Some Aspects of Gossip: Villo Point

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My initial intention in entering Villo Point was to collect data concerning the declining arrowroot industry and to gain some insight into the general economic structure of the region. In the course of my early discussions with various informants I was struck by the amount of gossip related to alleged thieving, and was subsequently drawn into a study of these communications. Accusations of thieving and stories relating to thieves, or "tiefs" as they were called, permeated much of the talk in Villo Point. I propose that we approach "tief" as a special idiom of expression, a narrative form operating with the communications network of daily interaction.

As an idiom of expression, "tief" carried with it many different aspects which gave useful insights into understanding social relations in Villo Point. Garbett (1970: 217) has rightly noted that "any social situation displays many different dimensions and is amenable to analysis from different theoretical perspectives." This point is particularly true of social situations involving gossip concerned with tief activity.

Thus, while gossip in Villo Point operated primarily as a mechanism for individual information- and impression-management, there was also an element of boundary maintenance and affirmation of group values in discussions of tief. As I will later demonstrate, accusations of thieving and stories relating to tief tended to follow definite lines of racial and inter-generational conflict, as well as generalized anti-government feeling within the village. The hostilities engendered by these conflicts remained covert and implicit in the daily social relations I observed, and appeared to find their main expression in gossip related to tief.

Tief provided both an idiom of expression and a flexible category within which individuals and groups were placed and evaluated. As a category, tief was multi-referential; that is, its use as a component of daily communications had a number of foci. These points of focus were relevant to a wide variety of social situations and could be extended to fit an individual’s purposes. In providing a flexible set of referents, tief was used in defining one’s own social position as well as in altering the definition of the positions taken by others.

The sense of position in a group provided by the use of a tief idiom brings us to some analogous and pertinent comments made by Blumer with regard to race prejudice:

To characterize another racial group is, by opposition, to define one’s own group. This is equivalent to placing the two groups in relation to each other. It is the sense of social position arising from this collective process of characterization which provides the basis of race prejudice (Blumer 1958: 4).
Blumer notes that the formation of categories involves the abstract images one group has of another group. The abstract images comprising "tief" as a category include aspects of group relations regarding inter-generational and political conflict as well as racial prejudice.

Villo Point is a small multi-racial community with an economy dependent upon subsistence farming and occasional cash labor in the processing of banana for export. While the Black and East Indian populations of Villo Point appear to have remained steady or even increased in recent years, the Portuguese segment is undergoing a decline in numbers. Permanent emigration to Trinidad and neighboring islands as well as to England has left a number of Portuguese families dominated by elderly and middle-aged couples.

A major factor in this movement away from the village was the scarcity of steady employment opportunities in the area. This economic factor affected Blacks and East Indians as well, but its influence was more striking on the proportionately smaller Portuguese population. Unemployment and consequent loafing of young males in the village were sources of tension, and not surprisingly this group was subject to a great deal of gossip relating to tief activity.

The changing demographic pattern of Villo Point was cited by some Portuguese as a primary factor contributing to increasing fear of tiefs. Many looked back to Crown Colony days as a better time for the Portuguese community, and there was a widespread discontent with the predominantly Black government in Kingstown. In expressing these sentiments, one man stated that

Only tief and vagabond be out at night. During days of Crown Colony nobody out after 10:00 p.m. If you on road after 10:00 p.m., the police take you overnight and see why you out. But now they [the government] go change up everything, rules different. This Black race of people, change everything up.

Informants commented that there had always been some tief activity in the area ("We got tief here since the mornin' of St. Vincent"), but this had involved only the theft of "ground provisions," such as banana and tanya. Modern tiefs, however, allegedly stole livestock as well as ground provisions and had no compunctions about breaking into houses.

My first experience with tief gossip occurred shortly after entering Villo Point. During one of my first talks with an elderly Portuguese woman she repeatedly warned me to lock my cooking shack at night in order to foil any would-be thieves. It soon became apparent that night was the special domain of tiefs, and discussions of their activities followed significant patterns centered around race and social position. The association of thieves with night was concisely put by a woman: "Remember the tief he come in the night. Sleep does not know what wake is doin'."
Stories relating to tief activity were usually vague in their details and at times quite fanciful. Although the stories said a great deal about the social relations of the parties involved, the facts of the incidents considered were often quite inaccurate. An example of this is the alleged use of drugs by tiefs as a means of subduing their victims. A typical remark relating tief and drugs, told to me by an elderly Portuguese man, went as follows:

Got to watch out for tief. In Sherman house they come in, take pipe and blow in smoke, blow in opium. Make people go to sleep. Treat woman very seriously nearly go kill man. They steal everything! This Negro race they got no conscience, got no soul, got no heart.

In fact, there was no evidence of drug use in the area and later investigation did not substantiate the actual facts of the above incident. While the facts may not be wholly true, such comments illustrated both a general racial prejudice and the attempts of individuals to define their own positions in relation to the abstract images they ascribed to tiefs.

Talk concerning tiefs appeared to be an element in the communications of all three racial groups in Villo Point. Most of the tief accusations I witnessed were directed at Blacks by Portuguese and East Indians. The primary referent of "tief" was "blackness" (which would include the quality of "night"), but it was often used in social situations which did not actually involve Blacks. "Tief" is best seen as a flexible category with a number of referents which were used situationally by individuals.

The flexibility of "tief" was clearly demonstrated in a number of communications with an East Indian man. In attempting to gain the anthropologist as a "friend," this man often used gossip to redefine the roles of others with whom I interacted, including Portuguese as well as Blacks. The following is a typical comment:

You got to be careful. Everywhere ya go we got tief. They gonna tief you blind, tief you to death. Them Blacks they 'specially bad. That house [pointing to the home of a Portuguese family], thems inside got skin like you but inside they is black, they go tief ya to death. I give ya warnin' because I friend.

This man's interactions with me provided a good example of the potential use of gossip in a purely self-interested manner. His talk was dominated by fear of tiefs, and the hostility and negative evaluations he directed against others were always countered by his assertion that he was both trustworthy and a good friend. Numerous gifts of vegetables and fruits, cocoa, and several river lobster (a supposed aphrodisiac) accompanied his attempts at impression-management of his and others' roles.

Our relations continued in this fashion for only a short while, ending rather abruptly after he asked me to buy him a revolver and find him
employment in the United States. I explained that I could not satisfy his requests and he rarely visited after this incident, nor did he send more gifts.

This person used the category "tief" in order to define his own social position and role in relation to me as a special audience. It was clear that he was not motivated to gossip by a desire to reaffirm the values of the people of Villo Point, although he utilized and manipulated the group's values in his impression-management. These values represented what most people felt were the attributes of a "proper Vincentian." In portraying himself as a "proper Vincentian" (that is, as a non-tief) as well as in stigmatizing others as tiefs, he acted in accordance with a special situation which confronted him. This situation centered around the fact that an apparently gullible American had entered the village and it was not wholly unreasonable for him to believe that I might be able to obtain employment for him in the United States.

Gossip and tief accusations were the primary means of shaping the role he wished to take. I soon learned that there existed a special term for someone who operated in this fashion. Thus this man was referred to by others as a "bummer": "He try to see what you have, coming from America, and then he see what he can get."

There was a great deal of talk and elaborate story-telling in Villo Point concerning two alleged "gangs" of tiefs. I was told that one group, comprised of young Blacks and several Portuguese, had recently moved to Tortola in the Virgin Islands, while another group was still active and based in a nearby town. Upon commenting that I was surprised to find Portuguese tiefs in a gang after being repeatedly told to associate tief with Blacks, a man replied, "Oh yes, they say they Portuguese, got light skin, but they got black heart."

Although the immediate motivations behind tief gossip appeared to be dominantly self-interested, there existed in discussions of "tief" a component of boundary maintenance and affirmation of group values in the most general sense. Thus, gossip concerning tiefs was used to evaluate actions and in defining what was properly Vincentian. The "proper Vincentian" is thought to work his fields during the day and subsist on vegetables rather than meat. The gang of tiefs now in Tortola had supposedly been involved in the frequent theft of goats and chickens at night. The butchering and consumption of the animals took place in the fields, and the skin and the entrails were left on the ground. "Tief eat in dead of night, and when everybody else get up they still sleep."

These polarities of night versus day and meat versus vegetable occurred frequently in discussions of tief activity. Meat was a scarce and expensive commodity, which was one factor in making the theft of livestock a very serious matter. Economic aspects aside, it was felt that "normal" people should be involved in tilling the land, and anyone who did not was suspect. One woman summed up her feelings on the theft of livestock as follows:
Sometime come see terrible thing. You go into fields, find just the back half of your cow. They come in the night and eat the cows and goats. They don't eat bread-fruit and tanya like other people, got to eat meat!

Gossip relating to tief activity usually did not involve face-to-face accusations. I witnessed the direct accusation of tief only once, and although it had occurred in jest, it appeared to have been taken very seriously and led to a breakdown in interaction. Soon after this incident I learned that tiefs were often thought responsible for giving the maljo, or evil eye, which would be an important factor in making direct tief accusations a serious and somewhat dangerous matter.

I should mention here that despite the great fear of tief expressed by the villagers, I was not aware of any actual thefts occurring in the area during my stay in Villo Point. Investigation into the existence of tief on other parts of the island, such as Richland Park and Barrouallie, revealed that there was talk of tief but not to the same degree as in Villo Point. Also, I was told that while there was an occasional theft of "ground provisions" in Barrouallie, there was little theft of meat and virtually no breaking into houses.

There existed an underlying conflict and sense of competition between the Portuguese of Villo Point and the Blacks of the adjacent community, which I found expressed in tief stories. On a number of occasions I was told of a recent murder which had involved several tiefs from the other community and had implicated a local man. The following is an account of the murder as it was told to me by several residents of Villo Point. The category "tief" and the images and qualities which go along with it, provided a major focus for this and other short narrative "tales" I heard concerning social relations in the area under study.

In brief, the story concerned the murder of a Black man from the nearby village and the subsequent false arrest of a Villo Point Portuguese man. The local man was set free after approximately four months in jail, and the case exacerbated the tensions already existing between the two villages. Many people in the region acknowledged that the actual murderer was a Black from the victim's village, but nobody dared accuse him for fear of his taking revenge "up on the mountain" as he had with his fellow villager.

Both the suspected murderer and his victim were alleged to have been leaders of large gangs of tiefs, and the gang of the victim was reputed to be unusually adept at stealing livestock. In fact, several people told me of a rumor that this former leader had a trap door in the floor of his house which led to a large underground room where he kept his stolen cows and goats.

The two men first came into conflict after one discovered that the other had been stealing livestock from the former's uncle's land. I was told that the conflict reached a turning point when the original thief and several other men stole four large pigs from this uncle. Soon after
the pig theft the nephew invited the thief to accompany him and two other men for a night-time hunting party in the hills. That night, as the thief bent over a stream to get water, the nephew came up from behind with his cutlass and cut off his head.

Soon after the murder was discovered a team of police was sent to the village to investigate. A number of people denounced the man from Villo Point as the killer and decried the fact that the police had gone immediately to their village: "Why do you come looking for killer among Blacks, why not look among Portuguese?" Several residents of Villo Point stated that the murderer himself was probably responsible for incriminating the local man.

Approximately four months after his arrest, the local man's wife had a dream in which she was standing at the "bay shore" and saw an angel descend from the sky and come in over the water towards her with a bright light shining from his forehead. He introduced himself as Gabriel and told the woman not to worry about her husband. A few days after this dream occurred he was set free for lack of evidence.

I have included a full recounting of this incident because it is a very typical gossip tale concerning tiefs, and it says a good deal about social relations in Villo Point and nearby communities. Resentment over this arrest and detention lingers in Villo Point although the incident occurred well over a year before. Also, the story contains a number of elements characteristic of communications regarding the behavior of tiefs, portraying the murderer and his victim involved in a night-time hunt in search of meat.

Another aspect of tief gossip I wish to mention briefly is its use in expressing anti-government sentiment. There existed a generalized feeling in the village, especially among Portuguese and East Indians, that the government in Kingstown was not responsive to the needs of the residents of Villo Point. Some went so far as to say that the largely Black government acted responsibly only to Blacks. An East Indian man stated that, "If you got straight hair [Portuguese or East Indian] or if you are mixed, the government gonna put you down, not listen."

Complaints of overtaxation and inflation were common. Many thought of themselves as simple working-class farmers who were being abused by an alien government, and the older people often longed for former times when discussing the present government. One elderly Portuguese man stated his feelings as follows:

The island is poor, they can't take advantage of the working people like that. Let us try work hand in hand. The Unseen Man is not like our government. He repays proper. In days of Crown Colony things here go more smoothly.

Anti-government sentiments were often stated in terms of the tief idiom: "Government ministers always away, we Vincentian pay the bills. Government tief the people. Ministers the worst tiefs of all!"
Talk of the government as run by tiefs was not prompted simply because the predominant political figures in Kingstown were Blacks. Many of the residents of Ville Point strongly favored the opposition party, and I was told that although the leader of the opposition party was also a Black, he could help the area economically and was definitely not a tief. Once again, tief was a flexible category used in accordance with a particular situation, which happened to center around political conflict and party affiliation in this case. As such, anti-government feeling expressed through tief referred to a number of qualities ascribed to others with respect to political factors rather than simply racial ones.

Gossip: Concluding Remarks

In theoretical terms, gossip may profitably be studied at several levels of abstraction, ranging from a strictly institutional, group-oriented view to one which is actor-oriented and stresses the ways in which individuals use gossip for their own ends. The empirical data from St. Vincent illustrate how gossip may operate on a number of levels and for a variety of purposes.

Gossip in Ville Point followed one particular pattern to such a regular degree that I have chosen to deal with "tief," that is, informal talk about thieving, as a special idiom of expression or narrative form. In that it was an extremely flexible category with a number of referents, tief was operable in a wide variety of social situations.

Robert Paine has suggested that we should study gossip as primarily self-interested, ego-centered interactions operating through the selective control of information. In a very real sense, many of the social interactions I witnessed which utilized tief were clearly self-interested. This would even include many of those communications which referred to tief in terms of group boundaries (i.e., who was and who was not a "proper Vincentian"), for very often their immediate aim was role- and impression-management. In agreement with Paine, I feel that a study of gossip must begin at the instrumental level, that is, in terms of how individuals use gossip to define and manipulate their social worlds situationally. Furthermore, after doing this, it may prove fruitful to move to a higher level of abstraction and analyze the effect of gossip in the group and its moral order.

My primary example of the self-interested use of gossip is my series of interactions with the East Indian. He attempted, through the transmission of information concerning the alleged presence of thieves, to create a favorable self-image and, at the same time, influence a particular audience to redefine its conception of the roles taken by others.

It would be incorrect, however, to assume that all communications regarding tief were simply self-interested. In fact, early discussions of tief, as when I was warned to lock up my cook-house, were probably presented more for the socialization of the anthropologist than simply for self-interested impression-management.
Implicit in the telling of tief stories was an evaluation of the facts involved; these communications were both informative and evaluative. This was illustrated in comments relating to the murder case. Whenever this incident was related by Villo Point Portuguese and East Indians there were invariably comments that the people of the other village were Blacks and tiefs, and, therefore, could not be trusted.

Also, discussions of this particular incident led to further talk concerning social relations between that village and Villo Point, and the distrust between the two villages appeared to be a function of economic competition as much as of racial prejudice.

Most residents of Villo Point shared the same basic cultural features and thought of themselves as "Vincentians." Within this overall group, however, there were splits which existed as a result of racial prejudices, economic competition, and political rivalries. How individuals perceived themselves and others in light of these conditions was often expressed through the tief idiom. In this way, individuals dealt with immediately present situations and at the same time reaffirmed the values and qualities attached to being a "proper Vincentian."

While "Blackness" is a dominant quality of tief, this is a categorical reference used situationally and, as I have shown, does not necessarily refer to all Blacks as a group. The abstract images which individuals used in defining their own social position and that of others are depicted below in oppositional form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>&quot;We&quot; -- Vincentian</th>
<th>&quot;They&quot; -- Tief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lightness - Daytime</td>
<td>Blackness - Nighttime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td>Meat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Bush&quot;</td>
<td>Government (usually associated with &quot;the town&quot;)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above chart refers to a number of qualities and not to absolute groups of people. The placement of the government on the tief side is purely situational and it is likely that individuals in a region favoring the ruling government would place the opposition party in the tief category.

In a somewhat abstract sense, Gluckman's approach is relevant here in that the model of a "proper Vincentian" involves the general structuring of group values. At a lower level of abstraction, however, Paine's model is useful in aiding a study of how individuals define and manipulate these group values in terms of daily situations. It is at this latter level of abstraction that a study of gossip must begin.
NOTES

1 One Portuguese family had erected a fence around its house and kept several large dogs outside at all times. As the woman of the house explained, "I got dogs. . . . You see the people here they get bad, they come in the house. Black Power start now, they come in the house, take everything."

I must stress here that at no time during my stay in Villo Point did I observe any overt "Black Power" activity, and it did not appear that an organized Black Power movement was supported by the local Black community.

2 Although not directly related to tief, another significant dichotomy recognized by my informants was that between life in town and life in "the bush." The advantages and disadvantages of town life were recognized by the people, and it appeared that many Villo Point residents, especially the middle-aged and elderly, clearly preferred the "bush" and its life of subsistence farming. As one elderly woman stated it, "Town life be very hard. I not like to live in the city. Too expensive. We know how to live here in the bush."

3 The following is an account of the only time I observed a direct face-to-face tief accusation, and is taken directly from my field notes. While working in Villo Point I was accompanied by Robert Ciski and David Mulcahy, both of the University of Massachusetts. Much of the ethnographic material in this paper could not have been obtained without their support.

June 27, 1970, 12:45 p.m. Four Black boys stopped by while we were resting on our cots. They offered to get us figs and bananas. They seemed very curious, said little, stared, whispered and laughed amongst themselves. After a few minutes Dave got his guitar and played. We offered the boys water-nuts which they accepted. They laughed hysterically and watched Dave intensely, especially the youngest two. After sitting and watching for approximately 20 minutes they left and returned 15 minutes late with about 25 bananas. We gave them each an orange ju-C and they huddled by the door for a few minutes. Soon they began to idly walk through the house and one asked if Dave would continue playing the "banjo." Dave said he was too tired, and the youngest boy asked if he could try to play. We gave him the guitar and as he strummed intently the other boys laughed.

All four boys were inside by my cot after another 10 minutes, and soon the oldest (approximately 15 years old) was by the steps with the guitar. The boys by the cot began to laugh and joke with one another; one of the boys suddenly called another a "bad tief," and after throwing "tief" back and forth (especially at the youngest boy, who seemed to bear the brunt of most of the jokes) there was silence and everyone looked very
earnest. The youngest boy appeared hurt and sullen -- the only time they had appeared serious while in our house. A tief accusation appeared to have gone beyond the proprieties of the situation and the boys fidgeted nervously for a few moments. They soon left.

Several hours after this incident I was warned by a Portuguese woman that the boys who had visited us were tiefs and definitely not to be trusted.