioral and normative contexts, rather than as a member of a set of conceptual categories of speech acts (cf. Abrahams and Bauman 1971). If such a categorization were carried out for the Lance, it is likely that what I have called "obscene talk" would belong in a sub-class including various kinds of entertaining dramatic banter or narrative, overtly expressing traditional group identity and solidarity. This sub-class would contrast with negatively valued talk, including cursing and insulting, which in general is felt to threaten security and solidarity.

behavior to be discussed should be considered primarily as individual characteristics. Indeed, I hope to suggest that in their broad outlines they reflect norms and constraints originating in the wider society.

To the extent that the new magistrate, Mr. S., was different than the previous one, some of the differences may be attributed to his newness to the job, as many Lance people maintained. His newness did lend force to his declared intention to rid the Lance of cursing and other forms of disreputable behavior, an intensification of policy that would have been difficult for an incumbent magistrate to introduce. My very limited observations of his predecessor, supplemented by arrest and conviction statistics and the comments of informants, suggest that Mr. S.'s severity toward cursing was distinctive mainly in degree.

Mr. S. himself frequently explained his role as an educational one, in that he would often be lenient toward offences that occurred before his appointment, but threatened offenders with more severe punishments if they committed the same offence after his warning. Although this "educational" goal did not appear successful, the magistrate is certainly one of the Lance's major sources of information on elite ideas and values. Mr. S.'s decisions and his often lengthy monologues were a favorite topic of discussion on the Lance. His opinions, attitudes and tone, as perceived through Lance eyes, reached well beyond the relatively few persons who actually attend court.

Whether or not the passage of time will gradually lead Mr. S. to relax his standards, it is these standards in their initially uncompromised, often highly explicit form that are of concern here. The standards of the magistrate's court with respect to cursing are here presented in the form of assertions. This discussion following each assertion indicates the kinds of evidence on which it is based, and the likelihood that it is also perceived by Lance people.

Insults are not actionable unless curse words are used. No cases of insult alone were observed during the period of field work. In one case, in which fishermen were not involved, despite confirmation of the epithet "you stinking Portugee" by a witness,

the charged use of "fuck" and "ass" was not confirmed, and the charges were dismissed. During the few months when "Raycan," a calypso by Lord Shortshirt, was the most popular hit song, a favorite insulting epithet was "Raycan," or "dirty Raycan" or "stinking Raycan," all directly inspired by the lyrics of the song and used variously to express sexual ridicule. Lance people sometimes warned each other that Mr. S. was particularly intent on punishing such references; and the obscenity statute includes a clause forbidding the singing of "any insulting song". However, there is no evidence that anyone was actually prosecuted under this clause during the period of study.

There is no valid excuse or justification for the use of curse words. Mr. S. repeatedly made this point in fining defendants who claimed they were merely responding to the curses used by another. The defendant should, Mr. S. points out, have gone to the police station rather than cursing in reply. Lance people were well aware of this court attitude. For example, one woman who had earlier been fined, told proudly of how she had resisted the temptation to return curses for curses on another occasion, quoting the magistrate to bolster her restraint. In another Lance case, a young man charged with cursing obtained the services of counsel, who pleaded somewhat irrelevantly that his client had been drunk, that liquor is a "heritage of colonialism," and that hence the blame lay with "the whole society". This argument failed to save the defendant from a heavy fine in addition to his lawyer's fees.

In only one observed case, charges of cursing were dismissed after a prosecution witness testified that the complainant had cursed first. In his decision, the magistrate chose to stress the "honesty" of the witness, to whom he awarded compensation for the time lost from work. This case seemed to involve status factors whose exact role was difficult to determine, as the parties were not from Gouyave; it does not constitute a significant exception.

Cursing is worse than at least minor forms of violence. This evaluation is not explicitly stated by the magistrate. It may be inferred from numerous decisions in which charges of fighting not resulting in serious injury are dismissed, while concurrent charges of cursing are punished; or in which mild violence is

excused if it is found to have been provoked by cursing. Further, the fine for cursing is uniformly set by Mr. S. at the maximum of \$96 (Eastern Caribbean; approximately \$48 U.S.), while fines for striking or slapping, or even minor theft, are usually lower, and may be as low as \$12. Mr. S. is frequently moved by cases of cursing to expatiate on his intolerance of this behavior and his intention to "clean up" the Lance; sometimes he calls attention mockingly to the contrast between the silence or inarticulateness of persons before the bench, and the uninhibitedness of their speech "by the bay". Such condemnations are seldom provoked by fighting, even when injury results. Lance people occasionally say that Mr. S. is harder on cursing than on fighting, and this awareness is shown when defendants attempt — usually futilely — to plead not guilty to a cursing charge though pleading guilty to other charges heard simultaneously.

Cursing, a criminal offence, is an affront to public decency rather than an injury to the person cursed. The criminal status of cursing charges is evident to Lance people in that compensation is never awarded to persons cursed, and in that policemen can and often do bring charges for curse words that they happen to overhear. That not all implications of criminal law are equally clear is suggested by the magistrate's occasional reminders to the court that charges once initiated must be seen through to their conclusion, and in his frequent need to issue warrants to complainants or witnesses who fail to appear (see Karlen 1967:20, 28).

Obscene language is held to be an "annoyance," and testimony must include a statement that some listener was "annoyed" by the words used. The complainant need not be the target of the cursing, but in practice it is usually either the target or a policeman who enters the complaint. Mr. S.'s comments rarely depict cursing as harmful or painful to the person cursed, but he frequently scolds defendants about the disgracefulness of their behavior and the intolerable situation that bad language on the Lance presents for persons passing through the area. The public offensiveness of Lance behavior is echoed in views often heard from others. These range from the complaint of a 12-year-old schoolboy that the children attending the school on the Lance

"can't learn" because of the bad language they keep hearing from the fishermen, to an indignant editorial in a Grenadian newspaper recording the writer's shocked observations during a "hurried passage along the Lance" (West Indian, Aug. 12, 1971).

Cursing by a woman is even worse than cursing by a man. While men occasionally may receive a reduced fine for cursing or even be dismissed with a warning or a bond for good behavior, if their other behavior is held to warrant it, women's cursing is never treated this way. The magistrate's comments to women defendants frequently emphasize their sex, for which rather Victorian standards of modest behavior and corresponding chivalrous treatment by men are explicitly advocated. For example, while scolding a young woman defendant the magistrate pointed out that "if the girls [are so shameless as to] use those words, what is left for the boys to do?" My observations of the magistrate's double standard in disposing of charges of cursing were not supported by Lance people discussing the cases. This may be because a high proportion of male defendants did receive equally large fines, and because Lance people also support a sexual double standard.

From the foregoing observations, it appears that the concern of the court in cases of cursing centers about the dimension of respect and decorum, rather than that of aggression and autonomy. It is likely, too, that, as suggested by the wording of the statute itself, the five curse words are not distinguished by the court from other "obscene" language. Other obscene words might well be punished in the same way if they were common enough and public enough to attract the court's notice. Since, as I believe, the court is not primarily concerned with the possible injury done by cursing to the person cursed, and since the five curse words are virtually the only obscenities to reach its attention, the question arises as to the reasons why the court is so concerned with this offence.

Cursing appears to be a vice that has attracted the displeasure of the government from the earliest periods of British rule. While the social sources of this displeasure are likely to have changed less than might be supposed, their past nature can only be guessed at. Royal instructions of July 1832, on the eve of emancipation, to the Governor of Grenada, urge that "all laws already made

against blasphemy, profaneness, adultery, fornication, polygamy, incest, profanation of the Lord's day, swearing, and drunkenness [sic]... be rigorously executed" and that "effectual laws be passed for the restraint and punishment of all such of the aforementioned vices, against which no laws are as yet provided" (Davis 1837: 128-129). An act of 1789 provides for trial before a justice of the peace, and punishment falling short of "life or limb," "if any Slave or Slaves shall personally insult, abuse, threaten, or in any Manner contemptuously treat any White or free Person (Laws of Grenada 1808:178). Prior to this law, and after it in cases not involving free persons, cursing by slaves would have been treated at the discretion of their masters, within the wide disciplinary latitude permitted them by law (see, e.g., Mrs. Carmichael 1833,II:152-159, 173-181, 186). Such legislation coincides with, and no doubt reflects certain aspects of the "movement for the reformation of manners" which greatly influenced moral legislation and law enforcement during the same period in England (Radzinowicz 1956, Vol. III). At the same time, it is likely that at least the earlier manifestations of this movement were concerned primarily with blasphemy and the impious use of religious language, as well as with improper sexual *behavior*, rather than with obscene language (see, e.g., Disney 1710 for some arguments against profanity). The development and prohibition of specifically sexual terms of abuse are obscure, both for England and for the West Indies, and require detailed historical investigation.

The present behavior of the court suggests that today cursing is condemned not because it is shocking to delicate sensibilities, nor because it is offensive to religious codes, nor yet because it exacerbates conflict. Rather, cursing is condemned, most simply, as the most prominent sign of what Grenadians often call "low" behavior, expressing a rejection of society-wide ideal norms of conduct and hence of status and authority relations in general. Low behavior is by no means synonymous with low socio-economic status; indeed what is most important about the value it refers to is the fact that poor and humble persons need not, and should not, be low. Persons of low socio-economic status are expected to observe many of the same norms of conduct as those of higher standing, and at the same time to acknowledge the latter's superiority both by special behavior in interaction, and by accepting

them as desirable models for emulation or admiration. Cursing, as a flagrant violation of norms of decorum and restraint, shows a rejection of the authority of social superiors as well as a defiant abandonment of the attempt to emulate them (cf. Abrahams and Bauman 1971:771).

A revealing comment by Mr. S. during a courtroom lecture on cursing, sheds further light on the relevance of models for behavior. Mr. S., who had lived for some years in England, told the defendant and the court that curse words should not be used, for they are not used by "white people" (in England). White people may "curse," but they do it differently, more cleverly, without using those words. If Grenadians see a white person come here and use them, they may not realize that he is the "lowest" white person in the world, "not fit to shine your shoes". The further implication was that such a "low" white person might mistakenly be imitated. Thus, on the one hand, white people, who are too clever to use curse words, are desirable models; on the other hand, some white people, who do use curse words, are inferior, and a person of any origin who behaves correctly may consider himself their better. Mr. S.'s comments reflect some of the complications faced by island behavioral standards in a changing world, as well as suggesting the connection between decorous behavior and accepted relations of status and authority.

Cursing, by rejecting values of decorum, poses an implicit threat to a social order that is seen, by its members at least, as integrated about a single set of norms. The reactions of the court to cursing lend little support to notions of a plural society, in which contrasting standards of behavior are accepted for different cultural subgroups (M. G. Smith 1965). The behavior of Lance people also lends little support to this interpretation. For despite the prevalence of cursing and other devalued behavior, and frequent signs of hostility or resentment towards police, "big shots," whites and "rich people," Lance people not only are subject to the sanctions of a single official authority, but also agree to a very large extent on the superiority and the legitimacy of the standards enforced by this authority.

Lance views of cursing and those of the court, though contrasting in ways I have emphasized in this paper, are still inter-

related as aspects of a single normative and social structure. Important ambiguities and inconsistencies mark the relations between elements of this structure *throughout its entire range*, and are integral to its form. They do not fall neatly into place as unitary, equivalent but contrasting subsystems associated with particular social or ethnic subgroups. While Lance people are to some degree set apart from their neighbors by their economic dependence on fishing, their low socioeconomic status, and perhaps by the frequency of some devalued forms of behavior, the Lance does not possess an integrated alternative cultural system. Such limited group cohesiveness and identity as it does display may be understood with reference to the social consequences of the organization of fishing; to incidental ties of kinship and proximity found in any comparable community; and to the consequences of lower class status, without analytic recourse to the concept of a separate cultural subgroup.

The court, being unacquainted with details of Lance social relationships and unsympathetic to the reality of Lance people's experience with bad talk, gossip, lies and ridicule, cannot be concerned with the aggressive aspects of cursing as they affect Lance people themselves. It may not be too much to say that, while Lance people view cursing in relation to its possible violation of norms of both respect and autonomy, the court considers "respect" not only as primary, but as the only legitimate means to attain autonomy. While both are concerned with context, the court recognizes a wider, public context to a far greater degree than do the lower class people of the Lance, whose behavior is focussed on a smaller, but more intimately known, set of personal relationships. While some of the magistrate's remarks to defendants might appear intolerant or contemptuous to an observer, it is clear at the same time that the magistrate is of necessity more universalistic in interpreting legal norms than Lance people. The latter maintain and recognize in their behavior with each other, numerous qualifications, exemptions and exceptions to universal requirements.

The foregoing statements about the court concern neither formal legal norms, nor the informal norms of the "middle class". They partake of both, since the law is enforced and applied

through the actions of largely middle class individuals such as Mr. S.; but they are also distinct from both. The legal institution permits, but does not require, all of Mr. S.'s standards; the standards Mr. S. applies in the courtroom must differ to some extent from those he employs in private life. From the point of view of Lance people, the standards applied in the courtroom are the legal institutions. From the perspective of the total society, the legal institution is both far broader, and far more limited than this (cf. Aubert 1969). Similarly, although Mr. S. may be a representative and advocate of the norms of the Grenadian middle class for persons before the court, these norms greatly exceed, in both complexity and range, the limited sample he displays before the court. It would therefore be a gross distortion to regard the interaction of Lance people with the court as an example of the interaction of lower class values, norms or behavior with those of the middle class. Rather, it illustrates some aspects of the functioning of institutions at the local level, and reveals some of the interrelations between the Lance and the total society.

THE COURT AND THE COMMUNITY

Although only a very small proportion of the incidents that might reach the court ever actually do so, the actions of the court during the period of study had considerable repercussions on Lance behavior involving cursing. These effects were consequences of the perceived increase in severity with which cursing was punished by the new magistrate. While some of them would perhaps be welcomed by Mr. S., other would no doubt be less welcome if known. The medium by which the effects were obtained was, as indicated earlier, the very lively interest in the magistrate's actions and their implications, as a topic of general conversation by Lance people.

The effects to be discussed must of necessity consist almost entirely of verbal behavior, especially statements about cursing and about the court. To determine whether rates of complaints to the police about cursing increased or decreased, or whether cursing itself changed in frequency, requires a measure of the actual total frequency of cursing; such a measure is out of the question with

existing methods of research, nor do methodological substitutes for it appear capable of yielding reasonable estimates. Information on the absolute numbers of charges brought by citizens and by police does exist, but could not be examined because of its inclusion of confidential material on cases not yet brought to trial; in any event, such figures appear significant only as rates. Constant frequencies of incidents of cursing can by no means be assumed, in view of possible seasonal fluctuations and the overall annual increases in all categories of offences brought before the court. Moreover, ratios of citizen-initiated to police-initiated cases are responsive to a complex set of conditions, and cannot be interpreted with any confidence (cf. Jayawardena 1963:126-129).

Police work, in particular, is a subtle and complex variable, rather than an invariate response to Lance behavior; and police actions certainly respond to policy directives from above. For example, the unpublished survey of St. Patrick's (Dyer and Warr 1968) records a striking decrease in the number of charges of cursing after a new magistrate determined to discourage minor cases; clearly the opposite could occur equally well, and would reduce the ratio to meaninglessness. Further, Lance policemen both receive and transmit informally a great deal of gossip, and exercise important informal initiatives in mediating between disputants, in acting to prevent or encourage court action, and in deciding which observed offences to ignore and which to report themselves.

Again, while one might expect that Mr. S.'s perceived severity toward cursing would be exploited by Lance residents with private grudges, certain Lance norms and behavioral responses to be discussed tend to counteract any such tendency. My impression, for whatever it is worth, is that the effects of the magistrate's actions revealed themselves far more in the interpretation of and reactions to cursing, than in its actual overall frequency or in the frequency of citizen's recourse to the law.

As indicated earlier, defendants almost always plead not guilty to charges of cursing, even when pleading guilty to other offences. Defendants usually appear pessimistic about their chances before a trial for cursing, and may joke resignedly about

their predicament among sympathetic acquaintances. Also reflecting the severity of the court are opinions that persons who had been fined were foolish to get caught, and were being punished justly for their carelessness. The speaker might add smugly, "They'll never catch *me* using those words [any more]"; further explanations of this view involved his or her willingness to pay \$96. Statements like these were also an element of banter, especially among women. One woman might teasingly remind another to watch her words if she didn't want to pay \$96, or, in the midst of an interchange of bantering abuse, one might declare that *she*, at least, could not be induced to use curse words and run the risk of fine. In bantering exchanges of this sort, the mere calling out of "\$96!" or "Mr. S.!" is enough to make the meaning clear. It is clearly the five words *per se*, rather than abusive or obscene language in general, that are the object of this self-censorship.

Implied in some of the banter, and stated explicitly on other occasions, is the belief that cursing provides one's enemies with a convenient means of harming one. The most commonly expected way of doing this is to "provoke" one's enemy deliberately to get him to use a curse word in anger, then to go to the police with a complaint about the cursing. Since Mr. S. does not accept any excuses for cursing, the provocation itself would not be taken into account by the court. Although the notion of provocation entails cursing by the person provoked, Lance people consider such cursing justified, if perhaps foolish, and condemn the provoker for his deliberate harmful action. The belief in provocation appears more significant here than its actual occurrence. I believe it does not occur often, if only because there are relatively few individuals whose words are so unguarded that they can be trapped in this way, and few who are willing to face public disapproval by attempting it. The belief itself, of course, encourages caution, and enables the recipient of offensive words or actions to feel some self-righteous satisfaction by accusing the other of provocation.

The use of the court to hurt an enemy is not restricted to occasions where the enemy actually uses curse words, however. It is believed that a person may "make case" to hurt an enemy,

using entirely false accusations. One woman even elaborated on the rather complex idea that a person would do well to enter a false charge against an enemy, even if no conviction results, because the enemy would be damaged by the great amount of time lost from working to attend court. This usually requires the entire day and often involves repeated last-minute postponements and reschedulings. The possibility of false accusations is believed to be present for a wide variety of offences besides cursing; it does not seem to have become more prominent since the change in magistrate. Although it does occur on some occasions, there are strong informal sanctions against it, and the extensive discussions of cases among partisans of both participants before and after trial make successful deception rare and its repetition unrewarding.

Both the belief in provocation, and the belief in "making case" on false accusations, show that the court is regarded with ambivalence by people on the Lance. The court is a source of harm as well as a source of justice, and in fact there is little reliance upon the court in the handling of everyday minor offences that are actionable in law. While Lance people believe that persons who steal or murder should be severely punished by the court, there is much cynicism regarding the court's effectiveness in disposing of such cases according to their perceived merits. This cynicism is nourished by what appear to be arbitrary standards of conviction, so that persons who are believed by the public to be guilty of serious offences are often not prosecuted or convicted, for a variety of reasons. While I cannot here discuss offences other than cursing, it should be mentioned that there is widespread advocacy of, and occasional recourse to, local self-help measures for acts like stealing, both as substitutes and supplements to legal action. Again, individuals are often criticized for appearing in court as complainants or witnesses in minor offences whose occurrence is not doubted, but which are not considered to warrant formal action. The threat to "bring up" the curser is far more frequent than the deed, and the typical defiant response to the threat may reflect awareness of this fact. One woman, otherwise popular, was criticized for hitting, and then bringing up, another woman who had repeatedly and provokingly cursed her;

it was said that she should have hit her, or brought her up, but not done both. It appears from this and similar behavior, that the court is considered as an alternative to what one informant referred to as "we law by the bay," rather than as the only proper way to deal with most offences.

Ambivalence toward the court is shown also in comments on the triviality of acts such as cursing, for which people are arrested or fined; or on the foolishness of trying offences that occurred two or three years earlier and have been forgotten by the participants (most of these are, in fact, thrown out by the court). These and similar comments merely reflect the common fact that the machinery of justice is in fact blind to many of the qualifications and nuances that have moral significance to those who are brought before it. They do not invalidate the search for justice itself nor the expectation that it should be found in the court. Indeed, if the court is an alternative to informal local controls, it is a uniquely critical one; and although reliance on it is infrequent, it is indispensable.

Persons other than policemen who make charges of cursing are most often women — usually either young women accusing men, or women accusing other women with whom they have long histories of quarreling or rivalry; men tend to be either of higher status, such as shopkeepers, or accuse other men who they feel have intolerably provoked them, usually by "cursing [their] mother" or "calling [their] mother's name," both euphemisms for "mother cunt," the most serious curse word. Recourse to the court reflects a perceived lack of adequate alternative responses; and court action, whatever its outcome, provides a public resolution of an unsatisfactory "stalemate" in interpersonal relations (cf. Hunt and Hunt 1969:127-128). That men seldom bring up women for cursing may simply reflect the generally greater restraint shown in cursing by women, but more likely it indicates the males' relative invulnerability to such attacks and the availability to them of many more effective means of retaliation.

The Lance, in the maintenance of its networks of social relationships and the exercise of normative controls, is not autonomous and self-regulating, but rather is a dependent segment of the larger society. Despite various informal mechanisms of

social control, it does not have effective means of dealing within its membership with individuals whose persistent harmful conduct fails to respond to informal appeals and sanctions. I am here concerned with cursing only, but the same conclusion could be drawn with respect to persons who repeatedly steal, or withhold essential assistance, or even commit more serious violent acts. The prominence of various kinds of bad talk, gossip, etc., which so many people of the Lance complain about as its major drawback, is itself a symptom of the limitations of effective regulation of conduct, rather than being primarily a successful means of enforcing conformity, or a titillating treat for the complacent or malicious.

Individuals such as R. and three or four others, whose cursing shows no regard for the opinions of others, threaten the social order of their fellows on the Lance as much as that of the police or magistrate, although the manner of the threat may differ. By dealing with individuals whom their peers are unable to control, the court renders assistance in the implementation of Lance values. The imperfections and unreliability of this assistance are viewed with skepticism and resentment, but its necessity is also clearly recognized. Most sentences are greeted with approval as deserved, even if the defendant was the object of overt sympathy before his trial. Much criticism of the court, moreover, is directed to sentences that are considered too light, or charges that are considered wrongly dismissed. In general, far more resentment is expressed toward the police than toward the magistrate in the performance of their respective duties. Indeed, there appears to be a tendency to find the court more just, more wise, more responsive to local needs, than it probably can be. For example, apparently cynical remarks to the effect that Mr. S. is trying to obtain revenues for the government by heavy fines, are followed by the judgment that fining is better than jailing, that the previous magistrate used to jail people for the same offence, and that the government needs revenue. On one occasion, a mature man, whose rather unusual domestic situation consisted of a legal wife with whom he lived but by whom he had no children, and a visiting relationship with a younger woman by whom he had a small child, was being scolded by the magistrate for having cursed his wife while drunk. The magistrate, again appealing to Victorian notions of chivalry,

exhorted him never to curse his wife, nor to beat her (his honest denials of beating were ignored); for if she is good enough to cook for him and bear his children, she is good enough to be treated with respect. Discussing this case later with two highly astute middleaged fishermen, I found they refused to consider that the magistrate might not actually have known that the defendant had no children by his wife; they insisted that he spoke this way "cleverly," in full knowledge of the inaccuracy, in order to shame the defendant.

It does not appear likely that any judicial policy of the kind described can succeed in eliminating cursing on the Lance. The vast majority of instances of cursing do not reach the attention of the law; and many of the responses just described have the effect of protecting most Lance residents from legal action and of defending Lance cursing patterns against basic changes. Aubert's remark that the court "is an institution that is exposed to a certain risk of having its authority undermined if it follows an expansive policy" (1969:303) may well be applicable here.

Curse words have varied significance for Lance people, and several of these variations have been discussed. While the court feels there is too much cursing on the Lance, its residents complain of too much bad talk, of which cursing is only one component. Curse words themselves are useful to Lance people as a means of self-defense and self-assertion, and as an expression of familiarity and equality; but their use is conditioned by considerations of appropriateness in an interpersonal context. Persons whose inappropriate behavior, in cursing or other acts, fails to respond to such informal measures as withdrawal of reciprocity, teasing, or criticism, pose a threat to Lance social relationships, and demonstrate the fundamental interdependence of the Lance with the larger society. Just as such individuals may attempt, as it were, to escape upward by seeking support and alliance in relationships beyond the range of the Lance, so the majority of Lance people must on occasion depend upon the court to deal with conflicts arising internally. The behavior of a newly appointed magistrate, reputed to be unusually severe toward cursing, was compared with Lance cursing behavior to illustrate the unity of the Grenadian normative structure, in which the differing pers-

pectives of the lower class and the court are interrelated, and a consensus on the legitimate superiority of middle class behavior and norms exists.

The prevalence of cursing on the Lance, then, is not the result of distinctive subcultural norms about the desirability of cursing. I have attempted to analyze the moral significance of cursing behavior on the Lance. Cursing expresses certain recurrent qualities of social relationships on the Lance. It is now necessary to look beyond the local community for the factors that make those qualities adaptive.

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