

# “PEOPLE WHO ACT LIKE DOGS”: ADULTERY AND DEVIANCE IN A MELANESIAN COMMUNITY

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*Abstract:* Sociological studies of deviance, especially labelling theory, are concerned with the labels used by society to identify deviants and with the long term effect of labelling for the people who are thus categorized (see Becker 1966; Lemert 1967). These studies have focussed primarily on large-scale societies, with little attention being paid by anthropologists to labelling of deviance in small-scale communities (but see Edgerton 1966, 1976). This essay is a study of the way in which the people of a small-scale, horticultural community in Papua New Guinea identify and respond to people who engage in deviant acts. We focus on the act of adultery and the range of responses to it, and we argue that the analysis of deviance in small-scale societies must discriminate between behaviour that merely breaks the rules and behaviour that causes conflict which may not readily be resolved and, consequently, may lead to the permanent disruption of social relationships.

*Résumé:* Les études sociologiques de la déviance, et spécialement la théorie de classification, touchent aux étiquettes utilisées par la société pour identifier les déviants, et l'effet à long terme que cela a pour les personnes ainsi catégorisées (voir Becker 1966; Lemert 1967). Les études ont, pour la plupart, convergé sur des sociétés à grande échelle et les anthropologistes ont fait très peu de recherches vis-à-vis de l'étiquetage d'activités déviantes dans les communautés plus petites (voir, cependant, Edgerton 1966, 1976). Cette étude démontre comment les habitants d'une petite communauté de Papoua Nouvelle-Guinée pratiquant l'horticulture identifient, et réagissent vis-à-vis, des personnes qui entreprennent des activités déviantes. L'étude se concentre sur l'acte adultère ainsi que les réactions qui suivent. Les auteurs proposent que toute analyse de déviance dans des sociétés à pe-

tite échelle doit distinguer entre des comportements qui vont au gré des réglemens et des comportements qui causent des conflits réels pouvant endommager et rompre les relations sociales pour un période indéfinie.

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There are about 1000 Lusi-speaking people who live in five villages and numerous small hamlets in the Kaliai area of the north coast of West New Britain, Papua New Guinea. They are normatively patrilineal and virilocal, and have an ethos of equality for males who have authority over females. Male authority is, however, moderated by the notion that younger people should respect and obey older people and by the fact that an intelligent, assertive person—whether male or female—may command the respect and obedience of others. It is, therefore, not uncommon for an outgoing, resolute woman to have authority over younger relatives.

The Lusi label activities and people in several different ways. First, non-generic labels are created for particular persons and apply only to them. Secondly, some generic labels can be applied to more than one person. Thirdly, some kinds of behaviour are only vaguely labelled but nevertheless stimulate strong response. We discuss these labels and their associated reactions in the analysis to follow.

### **Particular Labels**

The Lusi give names, not only at birth, but to call attention to an event in a person's life (thus a widow may be named Cookie if her dying husband craved sweet biscuits); to a physical disability (One-leg, Dummy, Gimp); or to an objectionable trait (Stingy, Bully, Bigmouth, or Frog for a promiscuous woman who hops from man to man).

Names such as Cookie or One-leg do not signify disapproved behaviour, but Stingy, Bully and Bigmouth may do so. The latter are terms both of address and reference that are often used in a teasing manner, sometimes in an attempt to influence behaviour. For example, Stingy's sister addresses him by this name when she plans to ask him for an areca nut or a bit of tobacco, in order to embarrass him into being generous. As she says, "If I just ask him for something, he'll say he doesn't have any, even if it's there in his basket. If I call him "Stingy," he knows I know he has some and maybe he'll be ashamed and share." Used in this way, names are clearly informal sanctions against undesirable behaviour, sanctions that may persuade the person to behave in a socially approved way.

Villagers say that a person uses a stigmatizing name in order to call attention to objectionable behaviour in the hope that the recipient of the name will change it. This hope is not always realized, however, because people

respond in a variety of ways to receiving a nickname. Some answer cheerfully to the name, ignore any negative implications related to its bestowal and continue to behave as usual. Others respond with defiance. "If you are going to call me that," they say, "I might as well act that way." Their disapproved conduct continues unchanged. Some respond with anger and shame to the name but, ultimately, change their behaviour. Regardless of the person's response, the name may continue to be used for years without reference to situational context. It becomes part of the individual's personal identity and may eventually lose its stigmatizing aspect and be given to a child as "just a name" in honour of the original owner.

Some names, such as *Frog* or *Voti*, "Stud" or "Lover Boy" are only terms of reference; the individuals are never addressed by these names. Instead the names are used by gossiping villagers to highlight the person's latest scandalous affair and to clarify for all and sundry the details of behaviour that they consider to be unacceptable.

### Generic Labels

Lusi also may place a person in several categories that identify specific behaviour that is either unacceptable or strange and unique. For example:

1. *Mata samai*, "unfocussed eye," is a categorical term of reference applied to a disobedient, violent, irresponsible, unpredictable and ill-mannered child. The individual we know who is referred by this term would likely be categorized in our society as emotionally disturbed with behaviour problems. *Mata samai* is a term that recognizes a perceived cluster of behaviour traits that are not thought to be under the control of the individual. It is perceived to be an affliction rather than a personality characteristic. One consultant told us that the general term to describe such a person is "childish," "senile," "mentally incapacitated." People responded to a village child who was called a *mata samai* in two ways that differed from their response to other children: (1) his parents had given up insisting that he attend school, and (2) his kinsmen predicted that he would likely kill or injure someone in a fit of rage when he reached adult strength. People otherwise treated him the same as they did other boys. He participated in village affairs and no special provisions were made for him.
2. *Kumbeku*, "fool," is used to refer to someone who accepts what he is told, no matter how ridiculous, without critical judgment. The only person to whom we heard this term applied was a government official who had attempted to seduce village girls. Because he was an outsider and his seduction attempt was unsuccessful, the villagers made no effort to socialize him. Instead, people conspired to set him up to make him look

foolish. The conspiracy worked and, when the official did not realize what had happened, he was labelled *kumbeku* and was made the butt of practical jokes until he left the village. In this case the deviant behaviour was the attempted seduction of village girls by a government official. The audience responded by conspiring to make him ridiculous; and the label was applied as a result of the success of the conspiracy. The label did not refer to the deviant behaviour; rather, it pointed to the successful response of the village to that behaviour. It is likely that the official did not know he was labelled until villagers filed a complaint against him with the provincial government charging, among other things, that he attempted seduction on numerous occasions and that he lacked critical judgement.

3. *Solivolving*, "transsexual," is a term derived from the name of a legendary individual who, as a consequence of being bewitched by a malevolent bush spirit, underwent genital change from male to female. After his physical transformation, he is reputed to have engaged in gender role behaviour appropriate to a female. Our consultants said that this name would be given to any individual who underwent a similar change in appearance and deportment. We know of no living persons with this appellation.
4. *Tanta musoaea*, "man of poison," "sorcerer" refers to the assumption that a Lusi sorcerer is engaged in secondary deviance (Lemert 1951, 1967). While some men dubbed sorcerers deny the charge, others accept the label and the social position it signifies (Prus 1983:3). Indeed, some sorcerers reinforce the label by threatening to kill with magic those who cross them, by decorating themselves with black paint to signal that someone will die as a result of their magic or by wearing insignia to warn parents that they have applied to their bodies powerful protective magic that is potentially lethal to young children. These men promote their ability to cause illness and death and use the fear that this ability engenders to enhance their political power.
5. *Aelolo rua: poea-sasi*, "two hearts: good-bad," is similar to the English term "hypocrite" and refers to a person who has two hearts or two sides. The "good heart"—the one that is "in the light" and is meant to be seen—governs a person's words, words that are often "sweet." The "bad heart"—one that is secret and "in the dark"—governs evil behaviour that contradicts the individual's words. This term is often applied nowadays to politicians who, their critics say, are elected because the electorate hear the sweet words coming from the publicly presented "good heart" and are unaware of the individual's hidden "bad heart" that will govern his behaviour. As with sorcerers, such persons are treated with fear and deference, even by their critics.

6. *Voti*, "adultery," "adulterer," "affair," "lover" or "stud," refers especially to a man with a "perambulating penis" (Meggitt 1976) or to an uncastrated pig. Both *voti* and *kavea* "copulation," "an affair," or "play" convey the sense of unapproved sex and, as at least one of the partners is usually married to someone else, the terms most frequently refer either to an adulterous relationship or to a person (male) who engages in such a relationship. There are other terms which we translate as "flirt" and "loose woman" that describe females.

### Adultery

Before discussing the Kaliai response to adultery, we must first define what we mean by the Kaliai moral order. Stephen argues convincingly that in the Melanesian world view, *human* society is characterized by order, predictability and morality (Stephen 1987). What is moral behaviour in Kaliai?

First, moral behaviour reinforces and validates ties of kinship and community while immoral behaviour causes strife among people, especially kinsmen, who should support each other. It leads to social chaos and the destruction of community. A man who seduces his brother's wife, for instance, risks an intra-lineage conflict that will cause the fission of the kin group. As we will see in the analysis to follow, this kind of adultery is considered to be inhuman, animal-like behaviour.

Secondly, morality requires persons to meet their social obligations. Mothers who neglect their children, fathers who fail to provide their sons with wives, villagers who refuse to feed and provide care for orphans and the dependent elderly are behaving immorally. The consequences are warfare and the breakdown of social order.

Thirdly, reciprocity is the basis of fair play on which human society is based. Nonreciprocal behaviour is immoral. Kaliai expect that people will reciprocate both good and evil, ideally with a bonus. Gifts, contributions of wealth and labour, and acts of kindness should be repaid with interest when the donor has need. Similarly, hostile acts should be returned in kind and preferably with abundance.

Fourthly, sociality and reciprocity require that people behave predictably. One cannot engage in reciprocal exchange or social intercourse with someone whose behaviour cannot be predicted. Unpredictable behaviour is immoral behaviour; immoral behaviour is unpredictable.

Adultery is a deviant act. It violates rules and causes conflict and litigation. The Lusi-Kaliai response to it is, however, shaped by the pre-existing relationship between the parties to the act. The disruption caused by adulterous behaviour may be short-term, because Lusi society has in place the means to resolve the conflict that arises, or it may result in long-term or per-

manent destruction of social ties, further conflict, or perhaps even death.<sup>1</sup> The latter, destructive type of adultery is highly deviant and provides a rich source of analytical material for considering the problem of deviance in small-scale societies.

### *Common Adultery*

Unapproved sexual activity is common in Kaliai. Any Lusi person who has the opportunity will, it is expected, engage in an illicit affair and, if half the gossip we have heard over the past 25 years of research is to be believed, almost everyone does so at some time or the other. It certainly is expected behaviour, and people gossip and speculate about the adulterous activities of their neighbours. They joke about adultery, tease each other about it, accuse one another of it, fight about it and take each other to court demanding compensation for it.

Adultery creates problems in part because it violates a man's rights in the sexuality of a woman over whom he has authority – his daughter or wife or, occasionally, his younger sister. Lusi women do not, at least in the minds of their parents and male relatives, have rights over their own sexuality. A man who has sexual relations with an unmarried girl violates her father's rights and must pay either compensation to him or marry the girl. If he does marry her he will pay bridewealth to her kin. Married people of both sexes have rights over the sexuality of their spouses and may demand compensation from both the offending spouse and the lover if their rights are violated. Common adultery is only a legal offense, not one that violates the community's moral order as does adultery between affines.

Common adultery is publicly denounced, occasionally it is the cause of divorce, and those who are involved in a dispute because of it take it very seriously indeed. At the same time, it is expected behaviour and a fact of life, and there are in place institutionalized dispute-settlement mechanisms that, in most cases, permit the trouble caused by adultery (or any ordinary illicit sexual behaviour) to be settled without a long-term rupture of social relationships. The ready settlement of most cases of adultery is possible because only the concerned parties become involved in the quarrel and because the antagonistic parties are not close relatives; they are not members of the same agnatic patri-kin group. This type of adultery is deviant behaviour, but it is not in the same category as adultery between affines.

### *Adultery Between Affines*

In 1966, Jack Goody observed that Western-derived categories of sexual offences, particularly incest and adultery, may be inadequate for analyzing offences in non-European societies (Goody in Bohannan and Middleton

1968:23). He noted that, for some peoples, incest and adultery may be equally serious breaches of the social and moral order, or that the offence that we term "incest" might be merely "disreputable" while sexual intercourse with the wife of a fellow group-member is met with "horror" (Goody 1968:32). The issue, he argues, is tied to social structure. In descent systems, sexual intercourse with the woman who is responsible for the social reproduction of the group is the ultimate sin and must be treated with the utmost severity.

Goody's analysis gives us a starting point for explaining Lusi response to sexual relations between affines. Like incest (sexual relations between Lusi-Kaliai who call one-another by primary kin terms: father-daughter; brother-sister to cite the cases of which we have knowledge), adultery between an individual and his or her spouse's parent or between a man and his brother's wife is a violation of the moral order. It is not human behaviour: people who do it are said to be "people who act like dogs." In Kaliai mythology, adultery between affines invariably results in fratricide, or suicide or both. In real life people are reluctant to talk about such behaviour or to admit that it exists. They do not joke or tease about it. It is never a subject of casual gossip. The mere suggestion that others suspect a person is engaging in a sexual relationship with an affine may result in suicide. This happened in 1971 when a woman killed herself because she thought others suspected her of having sexual relations with her husband's father, and it was the case in 1979 when Sharon, a young married woman, drank household bleach and died of the self-administered poison.<sup>2</sup>

Although we were not present in the village at the time of Sharon's death, we discussed the event at length with many villagers in 1981. The facts that they agreed on were as follows:

1. Sharon, who had eight children, had an affair with Stud, her husband's classificatory brother. This affair resulted in her pregnancy. Because Sharon behaved in an irresponsible manner, leaving her small children alone for long periods while she met Stud, many of our consultants suspected that he had enchanted her with love magic.
2. Sharon's husband, Paul, was aware of the affair. On several occasions they quarrelled violently and he beat her. The possibility that she had been seduced by love magic did not remove her responsibility for her behaviour.
3. On the night following the 1979 Papua New Guinea national Independence Day celebrations, Sharon did not return home. Her husband and all of our informants assumed that she spent the evening with Stud. Paul met her upon her return home and the two quarrelled violently.
4. Late the afternoon of her return, she went alone to the seep spring where women wash clothing. Shortly, Puri heard Sharon calling,

“Come, I’m dying!” Puri ran to the spring and saw Sharon drink the last of a bottle of household bleach. She tried unsuccessfully to induce vomiting, then she ran for help. By the time her fellow villagers carried Sharon home, she was comatose. She died that night despite intensive efforts to resuscitate her.

5. Paul and Stud both paid compensation to Sharon’s parents for her death, but no payment was made by Stud to Paul. Payment of compensation between brothers, even classificatory brothers, is inappropriate in Kaliai because brothers share rights in land and wealth resources.
6. The kin of Paul and Stud were shamed by the affair, and four households, headed by the relatives of Paul and Stud, and including Paul’s full brother, moved out of the village and built a small hamlet located about 30 minutes by canoe down the coast. Paul, a school catechist, moved to a small house on the school grounds, where he lived alone. Custody of the children of Sharon and Paul was taken by Sharon’s parents.

In 1981, when we returned to the village for three months of field research, people were still distinctly uncomfortable discussing the circumstances surrounding Sharon’s death. People who were willing to talk with us about it differed in their assessment of responsibility and culpability. Some argued that Paul was culpable. His payment of compensation to Sharon’s parents demonstrated his guilt. One woman argued that Sharon was caught between love magic and a violent husband, and that, if a man beats his wife too much, suicide might be her only recourse (see Counts 1980 for a discussion of suicide as a last resort of powerless people in Kaliai). One of Sharon’s relatives argued that Paul actually murdered Sharon. According to this view, children had seen him forcing her to drink the poison. This accusation was not made publicly but was widely known and, together with the opinion that he was culpable, later had fatal consequences for Paul. Others felt that Sharon was responsible: she was shamed by her pregnancy and she was killed by her shame. Still others argued that nobody was responsible. Suicide is common in some families, one man said. Sharon, therefore, was only reacting to shame in the same way as many of her relatives had done before her.<sup>3</sup>

The reluctance of the villagers to discuss Sharon’s death, and their disagreement as to responsibility for it, alerted us that something was peculiar about this tragedy. Ordinarily, suicides are considered to be victims either of sorcery or of slander, and great effort is made to reach consensus on the identity of the culpable party or parties (for a detailed discussion of this point see Counts 1980). When we figured out for ourselves the relationship between Paul and Stud and quietly remarked on it to our most intimate in-



formants, they confirmed our analysis and admitted that the shame arising from the suicide and consequent public exposure of the adultery had been a major factor in the decision by Paul's relatives to move out of the village and establish the new hamlet. Some consultants privately remarked that Stud had finally gone too far, and predicted that eventually he would die as the result of sorcery.

Clearly, then, the response of the village audience to a sexual affair between affines is dramatically unlike their reaction to common adultery. Their response, like the act, is anomalous. As long as the affair is not publicly acknowledged, the reaction appears to be similar to the normal response to minor deviance. People *seem* to ignore it. There was no public confrontation between Paul and Stud, no public denunciation of the relationship between Stud and Sharon, and no overt violence between Stud and Paul. Instead, everyone, including the two men, publicly ignored the affair.

But the affair would not go away. There was no means by which the conflict would be resolved publicly. So, as we discovered when we returned to Kaliai in 1985, the parties who were injured by Sharon's death had done what Kaliai do under such circumstances; they had resorted to private, secret, sorcerous retaliation, or so our informants believe. The father of Sharon, convinced that his daughter's death was Paul's responsibility, engaged the services of a well-known sorcerer to kill Paul. After Paul's death in 1984, his relatives called for a public inquest which was attended by the populations of at least three villages and four hamlets. At this moot, the sorcerer was exposed, admitted his guilt, named the person who had employed him (Sharon's father) and subsequently fled the Kaliai area.<sup>4</sup> He reportedly renewed his sorcery career in his new home and was severely injured in an attack by the relative of one of his reputed victims. He died a short time later.

## Discussion

Now 12 years have elapsed since the death of Sharon, and seven years since the death of her husband, Paul, and all our consultants agree that there is more to come. Paul's relatives have not been compensated for his death, for, though the sorcerer has been laid low, the one who employed him has neither admitted, denied nor paid compensation for his alleged complicity. Paul's relatives dread further retaliation by Sharon's father. They reason that he expects them to avenge Paul's death, and has decided to exterminate them with sorcery before they can attack him. Indeed, one well-educated young woman, a niece of Paul's, has recently confirmed to us that her family believes that Sharon's father is trying to kill all of them. When an epidemic swept through the hamlet where Paul's closest kin now live, a num-

ber of people temporarily fled to avoid death by sorcery. Although they subsequently returned home, they continue to live in fear.

If the affair between Sharon and Stud had been commonplace, there would have been trouble. It would, however, have been settled long ago, as have several other affairs in the intervening years. Fines could have been paid; marriages would have been dissolved or new ones created, or both; and the persons involved would have been either made the butt of jokes, despised or feared, depending on their personal histories and place in Lusi society. How different—how *deviant*—Sharon and Stud's affair was can be seen in its consequences: hamlets of close kin broken apart; one suicide; one killing; one expulsion; hamlet members fleeing in fear of further sorcery; and, finally, continuing concern about the next act in the drama. The parties to the events—Sharon's father, Paul's relatives, Stud—all continue to live in the village and its associated hamlets without public reference to the events of the past 12 years. In all that time, the only public act has been the sorcery moot and the flight of the self-confessed sorcerer. None of the parties to the events except Stud are labelled and his name, Stud, was bestowed long before his affair with Sharon. It is part of his total personality—not part of any attempt to exercise control over his behaviour.

In conclusion, it is clear that the Lusi do label deviant behaviour in order to exercise social control. Their intent is to sanction and, hopefully, to change unacceptable behaviour. However, some behaviour such as affinal adultery creates problems that cannot be resolved by normal means. Labels are not applied to this type of deviance. Instead people act as though it had not occurred. Attempts to ignore what we may call "unspeakable deviance" may be unsuccessful, and the issues that arise from it create social dissention and become potential sources for further social disruption, violence and even death.

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cultural deviance where it was delivered grew out of kitchen table conversations with Richard Brymer. We have a special debt to him.

### Notes

1. See Counts and Counts 1974 for an analysis of Kaliai disputes in which we distinguish between the kinds of quarrels that can be settled permanently and those that erupt as underlying factors in future disputes.
2. We have used fictitious names to protect the privacy of individuals.
3. The suicide in 1985 of Sharon and Paul's 20-year-old daughter over a thwarted love affair lends substance to this view, although it does not appear to have led others to re-evaluate the events of 1979.
4. We are reporting here the unanimous view of our Lusi consultants. No legal or medical connection has been established between the actions of Sharon's father, the sorcerer and the death of Paul. No one has disputed, however, that Sharon's father employed the sorcerer or that the sorcerer took the steps that resulted in Paul's death.

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