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## CHAPTER 4

# “Control your emotions! If teasing provokes you, you’ve lost your face...”

## The Trobriand Islanders’ control of their public display of emotions

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Kilivila, the Austronesian language of the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea, has a rich inventory of terms – nouns, verbs, adjectives and idiomatic phrases and expressions – to precisely refer to, and to differentiate emotions and inner feelings. This paper describes how the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea deal with the public display of emotions. Forms of emotion control in public encounters are discussed and explained on the basis of ritual communication which pervades the Trobrianders’ verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Especially highlighted is the Trobrianders’ metalinguistic concept of “*biga sopa*” with its important role for emotion control in encounters that may run the risk of escalating from argument and conflict to aggression and violence.

**Keywords:** Papua New Guinea, Trobriand Islands, Kilivila, expression of emotions, emotion control, ritual communication, verbal and non-verbal behaviour

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Let me start this paper with the following four observations I made during my first field trip to the Trobriand Islands in 1982/83.

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1. This paper is based on field research on the Trobriand Islands carried out during 16 field trips between 1982 and 2012. I could not have written this paper without the help of my consultants in Tauwema, my village of residence on Kaile’una Island. I express my great gratitude to the people of the Trobriand Islands, especially to the inhabitants of Tauwema for their hospitality, friendship, and patient cooperation. I would also like to thank the National and

- (1) Early in the morning of May 28th, 1983 our neighbours informed us about the death of a young man who lived in our neighbour village Koma. They invited us to accompany the people of Tauwema to Koma to bewail the deceased man. We walked all the way from Tauwema to Koma, gossiping and joking. However, when we came close to the platform of the small yams-house where the corpse was publicly displayed with all his valuables at his side, the people from Tauwema immediately stopped their gossiping and joking and started to literally weep barrels. After a few minutes of loud and uncontrolled crying they retreated to the platforms of other small yams houses in the vicinity or to relatives who live in Koma, sat down there, dried their tears, started gossiping and joking again and closely observed and commented on newcomers and their public mourning behaviour (see Senft, 1985b; 2011: 1ff).
  
- (2) It was an open secret that beautiful Imdeduya and handsome Yolina<sup>2</sup> had been very fond of each other for many weeks. In the evenings they were dancing with each other in the village ground to the music of the Tauwema string band. Imdeduya accepted Yolina's betel nuts, they chewed them together and usually left the premises late at night one after the other – both heading into the direction of Yolina's little bachelor house. A few days after the *milamala* harvest festival had started with the singing of the *milamala* songs early in the morning, the people of Tauwema welcomed a visiting party of people from Kaduwaga, one of our neighbouring villages. Especially the young unmarried men and women had dressed up carefully in their traditional clothes. The girls wore their 'grass-skirts' that are made out of fibers of banana leaves and the men wore their traditional loincloth, made out of the bark of the betel-palm. Their bodies were anointed with coconut oil and an essence made out of fragrant herbs and they had sprinkled their torsos with yellow blossom leaves. In the evening the adolescents joined the dancers in the village ground and danced with the boys and girls of Tauwema. A young man from Kaduwaga had been flirting with Imdeduya for a while, then he offered her a betelnut which she accepted; finally they left the dance floor together going to the beach. Yolina had observed this intently – with anger and bewilderment, but he remained on the dance floor, joined the group of singers and musicians and remained together with them singing all night long. I happened to notice

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Provincial Governments in Papua New Guinea, the Institute for PNG Studies, especially Don Niles, and the National Research Institute, especially James Robins, for their assistance with, and permission for, my research projects.

2. The names of the two adolescents *Imdeduya* and *Yolina* are the names of the protagonists of an important myth (see Senft: in preparation). I use these aliases to anonymize the boy and the girl involved in this incident.

all this and the next day I asked my old friend Weyei how Yolina managed to control his emotions in this situation. Weyei laughed and just said: “*Ke, ekokola baloma* – Well, he was afraid of the spirits of the dead”.

- (3) After a two months long journey to the Amphlett Islands, one of the influential and highly respected men of Tauwema returned with his crew in his big *masawa* canoe loaded with clay pots which he had bought and exchanged in Gumasila (see Lauer, 1970). He landed his canoe about four meters besides his wife Kadawaya who was cleaning her stained aluminium pots at the beach. The couple did not greet each other, and even more so, they hardly deigned to look at each other. After a while the man’s wife approached her husband who was sitting on the veranda of their house, supervising the unloading of the clay pots from his canoe, gave him a cup of tea without much ado and then continued to prepare their meal for dinner.
- (4) On a sunny morning early in April 1983 there was suddenly some commotion in the village. We saw Tudava<sup>3</sup> running to his house, fetching his bush-knife and his *kelubadaga* fighting sticks, intending to fight Dokonikani, who obviously had teased him so severely that he had lost his temper. Dokonikani had also grabbed his bush-knife and his brothers rushed immediately to his side, also armed with bush-knives and fighting sticks, to protect him. One of Tudava’s neighbours and allies in village politics had managed to embrace the outraged man from behind, thus hindering him to storm towards his offender and his brothers. Tudava was shouting at Dokonikani and his brothers and only after some 5 long minutes or so his neighbour managed to calm him down. When outraged Tudava realized that he had wounded his friend with his bush-knife – as usual sharp as a razor blade – he vanished into his house and was not seen any more for the next six weeks or so. He left the village at dawn before everybody else got up, worked in his gardens and returned back home after sunset. During a village meeting in mid-May he suddenly surfaced again, distributing piles of his betel nuts to everybody, but especially to Dokonikani and his brothers who accepted this gift rather nonchalantly, realizing, though, that the donor of the nuts closely observed them. Their acceptance of the betelnuts settled the case and Tudava had managed to restore his face (see Goffman, 1967).

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3. The names of the two men, *Tudava* and *Dokonikani* are the names of the protagonists of an important myth (see Senft, 2010a: 81ff). I use these aliases to anonymize the men involved in this incident.

## 2. Ritual communication and its role for emotion control in the Trobriand Islanders' public behaviour

Since 1982 I have been studying the language and culture of the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea. The Trobriand Islanders belong to the ethnic group called 'Northern Massim'. They are gardeners, doing slash and burn cultivation of the bush; their most important crop is yams. Moreover, they are also famous for being excellent canoe builders, carvers, and navigators, especially in connection with the ritualized *Kula* trade, an exchange of shell valuables that covers a wide area of the Melanesian part of the Pacific (see Malinowski, 1922; Persson, 1999). The society is matrilineal but virilocal.

Kilivila, the language of the Trobriand Islanders, is one of 40 Austronesian languages spoken in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea. The Austronesian languages spoken there are grouped into 12 language families; one of them is labeled Kilivila. The Kilivila language family encompasses the languages Budibud (or Nada, with about 200 speakers living on Budibud Island), Muyuw (or Murua, with about 4,000 speakers living on Woodlark Island) and Kilivila (or Kiriwina, Boyowa, with about 28,000 speakers); Kilivila is spoken on the islands Kiriwina, Vakuta, Kitava, Kaile'una, Kuiuwa, Munuwata and Simsim. The languages Muyuw and Kilivila are split into mutually understandable local dialects. Typologically, Kilivila is classified as a Western Melanesian Oceanic language belonging to the Papuan-Tip-Cluster group (Senft, 1986: 6).

Already Malinowski emphasized what I have pointed out over and over again: various forms of ritual communication (from here onwards abbreviated as RC) are pervasive throughout the Trobrianders' verbal and nonverbal behaviour.<sup>4</sup> In a rather broad and general way, Ellen Basso and I (2009: 1) have defined RC as

[...] an undertaking or enterprise involving a making of cultural knowledge within locally variant practices of speech-centered human interaction [...] [R]itual communication is artful, performed semiosis, predominantly but not only involving speech that is formulaic and repetitive and therefore anticipated within particular contexts of social interaction. Ritual communication thus has anticipated (but not always achieved) consequences. As performance, it is subject to evaluation by participants according to standards defined in part by language ideologies, local aesthetics, contexts of use, and, especially, relations of power among participants.

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4. See, e.g., Basso & Senft (2009); Eibl-Eibesfeldt & Senft (1987); Senft & Senft (1986); Senft (1985 a–c, 1987 a&b; 1991, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2009, 2010 a&b, 2011).

From a more human-ethologically inspired point of view I have approached this important concept in a more specific way. As pointed out in Senft (2009: 81f.), discussions of ritual and ritualization, such as Goffman’s (1967) essays on face-to-face behaviour, emphasize functional criteria and highlight that one of the most important functions of rituals is to create and stabilize social relations. Social rites that serve the functions of bonding and aggression-blocking are central to the interaction of living beings. Humans, however, do not have to rely on nonverbal signals to develop rituals; they can also use verbal means to reach this aim.

Thus, with humans we observe not only ritualized patterns and forms of nonverbal behaviour that are used as signals in acts of communication but also, and especially, ritualized patterns and forms of verbal communication. In what follows, the term “ritual communication” subsumes verbal as well as nonverbal patterns and forms of behaviour that function as signals that originate and have been generated in processes of ritualization (see Senft, 1991: 43).

It is a trivial insight that anyone who wants to research the role of language, culture, and cognition in social interaction must know how the researched society constructs its reality. It is a prerequisite that researchers must be on “common ground” with the researched community. However, as Goffman pointed out, this essential precondition is a rather general one: Every speaker of a natural language must learn the rules of nonverbal and verbal communicative behaviour that are valid for her or his speech community. In the course of this learning, one of the most important objectives is to understand and duplicate the construction of the speech community’s common social reality. Verbal and nonverbal patterns and modes of behaviour must be coordinated and harmonized, too.

The duplicated social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) must be safeguarded and secured, especially with respect to possible “sites of fracture” such as cooperation, conflict, and competition within the community. The safeguarding of the duplicated social construction of reality is achieved partly through the ritualization of verbal and nonverbal communication. The ritualization of communication can contribute to relieving tension in critical social situations and to regulating social differences and dissension by increasing the harmonizing functions of speech, by creating and stabilizing social relations, and by distancing emotions, impulses, and intentions. Ritualization of communication can increase the predictability of human behaviour; moreover, it can open up space where behaviour can be tried out without fear of social sanctions.

Therefore, one can characterize RC broadly as a type of strategic action that, among many other things, helps promote social bonding, block aggression, and dispel elements of danger that might affect a community’s social harmony. It acts within the verbal domain by enabling people to voice these elements of danger and bring them up for discussion (see Eibl-Eibesfeldt & Senft, 1987: 75ff.).

It goes without saying, however, that this does not always work (as illustrated with the incident (4) reported in the introduction above). As Ellen Basso (personal communication) has pointed out, the duplication of the social construction of reality or the social truth of a locution does not always accord with either the speaker's or the listener's experiencing of that situation or one alluded to in the locution. Aggression that might result from this failure is usually suppressed because of the strong general societal requirement to "be nice" even when people do not feel that way. Thus emotions can be calmed, and voicing can be repressed. A society as open as the one in the Trobriand Islands in which I have been studying forms of RC (and any other that offers few closed personal spaces to ensure privacy for its members) depends on its members' having a strong sense of tact. Sometimes one has to pretend not to (over)hear and not to note things, and one must learn at an early age that one does not talk about these things – so the atmosphere is indeed often tense. The general requirement of tactful behaviour, the necessity to be nice, and the positive and successful effects of RC contribute to and create the necessary social harmony in a society such as the one of the Trobriand Islanders.

Thus, the Trobriand Islanders' forms of RC, the ways in which they ritualize their communicative behaviour play a central role in and for controlling their public display of emotions. Kilivila has a rich inventory of terms (nouns, verbs, adjectives and idiomatic phrases and expressions) to precisely refer to, and to differentiate, emotions and inner feelings (Senft, in print, see Appendix). This reveals that the Trobrianders are (not only metalinguistically) very much aware of various kinds of emotions and forms of their expressions in social encounters – an observation which both results from and confirms the impact RC has for their social construction of reality.

On the basis of these insights we can now go back to the four observations reported at the beginning of this paper and describe what is actually going on and why the interactants behaved – or misbehaved – in the way described there.

### 2.1 The social obligation to weep for a deceased person

Whenever a person in one's own village or in one of the neighbouring villages dies, the Trobriand Islanders strongly feel obliged to go to the house where the just deceased person is lain in state to bewail him or her. The Trobriand Islanders refer to this form of behaviour with the expression *bakalosi bakavalamsi* "we will go we will cry". This obligation is even stronger in cases where the deceased person is a young man or woman. The Trobrianders believe that younger persons cannot die a natural death – they are convinced that in these cases sorcery and black magic has been involved (see Senft, 1985b: 490; Malinowski, 1929: 387; see also Weiner,

1976). The communal crying – displayed in very intensive expressive patterns (see Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1979: 14ff) – has a number of important functions for the Trobrianders’ society (see Senft, 2011: 7f.):

- In the case reported here, the Trobrianders who cry for the bewailed young man demonstrate that they cannot be blamed for his death; there is a kind of general cultural conviction that somebody who comes to bewail a dead person cannot be involved in black magic that caused the death of this person. Thus, in this case the crying of the people did not only express their sadness but also had self-protective functions in a society that then still very much believed in sorcery.
- It is a trivial, though pertinent fact that every case of death implies a loss for the persons left behind. The smaller the group which is affected, the more serious is this loss, because it disturbs and even endangers the relationships between members of the group within its “social network”. It is obvious that such a situation easily causes conflicts. The loss of a person implies frustration which results not only in grief but also in rage, fury, anger and aggression. These feelings need to be channeled (see Lorenz, 1973: 261) to prevent even more harm. This is probably one of the reasons why cultures developed mourning rituals.
- Human ethologists and ethnographers have shown that mourning is a universal feature of human behaviour (see e.g. Damon & Wagner, 1989; Counts & Counts, 1985; Metcalf & Huntington, 1991; Venbrux, 1991). Mourning evokes comfort and support and inhibits aggression (see e.g. van Gennepe, 1909: 146–165; Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1981).
- Public mourning with its various forms of verbal and non-verbal behaviour and its different levels of complexity does not only express grief but also channels emotions, especially aggression, and thus contributes decisively to social bonding within the group affected by the loss of one of its members. The mourners are not left alone – “the group steps in” (see Malinowski, 1974: 62) – mourning becomes a “shared experience” (Feld, 1982: 34) and the danger of destroying the group’s social network is warded off.
- Therefore, mourning not only becomes a social event but also a social duty, an obligation which helps the mourners and the bereaved to finally overcome their loss and their sorrow.

Thus, the ability to consciously “switch on” the expressive behaviour of heavy crying (and to “switch it off” again) reveals that the Trobrianders – probably because of the important cultural functions of mourning behaviour listed above – obviously control this most extrovert form of expressing the universal emotion of sadness. This crying for a deceased person is highly ritualized and indeed an important form of RC on the Trobriands.



## 2.2 Morals and manners prevailing for unmarried adolescents

In 1929 Malinowski published his volume *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia*. Although many parts of this book present a rather dry sociological account of strict rules that regulate societal life on the Trobrianders, those paragraphs that emphasize the sexual freedom and the general promiscuity of young unmarried Trobrianders immediately got a reception that distinctly reached beyond the circle of anthropologists. It is true that compared with European standards of education and moral Trobriand adolescents enjoy an incredible amount of sexual freedom until they decide to marry.<sup>5</sup> After marriage the official ideal for the Trobrianders – as well as for us, the *dimdim* – is for the spouses to live in monogamy and to be true blue to each other. The adolescents seemingly unlimited sexual freedom, however, is governed by the strict maxim: “An unmarried person must not be jealous!”<sup>6</sup>

The Trobriand Islanders are convinced that the keeping of this social commandment is controlled by the immortal spirits of the dead, the so-called *baloma*. After the death of a person his or her *baloma* lives in a land of the dead which is an underworld kind of “paradise” located on (or rather under) Tuma Island. The spirits of the dead are believed to visit their villages at times, especially during the period of the harvest festival. The *milamala* festival starts with the singing of the *wosi milamala*, the harvest ritual songs. These songs are sung in an archaic variety of the Trobrianders called *biga baloma* – the language of the spirits of the dead. They are a highly ritualized salute to the *baloma* and they are sung throughout the *milamala* period which lasts for a months or so, not only to please the spirits of the dead, but also always reminding the villagers of their presence (see Senft, 2011).

The *milamala* period is characterized by conviviality, flirtation, and amorous adventures of the unmarried adolescents. All harvest customs still “favour erotic pursuits” (Malinowski, 1929: 210). It goes without saying that during this festive period, social norms, rules, and regulations are interpreted more liberally and generously than at other times. This might lead to jealousies and rivalries that, in

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5. How marriages are made public is described in the next subsection.

6. Kilivila has the following lexical means to express the concept of “jealousy”: The nouns *kaiwada* and *pugipogi* can be glossed as “jealousy, envy”, the noun *uliweli* refers to “marital jealousy”; in the Kilivila lexicon we also find the verbal expressions *-nanali-* (to be bad, to worry, to be jealous), *-pogi-* (to fear, to be jealous, to poison), and *-polu-* (to boil, to worry, to be jealous), the adjectives *-nanali* (bad, wrong, jealous) and *-uliveli* (unjust, jealous) and the phrase *nanola ipolu = nano-la i-polu* (mind-his/her it-be jealous = It makes him/her jealous, s/he is jealous).

escalation, could threaten the community. However, the presence of the *baloma* prevents any such developments.

The Trobrianders are convinced that the *baloma* control whether the villagers living now still know how to garden, how to celebrate a good harvest, and how to behave properly even while celebrating exuberantly. The *baloma* “keep strict watch over the maintenance of custom, and they punish with their displeasure any infraction of the traditional customary rules [...]” (Malinowski, 1974: 184). The most severe punishment is to enhance or hinder a person’s production of yams in the coming year (see Damon, 1982: 231). Thus, the Trobrianders know that the guardians of the norms of the past are present during the *milamala*, checking whether that past is still present in their former villages. Although the pleasure, the dancing and the sexual license during the *milamala* also pleases the spirits of the dead, the *baloma* must not be offended by unseemly and indecent behaviour, which includes “publicity and lack of decorum in sexual matters” (Malinowski, 1929: 382) as well as jealousy among bachelors. Keeping this in mind, Trobrianders must control their behaviour, especially their emotions, because no one would dare offend the spirits of the dead (Senft, 2011: 29f.).

And this is exactly why Yolina did suppress his emotions of jealousy observing the interaction between Imdeduya and the handsome visitor from Kaduwaga. As Weyei so cryptically remarked, he was indeed afraid of the *baloma*. If he had attacked his rival, they would have punished him. A young man on the Trobriands can severely impress the girls by being an excellent gardener. This is an important route to status and fame.

Overproduction of yams is not only important for a man and his clan, but also for his wife’s clan and for his village community as a whole. Yams is the actual fabric of the Trobriand Islanders’ social construction of reality. It plays the most prominent role in food exchange rituals, e.g., in mourning rituals or in communal meals initiated by chiefs or other men of rank as gifts for their fellow villagers or as a payment for their support, e.g., in the construction of a new *kula* canoe. Yams exchanges have important bonding functions not only for kinspeople, but also for fellow-villagers who are members of other clans. Thus, yams is the Trobriand *valuta par excellence*.

If a young man’s production of yams is hindered by the *baloma* as a punishment for indecent behaviour like jealousy and possible forms of aggression resulting from him being unable to control his emotions, his chances are severely depreciated to impress girls in such a way that they are not only interested in him as a possible temporary lover, but also as a prospective spouse. Yolina managed to control his emotions and thus kept face with respect to the spirits of the dead. He may have consoled himself assuming that the young man from Kaduwaga had

stronger love-magic than he – betelnuts that young men offer to girls are believed to contain love magic; and the stronger the magic the smaller the girl's chances to resist its owner. To sum up, this anecdote reports a case of emotion control due to a belief in controlling metaphysical powers, a belief which is reinforced day after day by the singing of the *wosi milamala* in the *biga baloma*.

### 2.3 Morals and manners prevailing for a married couple's emotion control

In public life the interaction between husband and wife on the Trobriands is rather controlled. Loving married couples do not exchange any signs of tenderness like holding hands, kissing in public, or embracing each other, not even after some time of having been parted from one another. The relationship between a wife and her husband seems to be rather detached and sometimes even looks like avoidance behaviour, at least in our eyes (see Senft, 1995: 220). Already Malinowski (1929: 95) pointed out that

[t]here is an interesting and, indeed, startling contrast between the free and easy manner which normally obtains between husband and wife, and their rigid propriety in matters of sex, their restraint of any gesture which might suggest the tender relation between them. When they walk, they never take hands or put their arms about each other in the way, called *kaypapa*, which is permitted to lovers and to friends of the same sex ... Ordinarily a married couple walk one behind the other in single file. On public and festival occasions they usually separate, the wife joining a group of other women, the husband going with the men. You will never surprise an exchange of tender looks, loving smiles, or amorous banter between a husband and a wife in the Trobriands.

To quote a terse statement of the case made by one of my informants: "A man who puts his arm round his wife on the *baku* (central place of the village, i.e. in public); a man who lies down beside his wife on this yam-house platform – he is a fool. If we take hold of our wife by the hand – we act as fools ..."

The only emotional gesture of tenderness and mutual commitment allowed in public is "lousing each other and eating the catch" which is known as "a tender occupation of lovers" (Malinowski, 1929: 387; see also p. 275). This "occupation" is documented on plate 25 in Malinowski's 1929 volume; the photograph depicts Orayayse lousing her husband Mitakata, and the caption to this plate runs "She is lousing him, one of the few intimate attentions allowed in public between husband and wife". Why this exception is granted – and why married people no longer display but also do not especially hide erotic scratches, the so called *kimali*, on their backs which are "so characteristic of native love-making" (Malinowski, 1929: 387;

also 217, 280f.) is not explained by Malinowski – and I could not get any information about this issue from my consultants, either.<sup>7</sup>

This relatively strict rule of behaviour, this norm of emotion control is also in extreme contrast with the many sexual allusions in songs, in ditties that accompany games played both by children and adults and even in lullabies, and the rather blunt bawdy and obscene jokes that permeate everyday interactions on the Trobriands (see Baldwin, 1971: 98f.; Senft, 2010a: 183, 232f., 237–243;). The explanation for this fact was given to me in connection with my violation of the so-called “brother-sister taboo”, another strict rule with respect to morals and marriage on the Trobriands (see Senft, 1995: 222f.):

One morning in 1983 my wife and I saw Itakeda sitting on the veranda of Yau’s house. This meant that the girl had decided to marry her boyfriend, and her family as well as Yau’s family were busily preparing for a festive exchange of gifts between the two families. Itakeda’s father seemed to appreciate the choice of his daughter so much that he was even preparing to kill a pig. After we came back from our morning bath, we sat down on the veranda of one of the neighbours of Itakeda’s father. It was more or less by chance that this was the house where Itakeda’s best girlfriend Bomsamesa lived. She was sitting at my side, and her older brother crouched beside my wife and observed the preparation of this little feast in honour of the newly married couple. Observing all these preparations I – rather stupidly – asked Bomsamesa when she was going to marry her boyfriend. I had

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7. That this cultural rule of proper public behavior between husband and wife is extremely important for the Trobriand Islanders was something my wife and I learned while being together in the field in 1983 and in 1989 (see Senft, 1995: 220f.). We did not accept this kind of behavior for ourselves. Not only did we walk hand in hand and even kissed and embraced each other in public, we also swam together in the sea and went together to the fresh water grotto where we had our baths together. Trobriand husbands and their wives just do not do this. All this was quite shocking for the villagers, and they even told us that this was something that violated their feeling of *mwasila* – which can be glossed as “shame”. However, when some of my friends and consultants hinted to me that we should not do this, we told them that the people of the Trobriand Islands have their customs, which we wanted to study together with their language, and that we had our customs, which we did not want to give up at all. Just as they would not like to give up their customs. This explanation was accepted. However, whenever we broke their taboos with respect to the Trobrianders’ idea of the proper behavior of a married couple, the villagers could hardly suppress a smile or a giggle. Nevertheless, there are situations, I presume, where field researchers may decide to “misbehave” in the eyes of their hosts, if they do not want to sacrifice important features of their own identity and personality. And if field researchers present themselves to their hosts as straightforward people of principle, it can be hoped that the hosts will appreciate the consistency, and thus the predictability, of their behavior – even if it may sometimes violate prevailing local rules.

hardly asked this question when Ibova, Bomsamesa's mother who was standing nearby, came down on me like a fury and scolded me for having asked such an indecent question to a girl in the presence of her brother. I immediately realized that I had just violated the most important taboo on the Trobriands, the taboo that Malinowski (1929: 433–451) had described as the so-called “brother-sister taboo”: siblings must not know about each other's erotic engagements or love affairs – at least not officially. I knew this. I had read Malinowski before I went to the field, but nevertheless, in the actual situation I behaved like I would have done back home, not realizing that this came close to how a bull behaves in a china shop – for the standards of the Trobriand Islanders, at least. It was finally my friend Weyei who tried to calm down Bomsamesa's mother pointing out to her *Gunter dimdim wala – gala enukwali bubunedasi* – “Gunter is just a whitefellow, he does not know our customs”. This explanation was certainly not a compliment to me... I left the scene quite depressed, and in the following weeks I tried to regain the friendship of Bomsamesa's mother Ibova with much tobacco as a “peace-offering.” One day I found her sitting with some of her grandchildren playing cat's cradle, a string-figure game, with them. I listened to the verses she was reciting and it was now my turn to be shocked, as I realized what kind of verse accompanied the beautiful string-figure she had just developed for her grandchildren. The verses of this string-figure, called *Tobabana* (see Senft & Senft, 1986: 154–156), go as follows

<i>Tobabane, Tobabane,</i>	Tobabana, Tobabana,
<i>kwakeye lumta!</i>	you are fucking your sister!
<i>Kwalimati.</i>	You are fucking her to death.
<i>Kusivilaga,</i>	You are turning around,
<i>kuyomama.</i>	you are weary and tired.'

Thus, it was obvious that this game referred to a case of incest between brother and sister – the extreme case with respect to the violation of the brother-sister taboo (see Malinowski, 1929: 451). I asked Ibova why she recited these verses to these very young children, who obviously had a great time listening to their grandma, on the one hand, whereas on the other she was recently so furious with me because of my – according to my standards – innocent question. She laughed at me for the first time after my faux pas and said that this was something completely different. She was only playing with her grandchildren, and this play was just *sopa*. After this lesson of hers we were on good terms with each other again.

The Trobriand Islanders distinguish not only local varieties – or dialects – of Kilivila (see Senft, 1986: 6ff), but also nondiatopical registers which I have called “situational intentional varieties”. As I have pointed out elsewhere (see Senft, 1986: 124ff.), I refer with this label to registers or varieties of Kilivila that are used in a given special situation and produced to pursue (a) certain intention(s). To

my knowledge, Kilivila native speakers differentiate and metalinguistically label eight of these varieties. They form the basic framework necessary for adequately describing genres (or text categories) in this Austronesian language, because the various genres that the Trobriand Islanders differentiate and also label metalinguistically are – generally speaking – constitutive for these situational-intentional varieties (see Senft, 2010a).

The metalinguistic expression *biga sopa* can be glossed as “the joking or lying speech, the indirect speech, the speech which is not vouched for”. This variety is absolutely characteristic for Trobriand forms of talk – it constitutes the default register of Trobriand discourse, so to speak (see Senft, 2010a: 149f.).<sup>8</sup> It is based on the fact that Kilivila, like any other natural language, is marked by features that include ‘vagueness’ and ‘ambiguity’. Both these features are used by its speakers as stylistic means to avoid possible distress, confrontation, or too much and – for a Trobriand Islander at least – too aggressive directness of certain speech situations. If hearers signal that they may be insulted by a certain speech act, speakers can always recede from what they have said by labeling it as *sopa*, as something they did not really mean to say. Thus *sopa* signals the speakers’ “unmarked non-commitment to truth” (Bill Hanks, p.c.). Trobriand etiquette then prescribes that hearers must not be offended at all by those utterances that were explicitly labeled as *sopa*. If they feel offended and display this feeling publicly, then they lose face.

The Trobriand Islanders employ this variety in everyday conversation, in small talk, in flirtation, in public debates, in admonitory speeches, in songs and stories as a means of rhetoric to avoid possible conflicts and to relax the atmosphere of the speech situation.

The *biga sopa* variety also contributes to put forward arguments because it allows speakers to disguise their thoughts verbally and to disagree in a playful way without the danger of too much personal exposure (see Senft, 1987b). Moreover, the *biga sopa* variety is used for mocking people. As a means of irony and parody it

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8. The *biga sopa* variety encompasses – at least to my knowledge – the following genres:

- sopa* – ‘joke, lie, trick’,
- kukwanebu (sopa)* – ‘story, joke in form of a story’,
- kukwanebu* – ‘tale’
- kasilam* – ‘gossip’,
- wosi* – ‘songs’, with a number of separately named subvarieties,
- butula* – ‘personal mocking songs’,
- vinavina* – ‘mocking ditty’ – with a number of named subvarieties, and
- sawili* – ‘harvest shouts’.

See Senft (2010a: Chapter 9).

can be used to criticize certain forms of sociologically deviant behaviour, relatively mildly asking for immediate correction.

Finally, the *biga sopa* variety offers the only license for the verbal breaking of taboos and thus for the licensed use of the so-called *biga gaga* variety, including the use of most insults (excluding the worst ones) and swear words (*matua*) – not only for adults but also for children.<sup>9</sup> The *biga gaga* variety refers to the inadequate use of language in a given communicative context. The basically aesthetic label is also used to qualify speakers' utterances with respect to a given standard norm of speech behavior. The use of this variety generally implies the distancing of speakers from their addressees. It is aggressive and insulting. Its use is – at least officially – not approved by the speech community and quite often sanctions are imposed against someone who produces such “bad speech” (see Senft, 2010a: 17ff).

I want to point out here, that the various genres that constitute the *biga sopa* serve the function of so-called “safety valve customs” (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1984: 492 ff; Heymer, 1977: 187). This ethological concept needs some explanation: Every society puts some of its realms, domains and spheres under certain specific taboos. However, the stricter the society is in regard to its observance of these taboos, the more these taboos are ignored. But a society can secure its members' observance of certain taboos, especially of taboos that are important for its social construction of reality, by allowing the discussion of its taboos – especially of the sociologically less important ones – as topics of discourse. It may even allow its members to imagine the ignorance of taboos – in a fictitious way, of course. And this is exactly how and why safety valve customs develop.

Genres of *biga sopa* that clearly show features of *biga gaga* are first of all classified as *sopa* – as play, as something fictitious in Trobriand society. The *biga sopa* thus generates a forum where the breaking of taboos – and thus the use of ‘bad language’ – is allowed, if it is done verbally! This forum permits a specially marked way of communication about something “one does not talk about” otherwise. Thus, on the Trobriands it is one thing to violate norms or even taboos in reality, but another thing to violate them in a fictitious way.

In sum, the *biga sopa* variety channels emotions, it keeps aggression under control, and it keeps possibilities of contact open. This concept with its tension releasing functions secures harmony in the Trobriand society and contributes to maintaining the Trobriand Islanders' social construction of reality. It provides an important frame and at the same time is an effective and dynamic tool for RC which is so extremely characteristic and – as we have seen – very important for the Trobrianders' social interaction.

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9. This is the reason why Bomsamesa's mother had no problems in reciting the verses that accompany the *Tobabana* string figure to her little grandchildren.

## 2.4 Control your emotions! If teasing provokes you, you’ve lost your face...

The concept of *biga sopa* is also important for understanding the fourth anecdotal observation of a quarrel which almost escalated into a fight. As pointed out above, the *biga sopa* is the default variety for verbal interactions on the Trobriand Islands. Speakers can always recede from what they have said by labeling it as *sopa*, as something they did not really mean to say, if their interactants signal that they may be insulted by a certain speech act. Trobriand etiquette then prescribes that hearers must not be offended at all by those utterances that were explicitly labeled as *sopa*.

The opposite of the *biga sopa* variety is the rather rarely used *biga pe’ula* or *biga mokwita* variety – the “heavy speech, the hard words, the true – direct – speech” (see Senft, 2010a: 13; also Weiner, 1983). If speakers use this register, the directness of the speakers indicate that they are completely aware of the fact that they have to take all risks of stripping away ambiguity and vagueness with which speakers normally can disguise their own thoughts – a feature so characteristic for the *biga sopa* variety – and that they can stand to argue publicly in terms of the heavy (*pe’ula*) dimension of truth (*mokwita*). Thus, the use of this variety implies an important personal and social impact of what is said; moreover, its use is and even requires to be explicitly marked by speakers declaring that what they are going to say now or what they have said is not *sopa* but *biga pe’ula* or *biga mokwita*. The speakers’ commitment in the marked sense finds its expressions in ritualized formulae, like, for example, *Besatuta balivala biga mokwita!* – “Now I will talk true language!”

What happened in the interaction between Tudava and Dokonikani<sup>10</sup> described in the introduction above was the following: Dokonikani, a well known jester who likes to provoke people, started a kind of mock fight with Tudava. A few weeks ago Tudava had announced that he will organize a *kayasa*, a harvest competition next year. Such an announcement presupposes that the organizer of the harvest competition has access to many resources, including all kinds of food, especially yams, the highly valued long *kuvi*-yams, pigs, betelnuts and other goods and valuables which he offers the best gardeners in that competition as prizes. In the mock fight Dokonikani had not only questioned Tudava’s skills and his competence as a *tokwaibagula* – a master gardener – but also his ability, and access to the resources, necessary for organizing a *kayasa*. Both these topics are extremely critical and delicate, because the title “master gardener” is very prestigious and organizing a *kayasa* implies that the organizer is a man of high status and political impact within the village community. During this public mock fight – which got louder and louder and thus attracted more and more people – Dokonikani managed to provoke Tudava in such a way that he could no longer control his

10. Remember that these names are aliases to anonymize the men involved in this incident.



emotions. Thus, this incident reports a case in which forms and tools of RC could not achieve their crucial functions of bonding and aggression-blocking. Although Dokonikani had never claimed to be serious – which would have required that he announced his use of the *biga mokwita* instead of the *biga sopa* – Tudava could not stand Dokonikani’s teasing any more. Unable to control his emotions any longer, he rushed in a frenzy for his weapons to fight his opponent who obviously had severely insulted him. Tudava was lucky that his neighbour managed to prevent him from fighting and to calm him down a bit. Having regained his countenance, he realized immediately that he had lost his face in this incident. This insight resulted in Tudava’s avoidance behaviour towards the villagers of Tauwema – and especially towards Dokonikani and his brothers in the weeks to come. Almost 6 weeks after his uncontrolled emotional and aggressive behaviour, Tudava dared to appear in public again – but only by displaying his wealth in betelnuts and his generosity towards the village community as a whole and especially towards his offender and his brothers. The fact that both the villagers and Dokonikani and his brothers accepted Tudava’s general gift of betelnuts revealed that they had forgiven him his timely inability to control his emotions, an inability which could have easily led to deadly fights between two groups of villagers within Tauwema and thus to a severe destruction of the village community’s social harmony and its construction of social reality.

### 3. **Kuvakulati am lumkola! – A maxim crucial for the Trobriand Islanders’ construction of their social reality**

Control your emotions! This maxim has turned out to be crucial for the Trobriand Islanders construction of their social reality. In this paper I have shown that forms of RC are pervasive throughout the Trobriand Islanders’ verbal and non-verbal behaviour. I have pointed out that some of the most important functions of RC are

- the creation and stabilization of social relations,
- the blocking of aggression and bonding,
- the safeguarding and securing of the social construction of the reality of a community,
- the controlling of emotions and their public display, and
- the distancing of emotions, impulses and intentions in order to relieve tensions, to regulate social dissensions and thus to dispel elements that may turn out to be dangerous for the social construction of a community’s reality.

And I have emphasized the special role of the concept of *biga sopa* and its important role for emotion control in encounters that may easily escalate from argument

and conflict to aggression and violence. I hope that I could also illustrate that despite the sophisticated forms of RC and its tools, all these unwritten rules and tools for regulating and maintaining the Trobriand Islanders’ construction of their social reality are in the end dependant on the discipline of the members of this society and their willingness to realize and accept the necessity to follow maxims like *Kuvakulati am lumkola!* - “Control your emotions!” And I dare to claim (on the basis of publications like those in Senft & Basso, 2009) that this is not only the case for the Trobriand Islanders and their construction of their social reality ...

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## Appendix

This appendix provides some lexical material that is relevant for describing and discussing forms of behaviour, feelings and emotions discussed in this paper. These words are usually produced by Kilivila speakers when they talk about observations like the ones presented in the Introduction of this paper.

However, let me first point out that the Kilivila word *lumkola* can be glossed as “feeling, emotion(s)”.

The Trobriand Islanders locate emotions/feelings as follows:

<i>Tommota</i>	<i>si</i>	<i>lumkola</i>	<i>e-sisu-si</i>	<i>nano-si,</i>	<i>vovo-si,</i>	<i>lopo-si.</i>
people	their	feeling	3-be-PL	mind-their	body-their	belly-their

‘The peoples’ feelings are (located) in their mind, in their body, (and) in their belly’.  
(see Senft, 1998)

Some lexical material relevant for anecdote (1)

<i>ebubusi mitilagila</i>	they flow her/his tears
<i>gibugibu</i>	sadness
<i>-gilagela-</i>	to sigh
<i>ikapisi lopola</i>	it feels sorry her/his belly, s/he mourns, s/he is sorry
<i>imwau nanola</i>	it is sad her/his mind, she feels grief/sadness/sorrow
<i>-kabikavina-</i>	to lament
<i>katela ikivigi</i>	her/his heart is broken
<i>-katuvilam-</i>	to make s.o. cry
<i>-kobusobosa-</i>	to sob
<i>kuvakulati am lumkola</i>	control your emotions
<i>lumkola mwau</i>	feeling sad (heavy)

<i>-makapwa</i>	mourning (one's dead child)
<i>mayuyu</i>	pain
<i>-milabova</i>	mourning (as a fatherless child)
<i>ninamwau</i>	grief, sadness, sorrow
<i>-nokapisi-</i>	to feel sorry for s.o.
<i>tutamwau</i>	sadness
<i>-valam-</i>	to cry
<i>-valeta</i>	mourning (as a motherless child)
<i>-yomwau-</i>	to be/feel depressed

Some lexical material relevant for anecdote (2 & 3)

<i>bobwaili</i>	love
<i>bubuna</i>	manners
<i>bubunela bwena</i>	good manners
<i>bubunela gaga</i>	bad manners
<i>-bwabwena-</i>	to behave (properly)
<i>-dubukasala</i>	ill-mannered
<i>guguya</i>	good manners
<i>-kaigini-</i>	to misbehave
<i>-komwayaba-</i>	to be flirtatious
<i>(-)migile'u</i>	attractive
<i>-mitakwai-</i>	to behave o.s. (properly)
<i>mitakwai</i>	good manners
<i>-mitikipoi-</i>	to flirt, to twinkle
<i>mwasila</i>	shame, shyness, modesty
<i>pigipogi</i>	envy, jealousy
<i>-pipisi-</i>	to flirt, to twinkle
<i>-polu-</i>	to be jealous
<i>-setaula-</i>	to be sincere
<i>-sivadulu-</i>	to be attracted
<i>uliweli</i>	marital jealousy
<i>-vesabu</i>	seductive
<i>-wali</i>	jealous

Some lexical material relevant for anecdote (4)

<i>-gasisi</i>	fierce, violent
<i>-gasisi-</i>	to be angry
<i>gasisi</i>	rage
<i>-gigasisi</i>	belligerent, quarrelsome
<i>-gubuluva</i>	angry, annoyed
<i>-gubuluva-</i>	to be furious
<i>-kaleya</i>	to get angry
<i>-kasigegina</i>	-to show one's teeth angrily, to bare one's teeth
<i>-kasemwali-</i>	to tease

<i>-katilakeya-</i>	to shout angrily
<i>-kopwali-</i>	to injure
<i>kokorola</i>	aversion
<i>-kowolova-</i>	to hate
<i>kowolova</i>	hate
<i>-lesigi-</i>	to be/feel provoked
<i>leya</i>	(hot) anger
<i>migila emitipayuyu</i>	her/his face looks angry
<i>-mitagibogibu-</i>	to look with anger
<i>-mitipayuyu-</i>	to look angry
<i>-nagoa</i>	out of humour; stupid, crazy
<i>-sibubonu-</i>	to tease
<i>tokokorogu</i>	(a) hated person(s)
<i>-yosibului-</i>	to make angry
<i>-yowai</i>	aggressive, ready to fight

See also Senft (in press) and the following URL:

<<http://www.mpi.nl/people/senft-gunter/research/expressions-for-emotions>>

