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Speaking as a Woman: Structure and Gender in Domestic Arguments in a New Guinea Village

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Introduction

Conflict—between social classes and between ethnic groups, between the individual and “society,” and between people in their encounters with others—has always been one of the major preoccupations of social theory. Yet, despite the central position of conflict in social theory and despite its frequent occurrence in human interaction, relatively little work has been devoted to understanding how people actually manage conflict in face-to-face interactions. Accounts of conflict management such as Goffman’s (1967, 1969[1959], 1971) are helpful in that they provide us with a way of seeing conflicts and a language for sequencing them. But as Goodwin has recently pointed out, even this type of research “has investigated disputes by theorizing about how they might function in larger social processes, while paying little attention to the procedures and competencies employed to build the dispute as a coherent, culturally appropriate object in the first place” (1990:142). Furthermore, the primary data for research on face-to-face conflict management are usually summaries of such encounters as observed by the researcher, reports of conflicts by informants who recount or gossip about them, or reports or transcriptions of meetings at which previous conflicts are publicly settled. Even recent volumes specifically devoted to the analysis of “conflict discourse” (Brenneis and Myers 1984; Briggs 1988; Watson-Gegeo and White 1990) turn out to focus much more on talk *about* conflicts or on conflict settlement than they do on actual sequences of conflict talk.

There seem to be several reasons why conflict talk as such is rarely analyzed. Many types of rancorous arguments, perhaps especially domestic arguments between spouses, are often considered by both ethnographers and the people being studied to be private, sensitive, and potentially explosive events. This combination of privacy and social touchiness presents the observer with

both practical and ethical dilemmas about recording, transcribing, and ultimately publishing material on such talk.¹ And it is certainly one reason why most of what we do know about conflict talk has been learned from the work of researchers who have studied courtroom disputes (e.g. Conley and O'Barr 1990; Philips 1990; articles in Levi and Walker 1990) or children's arguments (e.g. Boggs 1978; Brenneis and Lein 1977; Eder 1990; Eisenberg and Garvey 1981; Goodwin 1980, 1990; Goodwin and Goodwin 1987).

Another reason for the lack of detailed studies of conflict talk, according to Shantz (1987:284) and Goodwin (1990:141), is that "researchers avoid studying conflict because it is negatively valued" in the white, middle-class society from which the majority of North American and European academics are drawn. Goodwin cites work by researchers working within what Comaroff and Roberts call the "rule-centered paradigm" in legal anthropology, that is, researchers who consider conflict as a kind of "deviance" or "malfunction" (Comaroff and Roberts 1981:5) that marks "the failure of social relations" (Allen and Guy 1974:239). She observes that this perception may contribute to a general disinclination to study conflict talk. Related to this general attitude, I would suggest, is the possibility that anthropologists—despite over a decade of postmodernist rhetoric and elegant lip service to multiplicities, *différance*, and cacophonies—still remain more comfortable with order than with disorder, and are happier concentrating on those social processes that seem to promote order (e.g. conflict settlement or talk about conflicts) than they are seriously engaging with the chaos and disorder of abuse. A strong structural-functionalist undercurrent runs through much of what is written on conflicts, and a frequently occurring trope is one of a "social fabric" that gets "tattered" through conflict and that requires conflict settlement to "stitch up [its] seams" (Haviland 1988:417). A tendency to see conflict as anathema to social order and as having to be overcome for society to work has contributed to a strong emphasis, in the literature, on conflict resolution. This analytic stress on the importance of resolving conflicts is now being criticized, as researchers working with empirical data on arguments conclude that past studies overemphasized the extent to which conflict talk ends in or leads to resolution (Goodwin 1990; Grimshaw 1990b; Vuchinich 1990).

Besides influencing what we choose to study, attitudes like those just mentioned have also affected *who* we choose to study. It would appear that public conflict settlements in most non-Western societies—from "disentangling" meetings in the Solomon Islands (White 1990) to Tswana *kgotla* in Africa (Comaroff and Roberts 1981)—are frequently the province of males. There are all sorts of economic, ideological, and political reasons why this is so, but it means of course that, insofar as our analyses of conflict talk focus on conflict settlements, the language we analyze will tend to be language produced by males. Women, who are often portrayed in ethnographic accounts as instrumental in provoking the conflicts that the men find themselves compelled to settle, are almost never represented in the ethnographic-sociolinguistic data.² Not only do women remain silent during public meetings in the New Guinea highlands or

during a Samoan *fono*, but they are also rendered mute by the types of talk we choose to analyze.

By an interesting sleight of hand, when research on conflict talk does look at women, it finds that they are not particularly prone to such talk. In North American and European communities, women, both black (Abrahams 1976; Hannerz 1969; Kochman 1981) and white (Lakoff 1976; Zimmerman and West 1975) are commonly said "to speak with reference to the rules of politeness, conversational implicature and interpersonal exploration" (Lakoff 1976:74), and their language is "characterized by less obtrusiveness . . . less speech intensity" (Thorne and Henley 1975:16) than that of males. Sometimes, this lack of obtrusiveness or concern with interpersonal exploration is even distilled out as part of the feminine essence, as when Carol Gilligan (1982) claims that females are less likely to dominate and more likely to negotiate than males, when Otto Jespersen explains that women "instinctively" shrink from "coarse and gross expressions" (1922:246), or when Luce Irigaray, discussing *parler femme*, imagines that "a feminine syntax . . . would involve nearness, proximity, but in such an extreme form that it would preclude any distinction of identities, any establishment of ownership, thus any form of appropriation" (1985:134). The result of these kinds of characterizations—which are, again, increasingly being challenged as context specific or unsupported by any reliable empirical evidence (Eder 1990; Goodwin 1990; Henzl and Turner 1987; Murray and Covelli 1988)—is, again, an absence: in the first place, of research on how women manage opposition, and in the second place, of a female voice in our analytical writings on conflict talk.

This paper is about both conflict talk and the ways that conflict talk is bound up with gendered voices, that is, voices that become discursively constituted as female and male. In the small Papua New Guinean community that I will be discussing here, women are forceful and belligerent in provoking and sustaining verbal conflict. This is recognized within the community, and conflict talk is spoken about in village rhetoric as arising from and characteristic of the female voice. Women in Gapun are stereotyped by men and other women as disruptive, divisive, begrudging, antisocial, and emotionally excessive. This stereotype is reinforced by women's complaints at their husbands, relatives, children, and fellow villagers who have offended them in some way. These complaints regularly get voiced in loud, obscene, and highly public displays that the villagers call *kroses*.

What I will do here is examine in detail the oppositional moves that define a speech event as a *kros* for the villagers. In doing this, however, I will also be exploring the way speakers in *kroses* use language to create gendered positions from which they speak and criticize the actions of others. My claim is that *kroses* are one of the major sites of gender negotiation in Gapun, where women define themselves, their rights, and their expectations by declaring publicly that these have been violated and where they assertively and artfully counter talk, often by men, that they "shut up." In *kroses*, women lay claim not only to specific female identities, but because the talk is built on opposition and because it is concerned

with dissatisfaction (in the case of domestic arguments, with the actions of her spouse), women purposely counterpose those female positions with ones they assert are male. In *kroses*, women thus effectively define not only femaleness, but maleness as well. Women who have *kroses* are, in this sense, engaged in a highly consequential political act, and part of my argument is that *kroses* are extremely significant in determining understanding and action in Gapun. For this reason, although the ethnographic examples I will be discussing are taken from talk produced in a small Sepik-Ramu society, they are relevant to more general theoretical and methodological issues concerning language and gender, empowerment, the composition of a female voice in Melanesian societies, and the dynamics of politics in so-called egalitarian societies.

Talking When Your *Bel* Is Hot

Kroses in Gapun are public displays of anger.³ They can and do occur any time during the day or night, but the time most likely for one to break out is in the late afternoon or early evening, when villagers arrive home tired, hungry, and exhausted after a hard day's work in the rainforest working sago or hunting. As men stroll off to their water holes to wash and as women begin preparations for the evening meal, chopping firewood, and ordering their daughters to fetch water, it is not uncommon to hear a high, indignant voice suddenly rising above the playful screams of children and the barking of the village dogs. The voice will often begin in low, loud, dissatisfied mutters, but it rises quickly and peaks in harsh crescendos. It becomes rapid, piston-like, unrelenting—so fast that the words become slurred and distorted to the point where it sometimes takes the villagers a while to work out what is being said. As the voice grows in volume and rancor, villagers stop what they are doing, cock their ears, and listen. "*Husat i kros?*" ("Who's angry/having a *kros*?") somebody will ask, eliciting a quick identification from anyone who has heard, a hissed admonition to "listen to the talk" (*Harim tok*), and a counterquestion addressed to no one in particular: "*Em kros long wanem?*" ("What's s/he *kros* about?").

If "the talk" continues for any length of time and especially if another person's voice is heard to join in angry response to the first voice, children will begin running to the source of the shouting, and adults will realign their bodies into more alert positions. If the shouting increases in intensity, adults will follow their children and go stand nearer the houses from which the angry voices are rising. There they gather, asking one another why X is *kros* at Y, even as they prepare themselves either to run away from or join in any fight that may arise if the *kros* becomes too vituperative and flies out of hand.

Kroses happen whenever an adult in Gapun feels put out, wronged, insulted, impinged upon, or encroached upon by a fellow villager. In this sense, the person who begins the *kros* always feels it has been provoked by others: "I'm not just *kros* for no reason," a speaker will often announce early in her stream of abuse, "I was minding my own business when Y did Z to me and heated my *bel* ('stomach/intestines,' the seat of emotion)!" Provocation provides villagers with an opportunity for dramatic declarations of self-display, in which they pro-

claim their personal rights and autonomy by loudly announcing that these have been violated. Self-display before other villagers is so central to a kros that the recipient of the kros does not even have to be present for the kros to occur. In fact, sometimes people (particularly wives with husbands who have a reputation for quick and violent tempers) will wait until the recipient of their kros has left the village before they begin their shouting (Kulick 1992a:104–117).

Kroses are heavily characterized by obscenity, sarcasm, threats, and insults, all of which are conveyed in shrill screams across the village. They are extremely abusive, and perhaps for this reason they are structured by precise conventions to which all villagers adhere as long as they want the conflict to remain a shouting match. One of these conventions guides the spatial placement of the disputants: speakers should remain in the near vicinity of—preferably inside—their respective houses. In domestic arguments, a woman dissatisfied with her husband will frequently engineer this kind of spatial positioning by waiting to commence her kros until her husband is sitting in the men's house, in someone else's house, or as just mentioned, until he is completely out of the village. What all this means is that in the majority of kroses in Gapun, the people doing the shouting are visible neither to their audience of villagers nor to one another. All one hears are angry voices, punctuated perhaps by the throwing of pots or the beating of firewood on the walls or floor. If one of the disputants should emerge onto her veranda or stray from the area immediately surrounding her house, the stakes of the conflict suddenly escalate. If both disputants descend from their houses and stand facing one another, violence is virtually assured. If one of the disputants—and this includes spouses—does actually strike the other, the conflict will inevitably become a frenzied melee involving most of the village population, as kin ties become activated and personal grudges rise to compel everybody to take sides and fight. In closings like these, which shatter village social relations for months at a time and which seem to happen only about two to three times a year, fighting sticks, knives, machetes, and even axes are routinely brandished and sometimes even used.

In village rhetoric, kroses are talked about as characteristic of women, and in fact the overwhelming majority of kroses that occur in the village are begun and sustained by women. Men do sometimes get angry and shout from their houses, but the most common pattern is for a man who feels impinged upon to inform his wife of the slight he has suffered and wait for the wife to take it from there, which can usually be counted on to happen (cf. Keenan 1974). Those men known throughout the village as ones who do sometimes have kroses are men who are either old widowers or divorced middle-aged men. That is, they are men without access to a woman's voice. Because of this lack, they may occasionally find it necessary to *parler femme* themselves.⁴

Kroses begin with little warning—a woman will suddenly raise her voice sharply and perhaps shout an obscenity. If she continues talking, her loudness, her positioning in or near her house, and the monologic nature of her talk signal to everybody that she is having a kros. By deploying these linguistic and paralinguistic features, a woman defines the communicative situation as a kros, and

therefore as a situation in which she will assert herself and engage in conflict talk. She imposes this definition on the interpretive and interactional moves of anybody speaking to her, and by doing so, she expects certain things from her listeners. Most of all, she expects to be *heard*, to be allowed to talk until she decides she is finished and has said all she has to say.

In this frame, it is important for the object of a kros to know when it is appropriate to speak and when to remain silent. The person being shouted at is free to begin a kros of her own in which she can assert herself by denying the accusations being hurled at her and by producing a barrage of insults and accusations of her own. This must be structured as an independent and overlapping monologue, however. Any attempt to negotiate blame assignment by providing excuses or trying to engage the accuser in a dialogue is considered “giving back mouth” (*bekim maus/sik ep*).⁵

“Giving back mouth” is a serious challenge indeed, since kroses are primarily occasions of self-display. For this reason, any attempt to disrupt a person’s kros is understood by the villagers not only as a challenge of the accuser’s perception of the action that provoked the kros but, more outrageously still, a challenge of the accuser’s status and right to self-assertion. Children over seven who are verbal enough to attempt to respond to their mothers’ admonitory speeches become confronted with this idea when they are shushed and told to “just hear my talk.” If a child ignores this warning and persists in trying to argue back, s/he is shouted down with a sharp cry of “Ah!” and threatened with a piece of firewood. Such a maternal reaction is a small-scale enactment of what actually may happen when adults begin giving back mouth during a kros: depending on how the person having the kros interprets it, giving back mouth can be seen as an escalation of the conflict. If it continues for any length of time, it may lead to the disputants leaving their houses and confronting each other on the ground. This, in turn, usually leads to violence.

Whenever the object of a woman’s kros is within earshot, that person will, however, usually “give back mouth,” thus compelling the production of extended opposition sequences that can last well over an hour. The kros that I turn to now illustrates the participation structure and meanings of this kind of conflict talk.

“Why Do I Have to Live Like This?!”

The data with which I will illustrate my arguments about kroses are taken from a domestic argument which began as a kros directed by a woman towards her spouse. I concentrate in this paper on a detailed analysis of a single kros in order to fully explore both the ways in which dispute is organized and the ways in which speakers create, over a series of turns, gendered positions through their talk. The kros to be examined here is in no way exceptional or atypical (for other examples, see Kulick 1992a:51–54, 104–113; 1992b). The person who initiates it is a village woman named Sake. Sake is a skilled and experienced kroses, and she is well known in Gapun and several surrounding villages as a *meri bilong kros/warak sumannga nangor* (“a woman perpetually ready to have a kros”).

Sake is in her midthirties, and like all adults who have grown up in Gapun, she is a speaker of both the village vernacular (a Papuan language called Taiap) and an English-based creole language called Tok Pisin. She lives in a house together with her in-married husband Allan—the main recipient of her abuse here—her old, senile mother; her younger, 23-year-old sister Jari; and Jari's five-year-old boy Kunji.

In order to make sense of this kros, it is necessary to know that the house in which Sake and these others live was built communally in 1986 for the author of this paper, who went to Gapun at that time to do anthropological fieldwork. Shortly after I left the field in June 1987, Sake and Allan, who had been my adoptive “mother and father” during my time in Gapun, moved into my house. The couple did this in open defiance of received village opinion: it was well known even before I left that the other villagers were deeply opposed to Sake and Allan taking up residence in my house, because the house had been built for me by the communal labor of the entire village, as a kind of gift. No one could accept the prospect of Sake and Allan making it “theirs” because this would, in effect, recast the villagers’ original work as having been done not for me, but for Sake (a notorious *meri bilong kros*) and Allan (an inmarried man from a far-away village). Sake and Allan ignored all this and moved in anyway.

By 1991, when I returned to Gapun, my old house was in its last inhabitable stages. The wide sago-frond shingles on the roof had slipped away from the central crossbeam, leaving a large hole in the roof across the entire length of the house. As a result, the inside of the house became drenched whenever it rained. The bark floor was sloping, frayed, and pitted with large, dangerous holes. (Houses in Gapun are raised on posts, about one and a half meters off the ground.) My reappearance in Gapun reinvigorated the village acrimony at the fact that the couple had moved into my house, and everybody agreed that I would have to live in some other house since Sake and Allan had “ruined” (*bagarapim*) my old one. Having been informed of my arrival several months previously, Allan had begun construction on another house for me in the center of the village. Only the frame had been erected, however, by the time I arrived, because in marked and purposeful contrast to the first house, nobody would help Allan with any work. “They ruined the first house that we all built for you,” I was repeatedly told by different villagers, “All right, let them show their strength and build one to replace it.”

At about eight o'clock on the evening of July 3, 1991, Allan returned home after a long day spent hunting in the rainforest. He had managed to spear a pig, and he carried the meat from this kill, plus a few lengths of sugar cane that he had collected from his garden, up into the house, where Sake was waiting for him. Sake had been in a very bad mood for several days. She was irritated at her younger sister, whom she accused of being lazy and promiscuous; she was furious at her older sister, who lived next door, whom she accused of having stolen a chunk of pig meat from her fire pit; she was angry at her older sister's ten-year-old boy, who littered the ground in front of her house with coffee beans he shot through a bamboo peashooter; and she was annoyed with her husband Allan be-

cause he had gone off to hunt even though she had wanted him to go with her to work sago.

Soon after Allan got home and sat on the floor to rest, Jari's son Kunji demanded some sugar cane. As Sake was walking across the floor of the dark house to give him a piece, she misjudged her step and fell up to her hip through a hole in the floor.

What happened next is not entirely clear. Sake flew into a rage, and it seems as though she hit Kunji, then turned on her husband, cursing him severely and perhaps moving to strike him. Allan then seems to have hit Sake across the arm, perhaps in self-defense, with a piece of sugar cane. This caused Sake to explode into a kind of frenzy, and she ran around punching and ripping and cutting the walls off the house, spitting high-powered abuse the whole while at her husband, calling him a "fucking mother fucker" (*maya pindukunnga aprɔ sakar*) and screaming at him that he "eats [his] fucking mother's cunt" (*mayama man kakunnga aprɔ sakar*).⁶

As the walls of Sake's house came tumbling down, exposing its innards, villagers fell silent and began drifting towards the shouting. Sake's sister Jari scooped up her child, left her old mother sitting hunched in a corner, and fled to a neighbor's house. Sake, still screaming at Allan that he was a "big fucking semen dick" and a "big black shithole," was now threatening to burn the house down, something she has in fact been known to do in a rage (Kulick 1992a:51). As my recording of the kros begins, about five minutes into it, Sake has just repeated that Allan "eats [his] mother's cunt."⁷

1. A: Shut up!
2. S: What for? You all get down [from this house]. Go down! I'm gonna burn it down.
3. A: You're taking care of my mother, ah?
4. S: I'm throwing you all out. Get your stuff and go down!
5. A: Ah?!
6. S: Get your stuff and go down!

Several features characteristic of the discursive moves that villagers deploy to build opposition in a kros are already apparent in this short extract. In his first utterance, Allan attempts to silence his wife, an interactional move that, as we shall see, recurs repeatedly throughout a kros. Sake counters his command with an oppositional question and then shouts a command of her own to get out of the house. (The "you all" in line 2 probably refers to Allan, Sake's mother, Jari and her little boy—who Sake may think are still present—and an adolescent nephew of Sake's who had been sitting with her.) Allan responds with a rhetorical question, demanding to know in line 3 and again in line 5 what business Sake has saying anything about his mother, when she has no social relationship with her. (Allan's mother is dead.) Sake (lines 4 and 6) ignores her husband and repeats her command to get out of the house so that she can burn it down.

At this point, Sake's old father Kruni, from his seat in his men's house, about fifteen meters away, joins in the kros. For a person not directly addressed to begin speaking publicly during a kros like this is potentially very risky. Normally, third parties do not become involved in kroses unless they are prepared for a physical fight, since a third voice is likely to provoke a fourth, in opposition to the third, and so on, rapidly igniting a chain reaction of shouting throughout the village. Once this begins, large-scale fighting is virtually assured. In this instance though, Kruni, as Sake's father and as the supporter, here, of Allan, has little to fear in terms of other villagers opposing him and coming to Sake's defense. Besides that, Kruni's talk, as we shall see, assumes a lofty, moralistic attitude towards his daughter, narrating her as a "rubbish woman" with "bad, bad ways," and himself as an enlightened patriarch who tries to instruct Sake in the "good" ways of a "real woman." Kruni (in the transcript denoted as K) begins his contributions to this kros by casting a message at Sake in a shout over to his old wife (Sake's mother, Sombang):

7. K: First thing tomorrow Sombang, you get up and go up to Kawri's bush house. Go into the bush. I'm going to Wongan [a neighboring village]. Tomorrow I'm going down to Wongan.
8. S: Get everything and go down! Hurry up!
9. A: There's no good talk here. Whenever she talks, she drags my mother into it.
10. S: [Whenever she talks, she drags my mother into it.
Why should I have to live like this?! Why?!
What did I marry you for, bring you here [to Gapun] for?! All the time my hands, my liver get burned sitting next to a fire cooking for you.
11. K: Leave her [to live] alone in this village. She's a bad woman. I'm sick of this! I'm sick of [her] kroses!
12. A: Ai! I'm a man who can build houses. You hear?

Already at this early stage in the kros, all three speakers have made the assertions that they will repeat with little variation for the next three quarters of an hour. Kruni, in line 7, announces his intention to leave the village because, as he then proclaims in line 11, he is "sick of" (*mnda*) Sake's bad-tempered kroses. Sake, in line 10, inaugurates the rhetorical question that she will repeat continually throughout this kros: "Why do I have to live like this?!" She also begins a narration of herself and her relationship to her husband which I shall discuss in detail below. For now, note that Sake casts herself as an active, assertive subject ("What did I marry you, bring you here for?!") and as someone who performs a service (cooking) for her husband at some sacrifice to herself ("All the time, my hands and liver get burned"). Allan, finally, counters Sake's accusations that she lives "like this" because he is lazy by claiming, "I'm a man who can build houses" (line 12).

Sake responds to Allan's claim by again ignoring him and continuing to shout:

13. S: [I] look after you for what? I don't give food to some other man! [i.e. I only feed my husband, but for what?]
 14. K: I give it to Allan.
 15. A: [A man goes hunting and brings back meat, you can't abuse him.
 16. S: You, I'm gonna strangle you—you know my ways?! Ah?
Don't you say a word. You're gonna get hurt now.

As he tells Sake he is going to strangle her, Allan stands up and moves threateningly in her direction. Sombang (“So” in the transcript), Sake’s mother, sees this from her corner and cries out:

17. So: Sake! Sake! Leave her alone! Leave her alone!
 18. A: Who are you calling useless? What man just floats around doing nothing?! Tell me now! You hear?! Tell me—hurry up!
 19. S: You all look who's talking.
 20. A: You want me to pick you up and throw you down onto the ground ah?!
 21. So: Enough.
 22. S: You're crazy now.
 23. So: Sake enough! Enough!
 24. A: You want me to?!
 25. S: I'm gonna slice him [Allan] up with this machete now. Let him go.

At this point, Allan’s younger brother Joe, visiting from Allan’s home village, shouts up into the house:

26. Joe: Enough now. Feel some shame.

Hearing his brother, Allan stops and walks away from Sake, warning her as he goes:

27. A: You watch it. I'll twist your neck right down to your legs.

Sake responds to Allan’s withdrawal by immediately resuming her abuse:

28. S: You live on other people's backs. I'm talking: You live off other people's work, not on your own.
 29. A: How many houses have I already built for you to live in?!=
 30. S: =I've seen your ways.
 31. A: [How many houses have I already built for you to live in?!
 32. S: You never do any work.
 33. A: Ah?
 34. S: You don't have any strength for work.
 35. A: How many houses have I already built? You were hungry for one of them so you cooked it with fire [referring to the newly built house that Sake burned down during a kros in 1986].
 36. S: I talk and talk and talk and

37. A: [~~talk for nothing, for nothing. No, no, you don't build no house, nothing.~~
So I just lay around all the time, ah?
38. S: [~~Nothing! Nothing, nothing.~~ Fucking shit man, bastard/

In this segment of talk, as Kruni continues to criticize Sake's behavior (line 14) from his seat in his men's house, the argument between Sake and Allan threatens to turn into violence. Allan stands up and shouts at Sake that he is "going to strangle" her. Sake remains assertive in the face of this threat. She continues to refuse engagement in dialogue with Allan, ignoring the questions he fires at her: "Who are you calling useless?!" (line 18), "You want me to pick you up and throw you on the ground ah?!" (line 20). Instead of talking to her husband, who has gotten up from where he was sitting and moved menacingly towards her, Sake responds with threats of her own, telling her audience of villagers that Allan "is gonna get hurt" (line 16) and that she is prepared to "slice him up" with her machete (line 25). Sake calls her husband's bluff. She is secure in the knowledge that, if Allan did strike her, he would surely regret it—not only is Sake renowned as a tough and fearless fighter, she also has two brothers in the village. By striking Sake, Allan would risk activating the wrath of these brothers, who have been known to join in and attack him with less provocation in the past.⁸

It might be for this reason—fear of having to become embroiled in what could quickly turn into a violent physical brawl—that Allan's younger brother, who was visiting him in Gapun at the time and who would be his only dependable source of support in case a fight broke out, calls up into the house and tells Allan in a loud voice to "feel some shame." Allan responds to this call by turning and moving away from Sake. Sake responds by screaming with renewed exuberance.

The most important interactional feature to note as the kros continues is that throughout this sequence, talk is structured in a way that openly rejects dialogue between the speakers.⁹ Each speaker—Sake, Allan, and Kruni—structures the greater part of her or his contributions to the ongoing talk as monologic litanies. The speakers do not talk *to* one another; they shout *at* one another. Much of the talk is overlapping, much of it consists of direct threats, and all questions asked by all speakers are rhetorical—that is, they are not intended to elicit a response. The only instance in which a speaker insistently demands responses to questions are points in the kros at which violence is imminent. When Allan insists that Sake respond to his questions here, for example (e.g. lines 18, 24, 29, 31), he is on the verge of hitting her. For Sake to respond directly to a question at such an interactional juncture would not lead to dialogue; it would result in violence and the cessation of speech.

The fact that there is no dialogue in a kros is significant in light of other research on conflict talk. Most research on conflict talk has focused on the ways in which arguments are avoided or brought to a close. Marjorie Goodwin is one of the few scholars who has emphasized that there are situations in which, and participants for whom, it is desirable for arguments to be prolonged. She has

demonstrated, for instance, how the African American children with whom she worked in Philadelphia organize their conflict talk so as to “keep . . . a dispute open without moving towards closure” (1990:158; see also Coraso and Rizzo 1990). One of the most frequently occurring interactional moves serving this purpose is what Goodwin calls *format tying*. Format tying is a subtle but significant transformation of an utterance in which speaker B repeats what speaker A has just said, but speaker B changes it minimally to highlight opposition, for example:

- Martha: I don't know what you *laughin'* at.
 Billy: I know what I'm *laughin'* at.
 Your *head*. [Goodwin 1990:177]

Like the Maple Street children studied by Goodwin, the villagers of Gapun, once they are engaged in a kros, do not attempt to resolve the conflict. Instead, they sequence their talk so as to prolong and sustain the dispute. It is striking, however, that the discourse feature of format tying, so common in Goodwin's data, and so common in nonoppositional talk in Gapun,¹⁰ almost never occurs in kroses. The only time format tying occurs in kroses is when speaker B responds to an insult by speaker A by topping it with an insult of her/his own, throwing it back at speaker A, e.g.:

- 249.¹¹K: () has no knowledge. She [Sake] has the knowledge of a pig, a dog=
 250. S: =Pigs knock you down and fucking fuck you. Pigs and dogs knock you over and fucking fuck you.

Instead of “tying” their utterances to one another in this way, speakers in a kros more usually actively ignore the talk produced by others, responding to it only by recycling their own rhetorical questions and their own abuse. Gapuners thus differ interestingly from the speakers studied by Goodwin in that they sustain dispute by *not* tying their utterances to preceding ones and by pursuing their own monologic tirades. Goodwin analyzes format tying as a means of calling attention to the trouble source in talk and also as a means of calling into question “the competence or status of the party who produced the talk” (1990:148). If we accept this argument that format tying in arguments calls into question the “competence and status” of other speakers, then what seems to be happening in Gapun is that, by willfully ignoring other people's talk, speakers during kroses seem not even to concede that the other speaker *has* a competence or status to contest. The net effect of the overlapping and monologic talk that characterizes kroses is thus a vigorous denial of the total social worth of other speakers.

This denial is further emphasized by the consistent use of obscene, pejorative personal insults. Obscenity (*tok nogut/wɛkɔk*) is a central feature of most village kroses. In this kros, for example, which lasted about 45 minutes, I counted a total of 119 obscenities, ranging from the relatively mild Tok Pisin word “bastard” (*bastad*) to more incisive permutations of that word, like “rotten bastard” (*sting bastad*), “fucking bastard” (*paken bastad*), and “fucking rubbish

bastard" (*paken rabis bastad*) to more outrageous attributive clauses in Taiap like "fucking grandfather dick" (*nɛnima kwɛmngan aprɔ sakar*) and "dog's vomit face" (*je kambwannga nanuknga munjo*) to complex verbal vulgarities in Taiap, such as "Crawl down into the toilet hole and sit in the shit, old man" (*ɔtɛta toiletnga gwabni yɛwirɛn sire ambitɛt lapun*) or "Catfish cunt, all everyone ever does is fuck you by the footpath. Pricks stick out of you on both sides wherever you go! You walk around like a porcupine with pricks sticking out of you everywhere!"¹² (This was screamed by Sake at her sister Jari, whom she briefly vilifies at a later point in this kros.)

All these 119 obscenities are uttered by Sake, the initiator of the kros and the one who has imposed this definition on the speech situation. In Sake's speech, obscenity functions discursively to draw pointed attention to the object of her anger. In line 40, below, for example, Sake shifts from addressing her husband to attacking her father with the line:

40. S: Black asshole who are you talking to?! Ah?!

Later in the kros, she attacks her husband in a similar way:

128. A: [This bad talk is making me mad now, and I'm gonna hit
()
129. S: [You're a fucking rubbish man. You hear?! Your fucking prick is full of maggots. You're a big fucking semen prick. Stone balls!

Obscenity also appears in kroses at points where closure or negotiation becomes possible. Sake consistently thwarts dialogue and interrupts speakers by screaming out vulgarities, often using them to preface a reiteration of her complaints:

171. A: Ah enough! Stop it now
()
172. S: [Fucking black prick! Fucking grandfather prick! You've built me a good house that I just fall down in, you get up and hit me on the arm with a piece of sugar cane! You fucking mother's cunt! What did you hit me on the arm with that sugar cane for?!

Another effect of Sake's relentless use of vulgar obscenity is that the objects of her abuse become narrated as socially objectionable. Framed in this way, speech and assertion by the offensive Other becomes a shameful act in itself, embarrassing both the speaker and all those who are forced to hear her or him. Again, the assertive language of the kros becomes a kind of rhetorical barrage that works to obliterate the social worth of those with whom the speaker is engaged in argument. Obscenity in kroses establishes a similarity between the other speaker and extraordinarily shameful body parts (sexual organs) and actions (intercourse with one's mother, defecation). The message seems to be that the object of the kros should not be listened to: any talk produced by that person is shameful talk emanating from a shameful orifice. The talk, like the person who enunciates it, is disgusting and worthless.

Following the series of exchanges in lines 27–38, the axis of the kros tilts away from Sake and her husband to Sake and her father Kruni. Kruni is sitting in his men's house, with his back poignantly turned to the house in which Allan and Sake are located. (To turn one's back on another person is a severe social slight in Gapun, and when villagers find themselves sitting with their backs to somebody, they immediately excuse themselves for *givim baksait* (*bwar i-*) and they turn to include the person in their circle of communion.) From line 7, Kruni has contributed a running commentary of distaste on Sake's actions. Much of Kruni's speech is not audible on the transcribed tape, because he was drowned out by the sounds of Sake and Allan fighting. However, expressions like "*Rabis meri*" (rubbish woman) that occasionally rise above and are audible over Sake and Allan's talk make clear the sentiments Kruni is announcing.

After line 38, Allan effectively retires from this kros, limiting his further participation to occasional interjections of self-defense. Kruni, however, remains very much involved, and his raised voice is at this point heard to shout:

39. K: She's really bad. She's a really bad child living here with me. She has no shame on her skin.

Hearing this, Sake now turns her guns on her father:

40. S: Black asshole who are you talking to?! Ah?!
 41. K: Shameless skin.
 bad thoughts, bad ways. Bad.
 42. S: Who's that black asshole who are you talking to?! Who?! To who?!
 43. K: You don't ever do good things to people, to the family.
 44. S: Ah?!
 Why should I live like a pig in a sty?! Why?!
 45. K: You're always doing bad things to people and [your] family. I've seen it plenty of times,
 your trashy ways.
 46. S: Why am I living in a broken down house?!
 Who's giving back mouth to me?!
 47. K: Eeeee. Mother. Eeeee. rubbish. Eeeee. Raja. [exclamations of exasperation and shame]
 48. S: You [Krui] find me a place to live now.
 I'm gonna burn this house to the ground. All our stuff is gonna get burned up. You better not heat up my guts! [i.e. make me angry]
 49. K: Go and live with the devils in the jungle. My head is paining now.
 50. S: You better not heat up my guts! You bastard you!
 51. K: In this village/
 52. S: /Your big fucking eyes are popping out on top of your head [but you don't see nothing]. You listen to Allan every day. Has Allan built me a good house?!
 I'm living in a good house and you're krosing me?! Ah?! You shit asses!
 53. K: All I ever hear is her shouting. All I ever hear is her shouting. Rubbish.
 54. S: All you ever get in your bowls from me is shit [sarcastic: i.e., I look

- after you all well with food, so I deserve a good house].
55. K: Ei!
56. S: Every day every day,
[my liver burns, my hands burn [i.e. I'm always over a fire cooking for you all].
57. K: Ei! Rotten woman!
58. S: I look after you all for nothing. No man has built me a house. I'm not living in a good house. No way.
59. K: You've all got bad ways.
60. S: Why should I have to live like a beggar woman/in a pigsty, live in a hovel of a house?!
61. K: First thing tomorrow I'm getting up and going
[to [stay with] my child in the mangrove swamps.
62. S: [I hurt myself when I fell,
[I informed him [Allan]. There's nothing to argue about about that.
[Spits loudly.]
63. K: Tomorrow take all my things and put them [with Kawri] in the jungle.
64. S: All the other men they build houses.
[Me poor thing, no! When the rains come, I'm gonna be soaked like a tree possum. Why?!
65. K: These bad, bad ways. I'm sick of them. Sick! Every day just her shouting. Just her shouting!
66. S: You keep talking [threatening tone].
67. K: Other women
[don't go on like this. She's the only one who's always doing this.
68. S: You keep talk/Fucking bastard!
69. A: Ai!
70. S: You bastard/ giving back mouth to me!
71. K: () Ah?! You're a big man ah? [Lit. you're a *pikus* tree ah?!]
This village is kept together by you? Ask yourself that.
72. S: () Fucking shit asshole! You won't let this kros go with your talking.
Fucking rotten thoughts! Putrid thoughts, Bastard.
73. K: Bad talk is inside your stomach. Hev everybody: You're a real woman ah?!
74. S: Black asshole. Two big assholes.
I'm talking: my guts are churning. It's hot/My guts are hot and I'm talking.

In this extended segment of talk, the lack of format tying is again very evident. Sake and her father both steadfastly pursue their own rhetorical agendas in flagrant disregard for the voice of the other. Sake repeatedly reasserts her dissatisfaction with her house, and Kruni continues to announce that he is leaving the village, driven away by Sake and her “bad, bad ways.”

Despite the lack of format tying and overt dialogue, however, Sake and Kruni are obviously cognizant of each other's speech. Sake repeatedly counters her father's comments with rhetorical questions whose effect is to mock and diminish Kruni's status (“Who's that black asshole who you are talking to?” [line 42] “Fucking bastard!” [line 68], “Fucking shit asshole!” [line 72], etc.) and to

publicly call into question his right to “give back mouth” to her (“I’m living in a good house and you’re krosing me?!” [line 52]). Kruni responds to Sake’s shouts with cries of shame (47) and dismay (55, 57). He also code-switches to the Adjora language in lines 71 and 73. This code-switch seems to be part of Kruni’s strategy to shame Sake and perhaps even scare her. Adjora is the language spoken by numerous villages to the east and south of Gapun, and it is the language used in sorcery spells to kill people, something Kruni may be alluding to by his switch to that language.¹³ Later on in this kros, Kruni makes explicit what he seems to be hinting at here, when he complains during a monologue that sorcerers killed two of his sons and Sake’s first husband because of Sake’s “rubbish ways.” He then asks loudly: “Why didn’t they just kill this rubbish woman?!” (234). (Sake, who is nothing if not an extraordinarily skilled kroser, replies to this by turning the tables on her father and shouting darkly: “You black prick, all these years you’ve sat by your fire doing nothing. Why didn’t you just kill me through sorcery instead of just sitting there doing nothing?!” [235].)

Speaking Subjects

This kros, like the other kroses that occur in Gapun, continues in the same way for some time, with speakers continuing to recycle their abuse and grievances, repeating these with only minor variations for three quarters of an hour. Twenty-five minutes after the above segment of text was spoken, Sake is still shouting in her father’s direction, “Fucking fuckhole, who is that man there talking to! He better not be saying bad things about me!” (309), Kruni is still yelling over to his niece and his youngest daughter, “Tomorrow get the old woman’s things [i.e. his wife Sombang’s belongings]. Awpa, Jari, take them up into the jungle” ([338], cf. line 7), and Allan, half an hour later, is still informing his wife, “Three times I’ve built you a house. Three times, three times” (378).

This goes on until the kros fizzles out, ten minutes after this comment by Allan. In terms of closure, there are two possible trajectories for kroses to take. One path is continual escalation, which means sustained dialogue over many turns, then movement by the speakers away from houses down onto the ground, the striking of one speaker by another, and the ensuing village-wide brawl. The other, more common, trajectory for a kros to take is for the person being shouted at by the speaker who initiated the kros to begin lowering her or his voice and declining to respond loudly to the shouts of the kroser. Gradually, unopposed in talk and satisfied that she has said all that she wishes to say, the kroser will also begin to quiet down. Talk eventually dies down to barely audible mutterings in the individual houses, and the audience of villagers begins to drift away and resume its former activities. Finally, even the woman who initiated the kros will fall silent and begin conversing normally with others in her household.

The important thing to note is that nothing is ever resolved during a kros. No position is won or lost, and the same grievances that sparked off the kros in the first place are likely to resurface again sooner or later in another kros. In very marked contrast to other forms of conflict talk which have been discussed in the

literature, there is no real closure to the disputes enunciated in kroses. Kroses, in this sense, never end.

There are very good cultural reasons why kroses never end in agreement or settlement.¹⁴ Most important is the fact that kroses are not conceptualized in themselves as being attempts to negotiate blame assignment. Blame has already been assigned, by the person who feels violated, and the kros is a public announcement of that fact. Instead of negotiating blame, kroses proclaim the violation of the speaker—they announce to the other villagers that a speaker has been wronged and mistreated in some way. This mistreatment, as I noted earlier, is capitalized on by villagers and exploited as an opportunity for self-display and self-aggrandizement.

Inasmuch as kroses function primarily as opportunities for self-display, there can logically be no end to them. Speakers have nothing to gain and everything to lose by attempting to resolve conflict within the kros framework, because in a fundamental sense what is being contested is not Sake's house, Allan's laziness, Kruni's disgust with his daughter, or any of the other issues that speakers repeatedly raise. What is being contested is the right to self-display and to a public voice. Throughout a kros, speakers vie with one another to make themselves heard, even as they unceasingly attempt to silence their opponents by deploying the discursive features that have already been discussed: obscenity, threats, overlapping talk, refusal to be engaged in dialogue, and direct commands to "shut your mouth!" The concern with speech and silence is so shared and overt in these situations that it is impossible to see kroses as anything other than polyphonic struggles to monopolize the floor. The importance of this struggle, which seems to be fully recognized by all speakers, is the ascension to public awareness of a specific perspective on the behavior of others. The importance of kroses, in other words, is that they have the potential to define social reality.

Speaking as a Woman

The social reality defined by kroses is one saturated with gender. Individual females who initiate kroses speak for themselves, invoking with their words a discursive space in which they give form to and assert their autonomy by declaiming the ways in which it has been violated. But in speaking for themselves, individual females also anticipate, counter, and contest the discourse of others, who would hear their assertions in a particular way and who would narrate them as being authored by impossible, troublesome, disruptive "women."

By anticipating and responding to this discourse of others, females like Sake are therefore not only asserting their personal rights and autonomy. Simultaneously, they are also engendering that autonomy, even as they hear it being engendered by the voices of others who are trying to get them to "shut up." These voices identify the violated speaker as a "rubbish woman," a "woman who gets kros for no reason." They shout at her mockingly to tell them whether she is "a big man." They ask in sarcastic tones for "everybody" to judge if the speaker is a "real woman."

In a kros, the woman answers back. Yes, she bellows at them in screams that rock the village, I am a real woman. “All the time my hands, my liver get burned sitting next to a fire cooking for you,” my “fuck-around” husband, whose “black prickhead bones” can’t even build me a decent house to live in. “My jaw pains” from having to continually tell you to build me a house. “My guts are hot” from having you, my “totally senile” father, “give back mouth” to me with impotent threats when I am kros. I am a real woman.

Here, speaking as a woman publicly challenges any interpretation that would claim women to be anything other than what the female speaker portrays them as being. Speaking as a woman loudly disputes the Other’s definition of a “real woman.” And in doing so, it exposes such definitions for what they are—contested fictions. Sake creatively resists all attempts by others to define “woman.” For example, her husband Allan tells her at one point during this kros:

You have no shame about talking like this. You’re a wife, you have to think about poor/You should think: “My poor husband, he always has to work himself carrying house posts and everything. He always has to do everything by himself.” You can’t talk about building no house. [346]

She responds later by displacing this fiction with one of her own:

It’s your shame. If you’d been a man, you would have built a house for your wife. You stink stink you stink like an outhouse. If I’d married a man, you would have built me a good house. You’re a rubbish man. Why do you just lay around inside the house all day? Real rubbish, there’s no work in you. [373]

During a kros, these alternative fictions become superimposed on one another in carnivalized cacophonies. Overlapping monologues tell competing stories, each carrying with it normative messages about gendered practices, all of them equally contentious.

In Sake’s narrative, a woman is storied as a series of nurturing acts for which she expects recompense. Throughout the kros, she repeatedly stresses that:

Every day I work hard for him [Allan], my hands get burned, my liver gets seared for him. Look after him with sago, all my food goes to him for nothing. He’s like a nothing man and I look after him. [328]

Within this narrative, a woman is not naturally nurturing. At one point in this kros, in fact, Sake screams at her husband and her father that “From tomorrow on you’re gonna die of hunger” (319), because she will no longer make them any food. A woman in Sake’s story is an individual engaged in a series of transactions that she can terminate if the compensation for her work ceases to satisfy her. Throughout her kros, Sake repeatedly asks, “Why do I give food to this man when he does nothing for me?” and she asserts, “You get out of here, you can’t stay together with me. You big long prickbone, piss off and get out of here, you can’t stay with me.”

In authoring femaleness, Sake authors maleness as well. But whereas women are storied as:

- assertive "Why did I marry you, bring you here [to Gapun] for?!" [10]
- hard working "I look after you all for nothing every day. Hard work, work that makes me pain ah ah, doing it, getting burned by the cooking fire. My skin blisters at the fire. The fire burns my hands. Fucking black assholes" [218]
- domineering Towards the end of the kros, Sake shouts at Allan, "You, tomorrow, you and your foreskin are gonna go work sago. I'm telling you straight" [353], and at Kruni, "Old man, tomorrow you're building me a house, you hear that? Get rid of that stoop in your back, straighten up, and build me a house" [278]
- fearless "I'm gonna slice him up with this machete, let him go" [25]
- threatening "You're gonna keep on krosing me?! He's gonna keep on krosing me, that old man, every day/I'm gonna break his spine" [321]
- and utterly in control, This old hovel, I'm letting it be. [But] if I changed my mind, fire would light it up right now. Right now!" [266]

men are characterized by a lack. Allan lacks:

- masculinity "You're not like a man should be" [343]
- strength "You don't have any strength to work" [34]
- self-constraint "You bastard. You're a cunt chaser. You're a man who sneaks around in the jungle. You're a rubbish man. Fucker. A man who chases cunt inside the jungle" [114]
- and knowledge "If you were the child of human beings, you'd have knowledge, sense to be able to do things. Fucking lightning threw you out of the sky. [You weren't born.]" [254]

And Kruni lacks:

- common sense "Your big fucking eyes are popping out of the top of your head [but you don't see anything]." [52]

- understanding “Feee! He’s psychotic (*orikatinet*); this old man is crazy. He’s crazy (*babasaknet*), this old man. His rotten head is fucked up, that’s why he’s talking. Fucking rubbish bastard you!” [122]
- Christian belief “Satan man, shut your mouth you bastard you!” [140]
- and power “You black prick, all these years you’ve sat by your fire doing nothing. Why didn’t you just kill me through sorcery instead of just sitting there doing nothing?!” [235]

Sake’s words fragment gender and externalize its components, shoving them violently onto a village center stage and into public awareness. Her talk is explicitly and flamboyantly provocative. It compels the recipients of the abuse to turn their own gaze to maleness and femaleness—to gender—and formulate a response.

Kruni and Allan respond to Sake’s fragmenting gaze by offering alternative narratives. In these narratives, a woman is mute and sensitive to the needs and desires of the men in her world. Allan, in his advice to Sake quoted above (346), tells her how he expects a woman to act as a wife. She should feel sorry for him and be supportive of him because nobody helps him work. Kruni assails Sake with instructions on how she should behave as a woman:

- she shouldn’t abuse her husband “A man goes hunting and brings back meat, you can’t abuse him” [14]
- she should possess an acute and paralyzing sense of shame “If I were you I wouldn’t be able to talk like that, I would get ashamed at my own rubbish ways” [101]
- she should be silent “All I ever hear is her shouting. All I ever hear is her shouting, Rubbish.” [53]; “This rubbish thing here [Sake] is destroying the village.” [127]
- she should conform to his idea of “woman” “Other women don’t go on like this. She’s the only one who’s always doing this” [67]
- she should be Christian “She doesn’t have any Christian faith” [161]
- and she should listen to male authority figures “Rubbish child. She’s not my child. I think her mother had her illegitimately. That’s why her ears are closed [to reason]. Too crazy. If she were my child, she would have

good sense. [She'd think,] 'My father is a good man, a sensible man, alright I must be too.' [221]

Men, in these stories, are:

good	(See previous quote, line 221.)
patient	"A: I'm not a man who gets angry." [109]
hard working	"A: I'm a man who builds houses, you hear?" [86]
maligned by foul-mouthed women	"A: I'm not angry with you that you should abuse me for no reason with your swearing, . . ." [79]
socially sensitive	"K: I get really ashamed when I hear your mouth." [99]
positioned to give women advice about feminine behavior and Christianity	"K: <u>I've been talking about these ways of hers for I don't know how many years.</u> " [210]; "A: Whenever you're wrong about something, he [Kruni] can lecture you about it." [314]; "K: You keep going like you always do. When you die you're gonna go to the Big Fire." [191]
and, if sufficiently provoked, violent	"A: You watch it. I'll twist your neck down to your legs." [27]

Allan and Kruni, collaborating here in vivid enactment of the village stereotype that portrays men as cooperative and socially supportive in the face of female destructive assertiveness, seem to deploy their stories of femaleness and maleness to reframe Sake's talk as unreasonable and aberrant. In their conversations with one another, men routinely stereotype women as convulsive, unreasonable troublemakers (Kulick 1992a: 115–119, 145–146). Here though, the two men invoke another fiction—that of the demure Christian wife and the good man. The good man who brings home the meat or who lectures headstrong women to show them what is right denies Sake the provocation that she ceaselessly reiterates to justify her kros. And the demure Christian wife individualizes Sake's talk, distorting it into idiosyncratic, unbecoming petulance. Both fictions are part of a united attempt by Allan and Kruni to undermine Sake's assertions and shame her to silence. Should Sake be rendered mute, however, the men would instantaneously and artfully produce an alternative fiction, one in which Sake's former vociferousness would be declared to be characteristic of all women.

Sake, however, is not about to be shushed into silence by the shouts of her husband and her father. She remains solid and unmoving in her battered house, which she has divested of walls and littered with objects hurled across the room in dramatic punctuation of her complaints. She holds the floor, screaming at

these men that she feels violated and that what they have to do is “listen to my talk.” From her opening threats to burn down her house to her final cry, before she winds down and begins muttering, 45 minutes after she began, of “Fucking black pisshole!” (379) at her husband, Sake remains talking, and she forces everybody else in the village to hear what she has to say. Sake’s voice—harsh and powerful, ripe with vulgarity and bursting with vituperation—remains insistent. The story she tells is and will be contested and “rubbished” by some villagers, but it will be remembered and perhaps appreciated by others. In any case, Sake has her say, and the perspective on autonomy and gender which she articulates will uncompromisingly enter into circulation and become part of the moral negotiations that constitute village social life.

Conclusion

In the anthropological and sociolinguistic literature on conflict talk and on language and gender, women tend to be represented by either absence or submissiveness and silence. Neither of these representations will do when describing the verbal behavior of women in Gapun. Women in this village are not dumb, and far from being instinctively adverse to “coarse and gross expressions,” their adroitness in using such expressions would probably set poor Otto Jespersen spinning in his grave. The raised voices of angry women are so much a part of daily life in the village that to neglect them—or to focus, as is commonly done in the ethnographic literature, only on the subsequent public talk of men who in oratories often try discreetly to arrange settlements that try to smooth over more serious conflicts¹⁵—would be distorting and wrong.

The struggle to be heard and to silence others during a kros confirms the generalizations of others who have written on the role that language plays in Pacific societies. It has been widely observed throughout the Pacific, and particularly in the so-called egalitarian societies of Melanesia, where the political autonomy of individual actors is high, that public speech events often do not result in concrete decisions or political directives. Instead, in Pacific societies, public speech events seem geared towards “the creation of meaning” (Myers and Brenneis 1984:11). Public speech here is “part of an ongoing community dialogue in which events and relationships are continually shaped and reshaped in the moral negotiations of everyday life” (White and Watson-Gegeo 1990:9), and therefore, “a central issue is who gets to be heard” (Myers and Brenneis 1984:12).

What this case study from Gapun adds to our understanding of speech in Pacific communities is the awareness that the events and relationships that are publicly shaped and reshaped include basic understandings about gender (cf. Lederman 1984). Furthermore, the shaping of these understandings is not exclusively the province of males (as the almost complete lack of data on women’s talk in this literature would seem to indicate), nor is it something accomplished only through “veiled” speech, indirection, and tropes (Brenneis and Myers 1984; Strathern 1975; Watson-Gegeo and White 1990). The “moral negotiations” that take place in Gapun are frequently between men and women, and

they occur on highly charged battlefields strewn with loud obscenity and disgusting personal insults. The speech articulated in a kros urges us to look for the negotiation of meaning and social norms in these societies not only in disentangling, conflict-solving sessions or in the telling of oblique parables, as has been the case so far, but also in explicit and direct conflict talk.

The explicit and direct conflict talk that has been examined in this paper challenges recent assertions about the nature of the female voice. In one of the most recent summaries of the language and gender literature, Susan Gal concludes that "women's special verbal skills are often strategic *responses*—more or less successful—to positions of relative powerlessness" (1992:182, Gal's emphasis). The qualifying "often" in that statement is later elided by Gal's examples, all of which underscore the responsive, "powerless" position from which women's speech emerges in communities throughout the world.

In a kros, however, the incensed voices of women are not quite the "responses" that Gal seems to have in mind. Quite the opposite. In a kros, it is men's voices that are provoked to discourse, challenged to speak, then ordered to "shut up" and overwhelmed with abuse. It is women who define the parameters of speech and action in a kros. Women's opening linguistic and paralinguistic behavior imposes a specific frame on the speech situation and constrains both the language and actions of others. Women steadfastly refuse to be silenced, and they maintain continual control of the floor during a kros with their uninterrupted outpouring of complaints and invectives. Women who have a kros are not so much responding as they are asserting themselves and compelling a response from others.

Of course, scholars like Gal might want to move this question onto deeper ground and argue that women have kroses in the first place because they are excluded from, and therefore cannot exercise power in male-dominated contexts such as oratorical speeches. This happens not to be the case for Gapun, where women are deeply involved at some level with most aspects of the decisions that are made in the village (Kulick 1992a). But one can obviously go round and round with this. Sooner or later, though, one reaches a theoretical impasse: either we see discursive practices as constitutive of gender or we see discursive practices as responses articulated from fixed gendered positions of power and powerlessness. This latter perspective must posit gender as existing prior to, or somehow separate from, the interactional contexts through which it is invoked and organized. Gal's position, which sees structural relations of gender and dominance perpetuated or subverted "*in part* through verbal practices in social interaction" (1992:176, my emphasis) dispenses with universalizing, essentialistic assumptions about males and females only to smuggle them in again in terms of a universal, "powerless" position from which women around the world discourse.

Rather than build our generalizations and our theories about language and gender around an assumed general powerlessness to which women, in their language, respond, it might be more rewarding to view both maleness and femaleness as mutually responsive and mutually unstable. While not denying

structural inequalities, we might want to highlight and explore the ways in which those inequalities are invoked and constituted through talk in situated activities. And we might want to expand Gal's "verbal practices" to mean *discursive practices* in the wider Foucauldian sense of "practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972:49). The advantages of this perspective would be both theoretical and methodological. Theoretically, it would allow us to move decisively away from a view of gender as a fixed index of identity, to seeing gender instead as a *process* through which persons, artifacts, events, and sequences are rendered male and female (Strathern 1988). Methodologically, a perspective on language and gender which sees gender as constituted through discursive practices would compel us to focus our attention on "the interpretive practices that transform contentious dialogic speech into fixed concepts of male and female and back again" (Stewart 1990:44), and it would motivate us to gather data which would help us assess the ways in which discursive practices (in this broader sense) structure and are structured through talk (Goodwin 1990; Merlan and Rumsey 1991; Ochs 1988; Schieffelin 1990).¹⁶

We all know that women in our own culture and in others argue and dispute. What we need to do is take this talk seriously enough to engage with it and explore how it is organized, interpreted, and acted upon. This kind of exploration will not just broaden our understanding of what conflicts are and how they are structured cross-linguistically and cross-culturally. Much more importantly, close analysis of female conflict talk in different contexts and cultures will lead us to a better appreciation of how conflict provides women with a means of guiding interpretations, influencing decisions, and producing particular configurations of social organization and action. For this is what *kroses* indisputably do in Gapun. *Kroses* ignite village-wide brawls, which can reconfigure village social relations for a very long time; they stop communal work like carving a large canoe or cutting the grass at the government-run elementary school in the neighboring village of Wongan for days, for weeks, or even for good; they prod recalcitrant husbands, sooner or later, into building new houses or into going to pound sago or hunt; they reaffirm—when they are concerned with theft (which is the single most common topic of a *kros*)—a woman's rights over specific areas of land, and so on. By no means are *kroses* simply dismissed by the villagers and forgotten when they are over. *Kroses* in Gapun *do* things.¹⁷

This leads to my final point that the voice that becomes discursively constituted as feminine in a *kros* is not really a subversive or subaltern voice, as the female voice is often characterized in anthropological and feminist writings. It is a frankly competing one. Targeted by women who feel themselves put out and impinged upon, men in domestic arguments find themselves having to contend with this voice and dispute it. Because it is loud, contentious, and explicitly conflictual, the female voice in Gapun reconfirms salient stereotypes about women—that they are disruptive, uncooperative, antisocial, and in need of control. These kinds of stereotypes, however, are not static. They are themselves continually challenged and reopened for examination and evaluation, as women's *kroses* juxtapose female assertiveness and control with men's failures

and weaknesses. So even as they adhere to and reinforce gender stereotypes, women, in their kroses, do not simply reproduce already existing relations of dominance. Instead, kroses undermine the stereotypes and keep the gendered fictions which compose them destabilized and under constant negotiation. Women in Gapun may be, on one level, everything the men say they are. But with cunning and truly creative expressivity, the women blithely fashion stereotypes that demean them into powerful positions from which they can publicly speak and demand hearing. By initiating and sustaining a kros, by speaking as a woman, the angry women of Gapun proclaim their visions of the world to others. And in doing so, they make sure that their perspectives are dramatically deposited into the pool of gendered narratives from which village social reality is fashioned.

Notes

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1. Having raised this point, which merits more serious discussion than can be offered here, I should state explicitly that the main reason I was able to openly record conflict talk, transcribe it, and discuss it with villagers is because such talk—as will become clear in the course of this paper—is decidedly *not* regarded by either speakers or listeners as a private affair (cf. Abrahams 1983:95–96, 130 for a similar situation in the Caribbean).

2. Some recent important exceptions to this generalization are Briggs 1992, Coplan 1987, Goldman 1986, Hill 1992, and Merlan and Rumsey 1991.

3. Gapun is located about ten kilometers from the northern coast of Papua New Guinea, roughly midway between the mouths of the Sepik and Ramu Rivers. The one hundred or so villagers who live in Gapun are largely self-supporting through a combination of sago processing, swidden agriculture, and hunting. Fieldwork was carried out for 15 months in 1986–87 and for 2 months in 1991.

4. Male use of the verbal conventions analyzed in this paper is the subject of another essay (Kulick n.d.).

5. Many of the people of Gapun are multilingual, but two languages, Tok Pisin (a creole language spoken throughout the country) and Taiap (the village vernacular—a Papuan language spoken only in Gapun) predominate. Throughout this paper, non-English words in italics are words in Tok Pisin, and underlined italicized words are words in Taiap. In the translations, which are in roman script, underlining signifies that the words were spoken in Taiap. Nonunderlining means that the words were spoken in Tok Pisin. Double underlining means the words were spoken in Adjora.

6. In order to give readers a sense of the tone and emotive force of the words used in a kros, I have avoided literal translations and have instead translated vernacular and Tok Pisin speech into a colloquial form of American English. As for the translation of

obscene speech, the word I have rendered as “fucking” in Taiap is the word “bad” (*aprɔ*) plus an emphatic lexeme (*sakar*) used only in the context of abuse. The anatomical references in the obscenity are fairly literal translations of the originals; thus *maya pindikunga aprɔ sakar*, which I have glossed as “fucking mother fucker,” is literally “mother fuck+NOMINALIZER bad EMPHATIC. The only exception to these literal translations is the Taiap *imin katɔ*, which literally means “lower intestine” but which is hurled at opponents, and reacted to, with the emotive force of my translation, “asshole.”

7. Transcription conventions for the text analyzed in this paper are as follows:

[Overlapping talk
┐ or ┌	Talk overlapped by another utterance not shown
/	Interruption (between speakers, used when one speaker is interrupted by following speaker; within a stretch of talk by one speaker, this indicates self-interruption or false start)
=	Contiguous utterances (used when there is no break between adjacent utterances, the second latched onto, but not overlapping, the first)
()	Unintelligible talk

8. Gapun is unusual among mainland New Guinea societies in that clan membership and rights to land are inherited matrilineally. Marriage occurs without bride-price, and traditionally it was structured as sister exchange; now both women and men are increasingly marrying whomever they choose. (A couple is acknowledged to be married when they begin working sago together.) Endogamous marriages within the village (which consists of five exogamous clans) have until recently been common, which meant that villagers of both sexes lived their entire lives surrounded by their kin and friends. Even today it is not uncommon for women like Sake, who marry men from distant villages, to “pull” their spouses to live in Gapun. All this means that women have an unusually strong structural position in Gapun, and their vociferousness is certainly at least partly based on that position.

It is impossible to know to what extent women’s kroses have “traditional” roots and to what extent they are the results of “pacification” and the successive dissolution of the men’s cults. Senior men claim that women in the past were afraid of men’s spears and their sorcery and that they therefore were much more docile than are the women of today. While there may be some truth to such assertions, given the militaristic and violent nature of precolonial Gapun society, it is also true that women had cult organizations of their own, and they had their matrilineal kin ready at hand to defend them against violent husbands. A woman’s brothers and other members of her clan would be unlikely to allow her to be injured by her husband, partly because of a very strongly held belief that one should avoid injuring members of another clan (“another blood”) unless in war, and partly because women are regarded as the “source” of clan strength because of their childbearing capacities. These issues are discussed in more detail in Kulick 1992a. Also, although men’s spears are nowadays “locked up,” as the villagers say, sorcery remains virulent; it is the sole cause of *all* deaths in Gapun, and it is greatly feared by everyone. Still, despite the risks they know they run by having kroses, women have them habitually.

Whatever the status of kroses may have been in precolonial times, they are very common today. It should be noted, however, that they may become less common and more likely to provoke swift violence against the speaker in the future, as villagers increasingly insist that Christian women do not try to involve their matrilineal kin in domestic disputes and that a Christian family is one where the husband is head and the

wife obeys him. Compare Gapun to the societies discussed in Toft 1985, which is a collection of papers by anthropologists about the causes and consequences of domestic violence in Papua New Guinea.

9. This is a general feature of conflict talk in the village. Indeed, there is a rule which dictates that dialogue in a speech event framed as conflictual will lead to violence. This was made explicit on one very atypical occasion in 1991, when a man publicly accused his older brother of trying to seduce his wife. After making the accusation in the men's house during a formal meeting, the accuser repeatedly screamed at his brother *not* to respond to the accusation but, instead, to leave the men's house without saying anything. The accused man ignored his brother's shouts at him to "Go! Go!", and he insisted on staying and trying to enter into dialogue with his brother and others in the men's house, justifying his nocturnal visit to his sister-in-law. The end of this episode was a violent, village-wide brawl. The brawl was initiated, significantly, when two of the women who had been listening to this confrontation yelled up into the men's house that the accuser's wife has a "cunt" that "isn't little" and "gets fucked by plenty of men."

10. Whenever format tying occurs in village speech, it is almost inevitably used to signal *agreement* not opposition (Kulick 1992a:111–113, 131–132).

11. Numbers appearing before or after excerpts from the kros signify the line number in the transcript of the transcribed text. Because it is not feasible to reproduce and discuss the entire transcript, this information is provided to give readers some idea of the way in which the language used during a kros coheres.

12. Although space restrictions prevent me from developing this idea more fully here, it seems to me that obscenities like the ones occurring in this kros may be an important site of individual creative expression and linguistic innovation—one might want to see them as kind of poetry. This idea was suggested to me as one of my co-workers in Gapun, Mone Banang, a man who spent literally hundreds of hours with me during my time in the village, helping me to transcribe recordings of everything from caregiver-child interactions to formal oratories in the men's house, continually expressed surprise and awe at the inventiveness of Sake's obscenities. Even those he found outrageously vulgar (such as "Your cunt is sagging like loose mud on a riverbank!") were greeted with a kind of astonished admiration. He even asked me to write down the particularly creative obscenities so that he would be able to remember them. To the extent that obscenity might be poetic and linguistically innovative, it is indeed tragic—both for female speakers and for the Taiap language as a whole—that one of the many destructive effects of missionization in Melanesia has been the interdiction and eventual eradication of obscene language in village life. Among the Kaluli of the southern highlands, for instance, obscenity was one of the first speech varieties to become virtually extinct when villagers adopted Christianity (Bambi Schieffelin, personal communication). Nothing so drastic has yet happened in Gapun, obviously, even though the villagers have been nominally Christian since the late 1940s. Obscene language is, however, clearly identified in village rhetoric with "the ways of Satan," and it is severely condemned, especially by those who identify strongly as Christian. Whether village women will still be creating novel insults in ten years' time is an open question.

13. For more on kroses and code-switching, see Kulick 1992a:111–113.

14. I mean here that agreement or settlement is never reached *during the course of a kros*. Kroses often eventually result in some kind of settlement, especially if they end up resulting in violence. Senior men orchestrate these settlements (*sekhan/kup*), which range in magnitude from the mutual exchange of (usually equivalent) amounts of money (no more than two to five kina—approx. two to five U.S. dollars) to large

conciliatory feasts. The settlements, however, are aimed at the symptoms of conflict rather than its causes; they do not address the reasons for the kros so much as they aim at "cooling the bellies" of the protagonists and their supporters. The issues which provoked any given kros tend to smoulder among the villagers until they are reignited at a later date or superseded by other conflicts.

15. Oratories in Gapun are discussed in Kulick 1992a:122–144 and 1992b, Stroud 1992, and Kulick and Stroud 1993.

16. Another recent summary of the language and gender literature, published several months after the manuscript for this paper had been completed, reaches conclusions about the processual nature of gender and about the need to approach "both gender and language as constructed in communities of practice" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992:487), that are very similar to the arguments pursued in this paper.

17. Kulick 1992a contains a number of examples of women producing specific social effects through having a kros. See also Briggs's discussion of what impact Warao (northeastern Venezuela) women's complaints *really* have on their society (1992:347–348).

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