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THE TALK GOES OUTSIDE: ARGUMENT, PRIVACY AND POWER IN MAMBILA SOCIETY TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF EMBEDDED PRAXIS

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ARGUMENTS AND THE INEFFABLE

This paper is a small contribution to the study of the ineffable, to the study of small scale but extremely social events that form the bedrock of ordinary life. That very ordinariness makes such events difficult to conceptualise or discuss.

A heated dispute, i.e. an argument, is an essentially ambiguous social practice. On the one hand it is specific, being tied to the issue in dispute: the sparks and context unite in disharmony those who argue. On the other hand it is a universal social act. By definition, an argument involves more than one person—solipsists do not argue—and the paths of argument, mediation or resolution trace the patterns of power and authority, the structures that comprise society. Small wonder then that anthropologists seem endlessly fascinated by, possibly even obsessed with, quarrels and disputes. As John Haviland (1997: 568–9) puts it, 'argument is a particularly potent arena for doing ethnography, in part because the language of argument directs us to people's hearts', and later, 'fights are an appropriate place to look because they are similarly ubiquitous, and because they are passionate—when arguing we frequently ''forget ourselves''.' Professionally, we really are 'looking for trouble'. Such an orientation carries its own problems. It is hard to explain why one is so interested in the small, messy and private problems of one's neighbours. It is difficult to explain why and how their words and actions transcend the local. For they do, but in complex and subtle ways. The words spoken in the heat of an argument, the forms and the means of argument point to deep and widely distributed ways of organising society.[1] Briggs (1996, 1997) discusses some of the wider ramifications of disputes and pragmatic research. Haviland (1997) raises the question whether Gricean co-operation and orderly turn-taking are idealistic social aspirations rather than observed features, although, as Brown and Levinson (1978: 100) observe, the maxims are honoured mainly in the breach.

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[1] I am indebted to a conversation with Michael Whyte for this idea. Murray Last, the panel commentator when this paper was first presented, made many provocative and helpful comments as he has done on later versions.

Some quarrels happen in the privacy of the home, others in public. Of the public quarrels, some are more serious than others. In this paper I consider the quarrels that often accompany the meetings of rotating credit societies (*dasi*s). These are far less serious than those heard at the Chief's court, where arguments are concluded by ritual oath taking (extensively analysed in Zeitlyn, 1994) which provides a definite conclusion to an argument, since its ultimate resolution is thereby taken out of human hands.

In many, if not most, rural communities the norm is that one lives near the place where one was born and where one will die. Privacy is therefore a scarce resource which is highly prized and which people labour to achieve (see Haviland and Haviland, 1983, for a Mexican parallel). In Mambila villages much of social life takes place outdoors in the sight of passers-by, who may be casual visitors, but are more likely to be siblings, cousins or lifelong friends or enemies. The management of social relations in such an environment reflects these basic facts (a similar European case has been documented by Rapport, 1983). Houses in Mambila villages are built close together. They typically have two or three rooms, one being a kitchen which is a public space, the other(s) being bedrooms and/or stores. Those not of the house may enter the kitchen but not the other rooms. Only spouses, children and junior siblings may legitimately enter the other rooms, anyone else doing so would be suspected of being a thief, witch or lover.

Husbands and wives, groups of siblings or friends sit close together in kitchens with the door open, or on their verandas. They talk quietly to one another, taking care not to raise their voices. Thus, they maintain some privacy, while acting within the sight of everyone: this is vital in order to escape accusations of witchcraft. Only witches act secretly, eating behind closed doors or conducting financial transactions at night.[2] There is strong pressure to invite any visitor arriving during mealtime to share your food in order to demonstrate that you are not eating 'sweet' meat (i.e. human flesh, the preferred food of witches). There is similar pressure to accept any such invitation, otherwise you may imply that you suspect the food offered is either human flesh or 'merely' poisoned. The proper course of action is to accept the offer but to eat the smallest possible amount, and then claim to be full of food and incapable of eating more.

Within such limits, Mambila villagers manage to secure for themselves a considerable degree of privacy. Information is not volunteered, and gossip is often muted in quantity. Indeed gossip in the village is rather different from that described by Robin Dunbar (1996)[3] since most people already know most 'secrets'. Despite that, there is a ready market in scandal and suspicion: who was seen with whom in suspicious

[2] See Geschiere (1997) for a more general discussion of contemporary witchcraft.

[3] See Firth (1956) and Haviland (1977) for more anthropological accounts.

circumstances, who fought with whom after drinking too much the night before, and so on. But the context of such stories is widely known and is shared by the storytellers.

Quarrels held in public are seen as dangerous since witches may 'hide' behind them. If one party to a quarrel falls ill, the obvious person to suspect of having caused it by poisoning or by witchcraft is the other party. Witches are believed to disguise their actions by attacking people involved in a dispute, hoping thus to escape detection. There is a tension between the wish to avoid secrecy, and the wish to keep disputes private and hidden from witches.

It is frequently stated in Somié that issues between a husband and wife are their business alone. This is cited both as a reason not to speculate, and presumably in the hope of being accorded the same privilege. Many people in Somié are parties to polygynous marriages[4] and complex relationships exist between co-wives. It is difficult to make one's way in the world without crossing others. Conflicts arise, and argument results; voices are then raised and, to translate the Mambila idiom, 'the talk goes outside'. Matters private to the household become widely known. To be human is to argue, to stand your ground and assert it as your own. This may be a truism but it points to connections between the particular (idiosyncratic, individual, scope-restricted) petty domestic quarrels and the wider social arena conventionally studied by social anthropologists. The latter is both constituted by, and forms a set of constraints upon, the former. The study of the detail provides a bridge to understanding larger social processes.[5] Given the Mambila insistence on privacy it is all but impossible to study marital disputes until they become public and are heard in the Chief's court. However, other arguments and related events occur. Some of these take place in the public arena and are therefore accessible to anthropologists with less danger of prurience. In the remainder of this paper I discuss how arguments arise and are conducted at meetings of rotating credit societies. By looking at the way in which argument occurs in public at these meetings, we can see something of the play of power, the way in which relationships between individuals are negotiated in the acting out of disputes in front of and between their siblings, spouses, peers, juniors and seniors. This has obvious relevance to the management of disputes in court and between spouses both of which can have more serious consequences. By comparison to these, the *dasi* arguments are

[4] In late 1985, 35 per cent of married men in Somié centre had polygynous marriages.

[5] Stroud (1998) provides a case study from Papua New Guinea in which women and men speak loudly and publicly to complain about social transgression; Stroud's case concerns a woman who complains about her sister who has left her to care for the sister's baby too often—in her opinion. The parallel is the use of the wider social arena accessible simply by raising the voice. Stroud examines the choice of register where, in a rapidly changing linguistic environment, choice of language sends further messages to the audience in general and the sister in particular.

of far less importance, indeed being almost tantamount to play,[6] but nonetheless they are revealing of wider social process.

Although poorly documented in the literature,[7] I suspect that these sort of events are widespread if not universal. In a tantalising example from northern Togo, Charles Piot (1999: 42) mentions in passing that 'a group of southerners arrived for a funeral ceremony for a house member (and—a seemingly ubiquitous feature of these reunions—promptly got into a row for not inviting the right people to drink the beer they had purchased)'.

Arguments of a wholly more serious note are found in the Chief's court. These formed the backdrop to the ritual oratory that I analysed in my book *Sua in Somié* (Zeitlyn, 1994). The arguments are concluded by a ritual oath-taking that provides a conclusion to the dispute in question. The arguments beforehand differ profoundly from those in *dasi*s. There are two principal reasons for this. First, there is a very clear power hierarchy in place, among the Chief and the Notables who hear the case and the disputants. Anyone who tries unsuccessfully to interrupt will be quickly silenced if they persist in trying to talk, whereas in *dasi*s they often continue shouting.[8] Second is the seriousness of the subject matter: the Chief's court hears cases of theft, adultery, fighting and farmer–grazier disputes. Although often resolved there, these may have been heard in the village as a prelude to being referred to the national system of justice—in the 1980s, to the police station in Bankim, or now, to the station in the nearby village of Atta. Lying behind this is a set of concerns about witchcraft as the expression of long standing rancour: the legacy of a schoolyard quarrel may be a witchcraft accusation thirty years later.

TWO VIEWS OF A ROTATING CREDIT SOCIETY MEETING

Meetings of Mambila rotating credit societies often involve rows or arguments. These are never mentioned in informants' accounts of how rotating credit societies are or should be organised. When asked about the arguments, Mambila informants dismiss them as unimportant and/or unfortunate happenstance.

Both *dasi*s and missions arrived in Mambila after the Second World War. In 1953, when Farnham Rehfisch undertook fieldwork in Warwar village (in what is now Nigeria), the cash economy was still relatively recent, and he describes no such institutions. *Dasi*s are nonetheless now firmly established as a vital part of the village economy. In particular, they allow women to raise the lump sums necessary to pay school fees for

[6] This must be qualified: there are truly playful or phatic arguments which occur in beer drinks when friends quarrel playfully. The tone of such exchanges (which often culminate in laughter) is quite different from *dasi* arguments which are heartfelt if not very weighty.

[7] Briggs' (1996, 1997) and Grimshaw (1990) collect much of the existing literature.

[8] There are clear differences with the cases discussed by Haviland (1996, 1997) and Duranti (1994).

their children, and allow villagers to make capital investments ranging from bridewealth through tin roofs to the purchase of sewing machines. Relatively unconnected with longer established institutions such as the chiefship or the masquerades (Zeitlyn, 1994), *dasi* participants have the freedom to play (to play-up, more accurately). In other words, participants bicker and make quarrels with more or less playful intent, there being little of substance at stake. By acting angry, raising one's voice as if angry, it is easy to become angry.

One of the inspirations for this paper was the meeting of a rotating credit society in Somié village at 8 a.m. on Sunday, 25 December 1994. I was there to present the contribution from, and drink beer on behalf of, a member from an outlying hamlet who was not attending. That morning I was struck once again, as I have been repeatedly over the years, by the difference between form and actuality, between what Lucy Suchman (1987) would call 'plan' and 'situated action'.

I have been attending *dasi* meetings since I first went to Somié in 1985. I have been a member in my own right, as well as carrying out quite extensive participant research on the beer drinking which accompanies the financial transactions of the credit associations. In particular, I have studied the meetings in which gifts of beer and cola nuts were made between those present. The speeches accompanying the presentation of the gifts provided a powerful expression of kinship in action. The giving of gifts and the public speaking could be recorded and discussed without causing social problems. I quickly became aware of the complexity of the different names and kin terms used to refer to the donors and recipients (an interest that I have further explored elsewhere: Zeitlyn, 1993; Wilson and Zeitlyn, 1995; Zeitlyn, *forthcoming* 2004).

There follow two versions of the events of that Christmas morning: first, what could be regarded as an orthodox account of Mambila rotating credit associations, the general form of their meetings and organisation; this is followed by a more phenomenological description which attempts to focus on some aspects of *dasi* meetings omitted from the first account, the most significant omission being the argument. I was startled to find myself jokingly describing *dasi* meetings thus: 'then they collect the money, then they argue, then they bless it, then they drink beer'. What was startling was the realisation that I could not recall a single *dasi* meeting which had not included an argument, yet my fieldnotes made no mention of this; and descriptions elicited of the organisation of rotating credit associations did not mention arguments, despite their frequency.

ROTATING CREDIT SOCIETIES: AN ORTHODOX ACCOUNT

Happily, the documentation available on rotating credit societies is voluminous, especially for the Cameroon area where the influence of Shirley Ardener's classic description (1964) has stimulated further research (see Ardener and Burman, 1995).

A rotating credit society is known as a *dasi* in Fulfulde, *société* in French, *mgbaa* in Mambila (possibly a Kondja loanword) or *djangi* in

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Pidgin (or Kondja loan?). In Somié *dasi*s meet usually on Saturdays (market day) and Sundays. Until the late 1980s there was also a market at Gumbe (a nearby hamlet) on Tuesdays when *dasi*s took place.

A *dasi* is often but not always accompanied by what is called a 'bank', a savings fund which is distributed at the completion of the *dasi* cycle, when each member has received the rotating fund. In 1985, the *dasi* of which I was a member originally had no bank, but one was set up after two privately arranged meetings between some of the members. Being small (with only four members) this bank was very informal. Each member contributed what they liked, the amount being noted. At the conclusion of the *dasi* when every member had their turn, the contributions were added up and returned. The 'president' of the *dasi* acted as banker, as is usually the case.

The president of the *dasi* is usually the first person to receive the fund. The order of receipt is established when the *dasi* is set up by nomination, often by discussion among the members. There is no sign of awareness of the economic significance of a member's place in the sequence (see Ardener, 1964). Indeed, some people actively choose to take their turn near the end of the *dasi*, saying that they are thus saving their money, although, strictly, this is economically unfavourable. However, this attitude may be pragmatic for a member whose kin have an insatiable appetite for cash and whose demands cannot be easily refused.

There is great variation in the frequency of meetings and the size of contributions, as well as of the membership of different *dasi*s. They vary from weekly meetings with contributions of around 500 CFA francs, through fortnightly or three-weekly ones whose contributions are between one and three thousand CFA francs, to the annual *dasi*s where sums of between five and forty thousand CFA francs may be contributed. The *dasi*s I am describing are small and meet frequently. They provide an excuse to drink beer, but the 10–15,000 CFA francs (equivalent to £10–£15 sterling in 1998) that they collect is not insignificant: for example, it is enough to pay a child's annual school fees. The difficulty in saving money by hoarding lends the impetus to the annual *dasi*s, held when the coffee crop has been sold. These enable people to mobilise very considerable sums of money, sufficient to buy a metal roof or to pay off a bridewealth debt (once a decade for such a *dasi* having ten members).

I have been to almost all the Mambila villages on the Tikar Plain in Cameroon and in 1986 I noted the number and frequency of their *dasi*s. However, I can only be confident about the information with respect to Somié and its immediate surroundings. Particularly with respect to annual *dasi*s, it is likely that my informants in other villages did not know of their existence or simply forgot to mention them, concentrating on the smaller but more frequent and hence more visible ones.

There is a direct correlation between the frequency of meetings and both the number of members and the percentage of women members. The *dasi*s which meet more frequently are dominated by women, whilst the annual *dasi*s have all-male membership, with the exception of one all-women annual *dasi* (although the 5,000 CFA franc contribution of

this is small compared to that of other annual *dasi*s). The weekly *dasi*s are dominated numerically, and in terms of active participation, by women, although they often have a male president. The one exception that comes to mind is a large all-women *dasi* whose president is a *Marenjo*, a 'princess'.[9] The annual *dasi*s have predominantly male memberships. My work on *dasi*s has focused more on their social than their economic role: beer is drunk at each meeting, the beer being provided by the recipient of the fund for that meeting.

TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF DASI MEETINGS—1

As the money is collected, the contributions are recorded by the secretary (usually male). Their task is made more complex because (as stated above) many rotating credit societies have a savings bank as well as the strictly rotating portion. Contributions to the savings bank may vary and so must be carefully recorded. After the contributions have been made the secretary often reads out the list of members and their contributions to confirm publicly that the record is correct. I note that in late 2001/early 2002, one *dasi* in Somié had deliberately decided to eschew written records. Its members claimed that a written register encouraged rather than inhibited arguments. Meetings of this *dasi* are not particularly different from others, but the process of collecting the money and confirming who has and who has not contributed seems more protracted than in those *dasi*s where written records are kept.

There is no one thing that always goes wrong. But something seems to get out of step. For example, absent members often send their contribution either with a non-member or, more confusingly, with another member who will make two contributions, one in their own right and one for the absentee. This means that to witness a *dasi* member putting money into the contribution tray is not sufficient evidence of that person having contributed!

On the day when the idea of this paper was conceived, the argument occurred later, over the distribution of the beer. Contributions were slow in coming so there was a large thirsty group waiting for a drink. The norm is that beer is not drunk until all the money has been collected and blessed by a short Christian prayer. It was raining in the dry season, and hence unseasonably cool, so several of the men present called loudly for warm beer. Some was taken away, ostensibly to be warmed up, before the money had been blessed and that beer never reappeared. Once the drinking had begun some more beer was poured into a metal pot to be warmed. When this finally reappeared there was a clamour for it from the corner where older men were sitting, who finally received their beer. A young man (one of the recipients of the *dasi* fund) was called over to serve. A gourd was passed to him, he filled it and passed it back. It went

[9] The *Marenjo* or *Gən mgbe* are titular positions held by either sisters of the Chief or senior women in outlying hamlets.

to one of the women. Shouting began. The wife of the man serving walked across the room with a gourd in hand, dipped it into the beer and walked off with it without a word. Shouting intensified. Eventually someone explained to me that women 'should not' drink beer warmed by a man who has *sua be* (i.e. who has been initiated into the men's *sua* society, as have most men in the village). As the beer ran out, people drifted off, the argument petered out, and the *dasi* meeting was over.

The drinking that accompanies the meeting differs, depending on whether the beer is just for members or whether some of it is for sale. When beer is sold, gift giving also occurs. One person buys some beer (or cola nuts) for another. Those gifts are announced to all present by someone (often a woman) who acts as master of ceremonies, or toastmaster. The MC is summoned by the donor who says that they are giving X to person Y. The MC then goes to Y and explains this. Conventionally Y says that they cannot drink alone, and that everyone must share their bounty, so the beer is added to the pot of beer for all those present (principally the *dasi* members). The MC then calls for silence and makes a public announcement identifying donor, gift and the recipient's response. Applause follows.

The smaller rotating credit society meetings seem to be held in order to provide an excuse for beer-drinking. But *dasi* beer-drinking, especially where gift giving occurs, is different from other beer-drinking. In the dry language of academic reporting, *dasi* meetings include rows, and involve more conviviality than everyday beer-drinking. What this leaves out is both the surface, and the 'deep structure' that explain this.

The participants may desire conviviality, but they do not intend to have arguments. So how do these come about? What is it about the organisation of Mambila events, such as *dasi*s, that leads to shouting matches? To help answer this question, consider a brief comparison between *dasi* meetings and work parties in the fields. These also include beer-drinking and may involve anything from six to thirty people, so on the face of it they have something in common with *dasi*s. Work parties are punctuated by pauses in which lots of shouting occurs, but no arguments. In work parties, work is rendered in return for the beer which precedes, accompanies and follows the work. One-off parties are called *seé lan*, 'work by invitation'. Extra hands may also be available through membership of a rotating work-party (*seé cucɔŋ*: work rotating) whereby work is carried out in the fields of each member in turn, the beneficiary of the work providing beer. *Seé lan* is used for maize and coffee fields and for house-thatching, while *seé cucɔŋ* seems to be restricted to the culture of food crops. Work parties are significantly different from *dasi*s: even in rotating parties where there is some long-term commitment there are no financial implications. More importantly there is no record keeping and since everyone knows how to farm there is neither the uncertainty about what is going on nor an uneven distribution of competence (as occurs with regard to writing in the organisation of *dasi*s).

The contrasts between work parties and *dasi*s is summarised in the following table:

	Work parties	*Dasi*s
Frequency	One-off or recurrent, but no financial commitment	Recurrent
Future orientation	One-off or recurrent	Contributions made in one week (and hence the total collected) affect future contributions.
Power (1)	Owner of field directs the work: unambiguous power structure	No clear power structure (secretary vs. titular 'president' vs. the recipient of the funds from each meeting who makes and controls the beer).
Division of intellectual labour	Everyone understands farm work	Not everyone can write or do mental arithmetic. There is more uncertainty about recording and addition of money than about farm work. The participants in work parties do not need to be recorded because of the absence of financial commitment.
Power (2)	Owner of field directs the work	Relative equality of sexes, absence of formal positions, gerontocracy. Those arguing are age mates. It is not the oldest or the youngest members who argue. A youth who has been to school is often the secretary and they do NOT play major parts in the arguments.

Overall, the shouting at work parties is mainly because of the wide spacing of the actors spread throughout the field. The shouting co-ordinates and encourages the work being undertaken. It is not an argument. In effect this defines a pole of the continuum of public shouting, which contrasts with the shouting at the Chief's court (the opposite pole). At the Chief's court the issues are weighty and shouting intermittently erupts—though usually the disputes are conducted in relatively low, passionate voices. The *dasi* arguments fall somewhere towards the middle of the continuum defined by these poles, since they have simultaneous shouting and some passion, but they occur in a context where the distribution of power is particularly unclear.

The *dasi* arguments exhibit features found at both extremes: laughter, friendliness and co-operation as well as anger, distrust and hatred.

TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF DASI MEETINGS—2

How can the *dasi* arguments be studied? No one asked will admit that *dasi*s *should* have the form they do, the arguments are dismissed as irrelevant happenstance. Only the anthropologist has noted their existence, although even he omitted them from many of the notes in the first years of his research in Somié. Repeated, patterned (predictable) events deserve attention and are explicable even if the anthropological terms of explanation are different from those used by the actors concerned. Asking about individual cases leads to the particularity of the specific events, not the general situation which permits or encourages them to arise.

Dasi meetings are the excuse for beer drinking, and occasion arguments. I hope that an anthropological approach can embrace both warm beer and heated talk within the terms of its analysis. The invariance of the arguments implies (to my mind at least) that we cannot ignore them, disregarding them as unimportant, or irrelevant. To participants they may be an unfortunate distraction that, in an ideal world, should not occur. Reflecting this, events like these often do not find a place in the idealised description of anthropologists. Recurrent, unregarded social action is the mediator par excellence of culture in high and low forms. Among the best documented examples of this are what Bourdieu (1977) calls 'habitus', and the analysis of the body and spatial organisation (Farnell, 1999, 2000), as well as the patterns of conversational structure and the strategies of politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Levinson, 1983).

DASI ARGUMENTS

The arguments are also unrecordable—there are many people shouting simultaneously—which is enough to defeat a single stereo tape recorder.[10] This means it is hard for me to document their development. It is not shouting by itself that characterises the arguments—for that occurs during work parties as well—rather it is the amount of simultaneous talk (shouting) and the passion, heat, and emotion of the exchanges that differentiates it from the shouting at work parties, where the people, being outside, are often more widely separated than in *dasi*s (see above).

All this points to an openness in Mambila society. It is a gerontocracy and has a chiefship but neither are weighty by African standards. The old are not pivotal intermediaries between the dead and the living

[10] Haviland (1997: 548–9) illustrates this with a transcript featuring eleven people speaking simultaneously, each recorded laconically in the transcript as 'unintelligible'!

as described by Kopytoff (1971) for the Suga. Mambila do not have corporate kin groups as are found in lineage-based societies nor well defined ancestral sanctions. There is more achievement in a powerful elder than may first meet the eye. The Chief is powerful but is not the all-embracing institution of the relatively nearby Bamoun, Bamiléké or the Bamenda Grassfields polities. It resembles more closely, for example, the Meta (Dillon, 1990). Though not quite as fragile a chiefship as Dillon describes, it is relatively limited in its extent. Gender relations are also limited in scope: men have more power than women but, by African standards, only somewhat! Women do more work than men and what they do is less appreciated than that of men but they have considerable freedom of action, and politically have considerable influence on village decisions although the body that formally makes these decisions is exclusively male (see Moore, 1986).

In this context, it is important to recognise that *dasi* meetings include men and women of all ages and statuses. The secretary is often relatively young and male, the president usually an older man. But Mambila women can disagree with men in public and at *dasi*s they do. Those arguing are *dasi* members. There are usually some people present who do not get involved and these may act to calm things down if the argument is not sorted out after a few minutes (the arguments typically are from one or two to ten minutes in length, rarely lasting longer, although some meetings may have two separate disputes: one about money and another about beer). Other people arrive to join in the beer drinking—so early comers may arrive while the money is still being collected and thus may be present during the arguments. The audience (including anthropologist) is typically quiet—though disapproving comments are sometimes exchanged about how poor a display is being made, particularly by those who have a reputation of being trouble-makers, the habitual disputees, as it were. All of this is very different from work parties. These are usually single sex (there are male work parties and female work parties) and for a single well understood purpose. At a *dasi* meeting the gathering of the money and the distribution of the beer is far less clear-cut and (as I have said above) has consequences for future meetings. Transparency—the public demonstration of what has been collected (and from whom)—is harder to achieve than it may seem.

SOME SAMPLE *DASI* ARGUMENTS

For all the difficulty of documenting *dasi* arguments outlined above, audiences and referees of this paper consistently ask for more information than was available. Recently the problem has been partially solved by using diary entries. Inspired by Pat Caplan's book *African Voices* (1997), which I first read when I was in the village in Cameroon, I asked several people to keep diaries for me—mainly to see what this would elicit, rather than having any specific or clear purpose in

mind.[11] In one case my request has clearly chimed as the writer is continuing—albeit under my influence, and with inducements (I pay a small retainer for the work undertaken in my absence). In late 2000, I asked him to note any *dasi* arguments that he happened to witness, thus providing a restricted sample, but one that other informants, with whom I have discussed them, agree is typical. Since he had already been keeping a diary for almost two years before this, and also served as a *dasi* secretary, he has considerable experience at note taking and record keeping, so my request that he also include details of *dasi* argument was not problematic per se. Until I asked, he had not been noting *dasi* arguments on a regular basis, but some were mentioned nonetheless.

The following summarise the diary entries concerning *dasi*s from the period 10 June 1998 to 22 April 1999 before I specifically asked him to note them (DZ's anonymised summaries from French originals):

14-6-98 W1's *dasi*: problems because two people did not contribute, and there was insufficient beer. At A's *dasi* the palm wine was badly distributed: ignoring the seniors which made people unhappy. NM's *dasi* is well organised.
29-6-98 At A's *dasi*, drinking before the meeting led to lots of argument.
5-7-98 At M's *dasi*, some borrowing was reported.
12-7-98 W2's fortnightly *dasi*, and another at A's. No problems reported.
19-7-98 At M's *dasi*, they discussed whether members could borrow from the *dasi* savings bank, or from the rotating collection.
9-8-98 There were at least three *dasi*s, no problems reported.
16-8-98 M's *dasi* went smoothly.
27-9-98 A *dasi* where the diarist collected enough for the school fees for his children.
28-9-98 A *dasi* meeting with no problems reported.
11-10-98 There were at least five *dasi*s, no problems reported.
19-10-98 M's *dasi* went smoothly.
21-11-98 A *dasi* that clashed with a wedding so everyone was not able to contribute.
29-11-98 A *dasi* went smoothly.
17-2-99 Problems at the *dasi* of which the diarist was secretary: problems getting repayment from the savings bank.
20-2-99 Problem at a *dasi*: a member had sent her contribution via someone else who spent the money on drink!
14-3-99 A *dasi* at which DZ was present.
15-3-99 A dispute about who should be the next president of the *dasi*.
21-3-99 Three *dasi*s reported.
18-4-99 A *dasi* of 22 people: 12 women and 10 men. The members don't want to contribute since the treasurer (different from the president) is believed to be misappropriating the funds. Also three other *dasi*s took place.

Other entries were made in December 2000 and January 2001, after I asked him to pay special attention to *dasi* meetings. In order to convey

[11] The diaries are further discussed in another paper (Zeitlyn, undated).

something of the tone of the writing, a sample entry is given in full (DZ's translation).

> 8-12-2000 The *dasi* was at M1's and there were more than 25 women who met there, and each woman who came had 250 francs for herself. And problems arose. M2 said she had given 400 francs at each meeting and now they must gather together the money for CX before the next person could take their place. Then the wife of YD said that her [the recipient's] beer wasn't yet fully fermented and also that there wasn't enough to fill the casserole there in front of everyone. And that's often why they discuss it. And they then decided that in the future they wouldn't hold a meeting for two people at once. So next Friday would have been ML and the other also on that Friday MM, but because there was a noise about it, that person having collected her money will make no further payments.

The diary entries reveal that most arguments are about contributions (and failure to make them), loans between members, beer (and its distribution, especially the prestigious first serving),[12] and the sequence in which people will receive the *dasi* monies. The last can and often is expressed as an argument about beer: the person who will next receive the *dasi* monies drinks the first gourd of beer (called *yór mbe*), so arguing about who gets this is a way of arguing about who will be the next recipient of the *dasi* monies. Usually the disputes are resolved without lasting consequences although sometimes (rarely) a physical fight results, and, also rarely, a person may leave the *dasi* (as is noted in the diary extract above) although this is extremely unpopular since it occasions complicated financial arrangements to ensure that the other members are not unequally disadvantaged. I have witnessed some *dasi* meetings where some of the participants moved from shouting their opinions to displays of real anger. When this happened they were quickly quieted, and made to hold their peace by others present. The disputes are not necessarily settled as much as resolved, in some fashion or other, so the beer drinking can proceed while the parties still hold their grudges. Often during the beer drinking, either the cause of the dispute is forgotten or is replaced by other causes for grievance, and so is displaced without ever being settled. Asking the different parties after the event sometimes has elicited repetition of their point of view but often has been unsuccessful: the day after the *dasi* meeting, the cause has been forgotten because it was satisfactorily resolved and then drowned in beer!

The diaries also reveal that some meetings pass off without noteworthy argument, and also that some *dasi*s work better than others. Group dynamics and the personality of the senior members of the *dasi*s mean that some have fewer arguments than others.

[12] See below.

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GENRE AND SPEECH EVENT

Arguments as they occur at *dasi* meetings, and the shouting at work parties are far from the only Mambila speech events. My starting point was domestic quarrels which may occur either privately or publicly (with raised voice). In English there is a continuum of passion ranging from 'discussion' via 'row' or 'argument' to 'quarrels'. For the purposes of this paper it is enough to identify an argument between equals as being characterised by the passion of those participating and by the amount of simultaneous speech—far greater overlap occurs than during ordinary conversation. Voices get raised during work parties (as we have seen) but also during arguments at the Chief's court. In the latter case, the presence of the Chief and the senior men provide an authority capable of calming those arguing in public. There is no such equivalent at *dasi* meetings, and of course, in general there is nothing as weighty in dispute, as by comparison with the topics dealt with by the Chief's court (see above and Zeitlyn, 1994). Another type of domestic argument occurs in a family commotion that was tape-recorded in December 1990. In this the father and mother berate a teenage son about his performance in school. After some initial attempts he does not answer back (see Zeitlyn, *forthcoming* 2004). Consequently, this is better characterised as the venting of parental anger at the poor school performance of a child rather than an argument proper. When the voices of a domestic dispute 'go outside' and neighbours realise that an argument is occurring, senior people quickly intervene so that, often by their presence alone, they can mediate and calm things down.

Rather than provide a catalogue of different Mambila genres (or speech events), I am attempting to concentrate on one, which I gloss as 'public argument' which may be typified as above. This concerns both passionate, heated and potentially serious, domestic disputes and the sometimes petty disputation of *dasi* meetings from where my main data comes.

Since domestic arguments are not easily accessible I have focussed on *dasi* ones which raise particular problems of their own. Though there is little immediately at stake, to scotch someone in an argument, in front of one's peers is a small but personal victory—there is a wider question of relative status at stake. So just as the village seniors, collectively known as *bɔ̀ Kuku bɔ̀* (lit. 'the big people'), have worked to achieve that status, so their juniors begin in the relatively benign surroundings of fora such as the *dasi* meetings, which are safe precisely because they are disconnected from the larger scope of village politics. Those arguing in *dasi*s seem to be unconcerned about their voices going outside—it is not private to begin with, as is the case in a domestic argument, and there is an implicit suggestion that even witches recognise that it is not very serious, so a *dasi* quarrel would not provide sufficient shelter to disguise a witchcraft attack. Furthermore, all the Mambila villagers I have discussed this with insist that *dasi* arguments are sorted out within the *dasi* and that, although in principle they could be taken up by the Chief's court, in practice, they never are. In the abstract, it was said that

in the case of a continuing dispute a senior could be asked to arbitrate. Two senior informants also said that if this failed the case could come to the Chief—but when I asked the Chief about this, he could not recall a single such case ever having come before him. He too said that the arguments were sorted out among the *dasi* members. In principle, a case could start inside a *dasi* and end up at the Chief's court but in practice this does not, and has not happened.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have attempted to consider the way in which the loud voices that typify argument form a part of the management of interpersonal relations. This holds in the fiercely guarded privacy of the home where a raised voice brings the neighbours into a quarrel as observers (at the very least)! In work parties and in the organisation of rotating credit societies loud voices do more than just call for attention: raising the voice is an act that emphasises its openness to observation; it is a claim for and expression of social openness. *Dasi*s are a relatively new social institution and mix both sex and age groups. Their very disconnection from more important institutions, family life at one extreme and the Chief's court at the other, means that they provide the opportunity to act competitively without much fear of consequence. In effect the *dasi* quarrels provide an expression of wider competition in Mambila society and allow those who will go on to become respected elders to hone their rhetorical skills. Talk going outside is a very social act.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the sociological implications of loud argument are considered, by taking a case study from the Mambila in Cameroon. Meetings of rotating credit societies are non-traditional forums where power and status are in dispute. These meetings contrast with both domestic arguments and with disputes held in the Chief's court. Rotating credit society meetings usually include arguments but these are dismissed as being unimportant by local informants. They pose a challenge for anthropological analysis since they are such a regular but disregarded—and disparaged—occurrence. Raised voices increase the range of bystanders as witnesses, so to argue loudly is a very social act.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine les implications sociologiques des disputes bruyantes, à travers le cas des Mambila au Cameroun. Les réunions d'associations de crédit tournant constituent des forums non-traditionnels au sein desquels on se dispute le pouvoir et le prestige. Ces réunions contrastent avec les conflits conjugaux et les disputes qui surviennent dans la cour de justice du Chef. Les réunions d'associations de crédit tournant sont généralement le théâtre de disputes, mais celles-ci sont jugées sans importance par des informateurs locaux. Elles posent un problème pour l'analyse anthropologique compte tenu de leur survenance régulière et cependant négligée—voire dénigrée. Hausser la voix permet d'attirer l'attention d'un plus grande nombre de passants et se disputer à voix haute est un acte très social.