

# Gossip in a Shona community

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*The literature on gossip shows disagreement about its nature and function, and in particular on its role in social control. This article is based on research in a Shona community and deals with what the community members themselves said about gossip. They described situations in which it is difficult to speak about offences openly. In such situations, offended parties are likely to seek relief and redress through gossip. The community thus perceives social control to be an important function of gossip. Academics generally prefer precise definitions for phenomena which they analyse or discuss, and so confine the meaning of the term 'gossip' to exclude certain kinds of communication. Members of the community, however, use the term more loosely and so are able to combine varied kinds of conversation, which together form a process of communication within the community. This broader use of the term 'gossip' therefore includes also processes, such as social control, that may be excluded by narrower definitions of the term.*

**Key words:** gossip, Shona community, 'guhwa', 'sahwira'

## Introduction

Much anthropological information has close parallels with gossip: it comprises many conversations between members of an in-group about absent persons (Anian Ghosh 1996). Gossip confirms relationships and is an intrinsic part of the human self. There is, however, surprisingly little literature specifically on gossip, and what there is comes to diverse conclusions about its nature and functions.

Gluckman (1963) argued that gossip is about resolution of conflict and social control (see also Campbell 1964:312-5 and Tebbutt 1995). Others have challenged this view on the grounds that gossip does not always support formal community values (Epstein 1992); or that it primarily serves other functions, for instance, as constituting a micro-political weapon (Paine 1967), a mechanism for inclusion and exclusion (Epstein 1992), for spreading information (Rajatsubhra 1989), or for entertainment and for satisfying curiosity (White 2000:76f.; Zinovieff 1987:11; Gambetta 1994). A strong argument against the function of social control appears in Bergmann's analysis of gossip in terms of interplay between public and private information: he argues that gossip cannot control behaviour since the persons concerned are excluded from gossip (1993:140-144).

The problem with Bergmann's approach is that it focuses on a definition that is independent of the contexts in which gossip takes place, and often couched in a language foreign to these contexts. Such an approach based on a narrow definition of the term misses the particular and varied contexts of gossip, which influence its effects. Merry (1984), for example, shows that different types of community support different functions of gossip. In a tightly-knit and inter-dependent ethnic Chinese community in urban America, gossip was feared and supported a system of values and control. In a more diverse and fluid Black population, gossip provided information about the community, including who was dangerous and to be avoided, but had little significance for control.

Our study<sup>1</sup> looks at gossip in a rural Shona community, covering four villages in Sengezi, about 140km east of Harare. It focuses on what people in the community said about gossip. While they recognised a variety of other functions, these people saw gossip as a means of social control. To understand this perspective, we need to redefine gossip as members of the community perceived it across a range of specific situations. In explaining how gossip controls behaviour, our respondents brought together a variety of kinds of communication, obscuring the division of gossip into academically defined types.

## Methodology

Data on gossip is notoriously difficult to gather (see Bergmann 1993:37; Merry 1984:273). Gossip is essentially private and often intended to be secret. To understand how it works, one needs to place it carefully in its social context. On the other hand, for researchers to intrude on the social context would intrude on privacy. We shall, moreover, be discussing social ambivalence towards gossip, which often makes people unwilling to speak about particular instances of what they say or hear or to specify to and from whom the gossip is passed. One technique is to provoke gossip and create situations in which gossip takes place, but this removes gossip from its normal situation of relative privacy, and consequently modifies its functions.

Both authors were involved in the design of the research and in analysing the data, but the data were collected by one of the authors, Michael Shambare. He spent about a month in the four villages in Sengezi, about 140km east of Harare, Zimbabwe. He was already well known in the villages, having been involved in collecting research data there for several years. His position in the community meant that it was not appropriate to ask people about specific incidents or persons: this would have been seen as unjustified intrusion into personal matters. Nevertheless, his familiarity with the commu-

1. An early version of this article appears as our report to Centre for the Study of African Economies, Oxford, 25 March, 2002. We are grateful to the Centre for support for the research and particularly to Abigail Barr for her support and useful comments on early drafts of the report. We are also grateful to Elisabeth Lickindorf for help in presenting our argument.



nity meant that people were willing to talk about gossip, often mentioning specific incidents in passing.

Apart from general observation in places where people gather, such as local stores, he conducted 59 in-depth interviews. For this, he selected households where he was known, and spoke to the adults present. In 14 cases the respondent was the male head of the household on his own, in 29 cases the respondents were women (in two of these more than one woman), and in 16 cases the respondents were husband and wife together. On most issues, he observed no difference between male and female perceptions of gossip, although there were two exceptions: women were more likely than men to attribute gossip to women (which we cannot explain); and women – particularly widows – were more likely to talk about the consequences of gossip (which we do explain).

### Perceptions of gossip

The English term 'gossip' refers to informal, private communication between a person and a selected audience, normally about absent persons. Gossip thrives when facts are uncertain or hard to come by, as when dealing with the private lives of individuals. The knowledge is not in the public domain – when everyone knows, we are talking about scandal rather than gossip (Merry 1984:275). Bergmann (1993:50) argues that gossip assumes that the subject will not be informed about what is being said: for Bergmann, gossip involves blurring boundaries between public and private domains, and revealing discretely to a selected audience what ideally should be private. On the other hand, Rajatsubhra (1989), focusing on places where gossip takes place in an Indian village, points out that gossiping is a principal way in which villagers pass their leisure, and that idle chat at the centres of gossip ranges from curiosity items about people in the village to serious information and politics. While academics find it useful to define terms more precisely than common usage, strict definitions by outside academics do not reflect the way people slip from one topic to another in such contexts as those described by Rajatsubhra (1989).

The Shona have a term, *guhwa*, which corresponds closely to 'gossip', and in this article we use 'gossip' as a translation of 'guhwa', as do the communities that have been studied. For talk to be classified as gossip, we were told, it must satisfy at least one of two criteria: gossip is not true, or the topic of gossip is not the concern of the speaker.

Many of the respondents commented on gossip falsifying or exaggerating what happened. One old lady equated gossip with lies. Others distinguished between untrue gossip, which is harmful, and true gossip, which can be useful.

As some respondents pointed out, it is not easy to tell if stories are true. If people hear the same thing often enough, they believe it to be true even when it is false. Other analysts have pointed out that, for gossip or rumour to function, it has to be plausible rather than true (Bergmann 1993:70). The power of gossip, as of much communication, depends on how people receive and interpret it, rather than on its strict truth<sup>1</sup>. From the point of view of the receivers, the value of the information depends on how well it serves their interests, whether these are harmony in the community, ammunition

against a protagonist, or simply entertainment. The better it serves interests, the more rapidly will the information spread. Plausibility can change with changing context, so that what is at first accepted as true is later dismissed as malicious gossip.

In Shona culture, showing due interest is as important as strict truth for the validity of communication. Much sociological work depends on the assumption that it is acceptable to refuse to answer but it is wrong to lie. Shona etiquette is different: if a stranger asks about something that is not his business, it would be impolite to refuse to answer, but it would be perfectly acceptable to invent a fictitious answer.

This relationship between interest and truth leads to the second criterion for gossip. Communication counts as gossip if its subject matter does not concern the speaker and his audience. If a man complains to a friend about someone's cattle damaging his crops, this would not be gossip, since he is a concerned party. Were he to distort the facts of the case, however, and exaggerate them, this would be *guhwa*. Alternatively, when this friend passes the information on to a third party, it becomes gossip however accurate the facts may be.

The audience and the manner in which information is passed are relevant to conversation being classified as gossip. If the offended person were to complain about the incident publicly in a bar, this would be ambiguous: he is a concerned party, but the audience has no right to the knowledge. Even a headman can gossip: although he has a right to know most of what goes on in the community, he has no right to speak loosely about the personal affairs of others. One respondent argued that the suggestion box at the police station is a form of gossip, because complaints are made anonymously.

Even when conversations were true and were conducted by interested parties, our respondents tended to include them in the category of 'gossip' when there was a malicious element involved. To cause or provoke conflict in the community is worse than to tell a lie. A corollary is that gossip involves discrediting others. To praise others behind their backs would not be classified as gossip.

As in most cultures, our informants talked about gossip in negative terms, associating it with idleness and untruth. Gossip was said to provoke anger and disrupt the community. This is especially the case when gossip is based on falsehood, or on exaggerations, or when the motive for gossip is malice or self-interest. Indeed, ten respondents (seven of them women) said that gossip is destructive and can never be justified: five of these were widows who appeared to be managing their plots and their finances well, the kind of person who breaks a common stereotype of poor widows and who is consequently likely to arouse gossip. Twelve others criticised destructive elements in gossip while also commenting on its useful functions.

The way people used the term 'gossip' or 'guhwa' did not always comply exactly with the definitions we were given. In practice, people did not always clearly distinguish conversations between unconcerned persons from passing knowledge on to a concerned person with the expectation of seeing a result. The term *guhwa* covers a variety of conversations in which information is passed around the community. Some of these conversations may be serious, between concerned par-

1. See also Besnier 1994 on the irrelevance of truth in light-hearted gossip which resists normal hierarchies.



ties. Others may be frivolous and entertaining. The conglomeration of these conversations provides a means, or a process, by which certain kinds of information can cut through barriers to communication.

### The usefulness of gossip

In spite of the negative attitudes to gossip, known gossips are not shunned, which suggests tolerance of the activity. Gossip sometimes brings benefits. Over half our respondents, including most of the men, spoke about positive functions of gossip. The most common usage of gossip related to providing information that is not easily spoken in public, such as information about certain illnesses or sexual activities or theft.

Mr X decided to sell his small crop of tobacco through a relative, since the size of his crop did not warrant a separate selling order. When the first payment was made, the relative was honest and paid X his due, but when the relative received the later final bonus payment, he did not inform X. X revealed this to his maternal uncle but not to the village authorities. He did, however, inform other tobacco farmers to warn them about such selling arrangements.

In Shona custom, one is not supposed to take a relative to the village court. A man has a joking relationship with his maternal uncle, which allows close communication between them: an uncle can be told anything. Other tobacco farmers are not involved and do not have a right to know about the incident. Informing them would therefore constitute gossip – with a useful purpose.

In another story, information about a sexual offence reached the offender's father through gossip. When he heard about his son's affair, the father made sure that the young man was warned and the affair ended.

The next case shows the place of gossip in spreading useful information about people's suspicions.

A young woman had accused a young man of impregnating her and went to live with his family. There was some gossip about the issue. Women in the young man's family said that the child was sick because it was being called by the wrong totem [that is, his real father came from another clan]. Rumours of this suspicion came back to the girl's mother through gossip (relayed with the intention of hurting feelings) on a nearby farm where she worked as a casual labourer, and through the girl's elder sister. Confronted by her family with these rumours, the girl confessed that her original accusation had been false and returned to her family.

There were other comments on the usefulness of gossip. Gossip based on a true story was said to help stop potential fighting. People receive information from gossip, and this enables some issues to be resolved without open conflict. Gossip meant to warn or to save someone from danger was said to be good. Gossip can spread information about thieves in the community. Although it has been suggested that the role of gossip is to discuss events rather than to pass information (see White 2000:76f.; Merry 1984:276), our respondents did

not make a clear distinction between judgmental gossip and passing information.

We were given an example of how gossip can be used to convey constructive ideas.

A murderer managed to talk his way out of trouble in the courts. People talked about the incident. When several people were courageous enough to approach him privately, he came to a private settlement of compensation for the bereaved family.

People said that gossip can also be useful in changing people's behaviour, although it takes a long time to reach the person it is aimed at. Several respondents said that gossip can stop bad practices such as witchcraft (though the person concerned is likely to start again elsewhere).

### The contexts of gossip

When we asked what kinds of person gossip, we were given many characterisations. On the other hand, the majority view was that no specific group of people had mastery of gossip. Anyone above the age of three was said to be capable of gossiping. Fearless people and even those in positions of authority were prone to gossiping. The victim of an act of injustice, the ignorant who speak on potentially explosive issues, and children who do not know the implications of what they say, all engage in gossip. Jealous and lazy people engage in idle gossip. Poor people were thought to be idle and prone to gossip. Carefree people, who make no demands on others and show no concern for the effects of their statements, earn the reputation of gossips. Gossiping is said to run in families. A regular gossip acquires the ability to poke fun at others. On the other hand, hard-working people were said to have no time to gossip. Some people gossip out of habit.

In many societies, while it is acknowledged that everyone can gossip, gossip is particularly associated with women. Nine respondents (eight of them women) said that it was particularly women who gossip. In Shona society generally, while men are associated with formal authority, women are often associated with mystical power, such as witchcraft, which is practised in secret (see Bourdillon 1987:51-57). Gossip fits readily into this conception of women.

Five respondents mentioned children in particular as gossips, partly because children are considered to have little right to know. School children were said to spread inaccurate stories about teachers. Young children also misrepresent issues that they hear their parents discussing. Young children are not aware of the potential danger of telling stories, and simply report what they have heard as factual information (and for this reason, two people suggested that talk by children is not gossip). In doing this, children were not aware of the danger that could result from their outbursts. We received a number of accounts of gossip reaching its subject through the actions of school children, who report at home with little inhibition whatever they hear at school. On the other hand, there was a suggestion that adults could deliberately use children to spread gossip.

One widow told us that her goat was once beaten by a neighbour, who was also her *sahwira* [ritual friend – see below]. A witness to the incident told others about it, but the lady concerned was not



told. Eventually her child at school heard about the incident from other children, and reported to her mother.

People are likely to gossip wherever and whenever they gather. Apart from homestead conversations between women, a number of situations were suggested as particularly susceptible to gossip, including places where beer is consumed and boreholes where people collect water. While waiting at a water point, people are drawn into gossip and compelled to take part. Some respondents pointed out that gossip is particularly likely when the weather is cold or raining – when people gather around a fire and easily start talking about other people. A polygamous environment was said to be a source of gossip since the jealousy inherent in such arrangements prompts conflicts. Gossip is the only redress women have when their husbands give their attention to other wives.

People pass on gossip to those they know and with whom they have friendly relations. An outsider passing through the community will not normally hear rumours circulating about members of the community. When the purpose of gossip is to spread a story, people who are taciturn and do not pass on information are less likely to be informed.

Although people in authority can themselves engage in gossip, the general perception was that they hear of things last. To tell someone in authority formally about a conflict is likely to produce a situation of open confrontation. Besides, people do not readily tell the police about incidents for fear of being called as witnesses. Also people who are feared, particularly those with reputations for magic, are not readily told of stories going around the village. We were told that if someone has died and there are rumours about who caused the death, these are not readily passed on to relatives of the dead person, for fear of creating conflict in the village.

Most people in Shona communities have ritual friends, known as *sahwira* (see Bourdillon 1987:61f.). There is a joking relationship between *sahwira*: the *sahwira* is allowed to speak to his friend about anything without reproach and is an important person in conflict resolution. Similarly, a sister's son has licence to raise issues, being a close member of the family but not of the same lineage (see Bourdillon 1987:33-36). We were told that people would not normally pass on gossip to the subject's *sahwira* or sister's son, because that is equivalent to speaking directly to the person concerned (although, as we shall see, at some stage such people may deliberately be informed).

Respondents cited a variety of motives and reasons for gossip. The wish to have fun and to mock others was cited as reasons some people use to pass reports from one person to another. There is a paucity of entertainment in rural areas, and plenty of time available for talking about other people. Related to this is simple curiosity. People like to know what is going on and to discuss this with friends. Those bent on making news sometimes pick up an issue and adorn the facts. People are particularly curious when someone acts in a very unusual way, and such acts are liable to be embellished as the gossip spreads.

People pass on information in order to impress others with their knowledge, and to present a good image of themselves: one man commented that, in doing so, they do not

realise that they are behaving badly by gossiping. Any happening can become the subject of gossip: people readily talk about such things as acquisition of new property, educational attainments or a visit by unfamiliar persons which warranted some gossip.

Some people were said to be full of the urge to hurt and do malicious injury to others, which drove them to talk about all sorts of issues that did and did not concern them. This spiteful urge is evident where disparity in wealth is present, making some people jealous of others. Also when someone rapidly acquires wealth, or loses it, people are liable to gossip. If individuals have been refused a request for help, such as the loan of a plough, they might start to gossip about the person who refused them.

Two friends gave each other love potions to use on their husbands. Later one of the friends wanted to borrow money from the other and was refused. So she informed a friend of the other woman's husband about the love potion. The story reached the husband, who beat his wife and sent her away.

We were told that if a person hears about the misdemeanours of someone with whom he has been in conflict, he passes the story on to as many people as possible. Also, telling someone, particularly a violent and aggressive person, about an incident might be an indirect way to injure the subject of gossip. Gossip about the misdemeanours of others might be used to divert attention from misdemeanours of the speaker.

One suggestion was that some people take it upon themselves to continue spreading a rumour because they feel pained by the action of a wrong-doer. They tell the story to ease their conscience or to avoid being blamed for saying nothing when the incident becomes public. The offended person is happy when people take their side on an issue and talk about it widely. This relates to the reasons for initiating a story, which is often related to conflict in the community. Before we discuss this aspect of gossip, we need to understand the reasons why people refrain from complaining openly when they are offended.

### Why not speak openly?

The usefulness of gossip is that it can break through barriers to communication. In particular, confrontation is often avoided. We received varied answers to the question of why people do not confront offences openly.

Most of the discussion was based on pragmatic considerations of good neighbourliness. In small farming communities, people are committed to living together and supporting each other in the long term. Most members of the community are interdependent socially, politically and economically, and costs of exclusion from the community would be high. In such communities, we expect the impact of gossip to be significant (see Merry 1984:296), and we expect people to avoid confrontation.

A child suffered from toothache. The mother shouted openly that a particular identified woman was the cause (implying witchcraft). Many people, including the accused, heard this statement. The accused woman did not want to engage in open confrontation by asking why she was being



accused. Instead, she approached the sister of her accuser, who in turn approached the lady concerned. The accuser did not apologise, but she showed contrition by greeting and talking to the person she had accused.

Minor offences do not warrant open confrontation. For example, chickens frequently venture into fields and gardens and damage crops, but chickens are hard to control and such damage is minor and common. Chickens are considered to have little value, and not to be worth disrupting community relations. Perhaps the issue here is that chickens are normally the domain of women, and women do not have as ready and easy access to formal systems of settlement as do men.

Even when the offence is serious, such as damage to crops by someone else's cattle, there is always the possibility that one's own cattle might do something similar, and this is reason for restraint. If you forgive somebody, the chances are that you will not be confronted in the event of committing a similar misdemeanour.

Several people mentioned a traditional saying that the first and second offences deserve to be ignored or condoned, with only the third offence warranting confrontation. Some people fail to face an offending person simply because they dislike argument. Several respondents mentioned the fear of being hated and disliked, a possible result of confrontation even when one is in the right. Some offenders are known not to be concerned with attempts to chastise them, and consequently those who feel like confronting them get discouraged.

Another reason for ignoring an offence occurs when one does not have clear evidence that will stand up to public scrutiny. This is particularly the case with clandestine sexual offences. It was a common belief among our respondents that these can endanger life if reported, but only one person could cite a case – from long ago – in which a sexual offence had resulted in murder. Because of the common belief, witnesses were very reluctant to bring sexual offences out into the open. Also, there was always the lurking danger that a wish on the part of the offended person or a witness to publicise an act of misconduct could have the evidence turned against them.

In one incident in Mungo village, a man tracked his sister-in-law to the forest in order to catch her red-handed in an act of adultery. The lover managed to escape. However, the woman confronted by her husband's brother invited him to have sex with her threatening that otherwise she would raise a case of attempted rape. The brother-in-law had to oblige. In the meantime the lover who had run away came back to check on what had happened to his woman friend only to find her being intimate with her husband's brother.

In cases where evidence is very clear, people may refrain from speaking out for fear of the consequences. If loss of wealth is a strong possibility, people prefer not to confront the wrong-doer. This applies when a woman knows that her

husband is having an affair: she is afraid to confront the offending woman lest the matter be brought to court with a resultant award of damages that could take away all their life earnings. Similarly, when someone stands to gain from an act of injustice the logic is to keep quiet. People may also refrain from exposing someone when they fear the case will turn into a murderous feud.

Fear of harassment by officials may also influence people to keep silent. Methods of restitution that appear to be hopeless discourage individuals from making reports to relevant authorities. People mentioned that there is not much point in reporting rape cases to the police, or under-age pregnancies (statutory rape)<sup>1</sup>. They said that if you do report such a case, the police harass you with never-ending questioning. When finally convicted, the culprit ends up serving the state and not the parents of the victim, and would not be in a position to pay compensation after a term in jail. Relatives of a rape victim sometimes sympathise with a culprit who is a blood relation. A jail term could destroy the culprit's family. (Nevertheless, occasionally an offended person, such as the mother of a rape victim, may go against the wishes of the family and take up the matter with higher authorities.)

Confrontation may be avoided where full compensation would be disastrous for the offender. For example, replacement of a destroyed crop would require great expense in fertiliser and seed, beyond the means of the person responsible.

Thirteen people mentioned fear as the reason for not confronting someone openly. Six of these explicitly mentioned fear of magic and witchcraft. Others mentioned fear of violence and reprisals, a fear of losing their wealth, a fear of hatred, a fear of being blamed when innocent, or a fear generally of the future and of death (which could be seen as implying witchcraft). The power of magic is widely accepted in communities such as those in this study, where it is often assumed that people who are arrogant and fearless rely on magical powers to defend themselves. Whether or not people are afraid of physical violence or of witchcraft, gossip has the advantage over open confrontation in that its sources are anonymous, and any individual can deny responsibility for the story. Two stories illustrate fear of open confrontation when witchcraft is suspected.

When a man died, relatives formally informed members of their own family, but not members of the widow's family, indicating suspicions of witchcraft. Communication between the two families only took place through non-agnates, who could pass on information about the suspicions. No overt action was taken by either family, but we were told that gossip brought awareness and hatred.

In another case, a man took a neighbour's bull to his own cattle pen without permission. The bull died during the night, and the owner kept quiet. Villagers talked about the issue privately and said the owner did not want to confront his neighbour for fear that he (the owner) would be bewitched.

1. Rasmussen (1991) points out that Taureg women do not bring complaints to formal courts where they are unlikely to receive a sympathetic hearing, but can break a man's reputation through song and poetry, which, like gossip, enables feelings to be expressed without burning bridges.



There is another way in which people perceive magic as hindering the open discussion of offences. If a person were to try to enhance his business operations through such magical means as child rape, the mother might be inhibited from reporting this wayward behaviour of a husband or relative.

At times, open confrontation is avoided in order to conceal shameful acts perpetrated by members of the immediate family. Conflicts between a husband and wife, or between close family members, should be dealt with privately in a family setting. Family members may, however, then gossip about what may have transpired. If someone were treating a child badly, family members would not like to bring shame on the family by bringing the matter into the open, but they try to shame the offender through gossip.

People may refrain from confrontation out of a sense of good neighbourliness. A rapist or a thief, for instance, may have understanding and co-operative parents who have the good will of the community. The offender might be treated leniently out of respect for the parents. People refrain from open confrontation in order to avoid shaming relatives or friends.

Victims of injustice may be so overwhelmed by the offence that they feel helpless and insecure. They do not see confrontation with the culprit as worthwhile. In some instances, the victims do not confront a culprit in order not to bring blame upon themselves. There are instances where the victim of crop destruction blamed himself for not looking after his crops well. Some victims, even of deliberate acts of injustice, adopt an attitude of non-confrontation. They feel the best way to deal with deliberate provocation is to keep quiet. They take such acts to be evidence of trying times.

One reason for not confronting a person openly is the hope that the offender will apologise of his own accord and offer appropriate compensation. Certainly, a person who is known to be ready to apologise is less likely to receive a hostile confrontation. Where such an apology was not forthcoming, the offender was just considered an uncooperative person who would meet his equal one day. The situation was considered hopeless and irreconcilable.

Open confrontation is nevertheless unavoidable when someone harbours sinister intentions. If you know someone is planning physical violence against a member of the community, the matter has to be brought out into the open. When the evidence is clear and culprits are caught red-handed, the matter is usually brought to the courts: one example is the destruction of crops by cattle. Similarly, adultery by men who are not related to the guardians of the woman is normally settled in open court (although such cases may also occasionally be settled privately). We were told that serious offences such as murder and rape are normally brought before the courts.

A person in authority generally has a right to confront a subordinate, and an elder has a right to shame a younger person. In such situations of inequality, the subordinate may have recourse to gossip in response to an offence, but gossip would be inappropriate for the superior.

### Covert redress

When people refrain from open confrontation, gossip can be a means of obtaining redress. In a set of 61 stories about conflicts over property, the talk of villagers was frequently men-

tioned, although it was rare that gossip provided a principal contribution to their resolution.

There was a funeral in the village. As a relative, I contributed some money for transport from the mortuary to this village. At the funeral ceremony, we couldn't get a cow to slaughter for the people to eat. My husband and I offered a cow on the understanding that the bereaved would replace it. It took two years of arguing and negotiating to get the payment for the cow. I went about seeking advice on what to do about the matter from other villagers. Now because of the rumour that was going around, the bereaved ended up buying a cow to compensate me. The villagers labelled this bereaved person as a bad person and advised that he should replace the cow. The bereaved person finally decided to do so because villagers used to ask him why he was behaving in such a bad way. The villagers used to talk to this bereaved person directly

If people are against confrontation, why do they speak about their offences to anyone? Respondents pointed out that pent up anger suppressed for days would find its way out through confiding in someone. Talk about an incident often starts with the offended person talking to neighbours and friends to get advice on how to deal with the issue: nearly half the respondents suggested that people gossip to obtain advice. This quest for advice was made in confidence in most cases, and sometimes associated with a search for material help. Alternatively, a person close to the offended party might wish to report an incident, simply to inform. This person may then discuss the matter with other friends, and soon the story becomes common gossip. Sometimes this may be a deliberate strategy to obtain redress: it was suggested that speaking to a neighbour about the incident is a way of ensuring that the offending party gets to hear of it eventually. Several people commented that gossip can be used to chastise someone. On other occasions, it may be against the wishes of the offended party. For example, a rape victim may confide in a *sahwira* (a ritual friend), who then spreads the story.

At some stage, the story gets back to the offender. People suggested several ways in which this can happen. In the early, confidential stages, people close to the subject of the gossip are avoided. When the matter becomes public knowledge, people close to the subject might be deliberately targeted. In one case, someone posted a notice on a tree stating that a certain young man had impregnated a girl: this way there was no personal confrontation, but the story was made public. People likened this notice to gossip: like messages in the police suggestion box, it was anonymous.

The following story shows how gossip can support a formal caution.

A woman lost a cow while taking the cattle for dipping, and her husband beat her. The woman complained to her husband's relatives, who cautioned him. The woman's parents were not formally told of the incident. Neighbours knew of the incident because of the noise and they talked about it. They blamed the man, saying that this was no justification for beating his wife. The man heard the



issue being discussed at a bar. Although he did not apologise, he regretted his action and is now acting responsibly.

Sometimes, an offended party might use gossip to accumulate evidence against the offender. Once enough incidents have been widely reported to convince the community that the offender is a bad person, the offended party is ready for open confrontation, confident that he will have support. The risk of becoming unpopular through open confrontation is diminished.

More frequently, the information comes to the subject through a friendly source. When gossip about a particular incident has been widely circulated, a relative or *sahwira*, or possibly someone else, will eventually inform the subject of the gossip. A close relative, *sahwira* or sister's son can, according to local values, approach the subject without fear of reprisal. A *sahwira* does not like to hear his friend blamed, so passes on the information. An outsider might receive a hostile response to such interference, although a respected elder may be able to raise the issue, or perhaps a friend can pass on the information in a way that suggests they are doing the subject a favour.

On being informed about the gossip, the subject sometimes admits guilt, in which case he can approach the offended party to settle the matter and make restitution. Alternatively, the subject may react in anger and deny any knowledge of the supposed misdemeanour. He can take advantage of the fact that the information does not come from the offended person to suggest that the information is unreliable. The offender may consider that people are afraid to confront him openly, and so he can continue to commit offences without fear.

We were told of a man who stole a cow. When he heard the village gossip about the incident, he started to tell anyone who would listen, 'People say I stole a cow.' He did this to defend himself and suggest that the gossip was unreliable.

## Discussion

Although gossip is largely associated negatively with idle chatter, many people in our study pointed out that gossip can be useful. While people may spread gossip out of malice, or for sheer entertainment, gossip can be useful in spreading important information about things that cannot easily be brought into the open. Gossip criticises behaviour that is regarded as unacceptable within the community, and to this extent gossip helps to maintain the values of the community. This perception supports analyses that point to the role of gossip in supporting community relations by maintaining channels of communication about community affairs (see Merry 1984:290-92; Tebutt 1995:181; Rasmussen 1991). Whereas some respondents commented on persons using gossip as a strategy to impress others, this seemed peripheral to common motives for gossip.

Gossip was seen as having a role in social control, although in practice it may not be widely effective. We were given stereotypical accounts that serious offences go before formal courts while trivial matters are treated through gossip. We were also told about incidents in which serious matters were kept out of the formal justice system and dealt with

through gossip. The informal and formal systems of control complement each other, but the division between them is blurred. There are many reasons why some serious offences do not come before formal administrative systems of justice, and gossip can have a role even in cases of murder.

When someone decides against open confrontation over an offence, they are likely to discuss the matter with a friend for advice, and news of the incident spreads as gossip. In some cases, this gossip is deliberate action. Although the subject of gossip is not supposed to be party to it, people assume that the subject will eventually hear the story, and gossips may on occasion target individuals who are likely to pass the matter on. Respondents generally argued that gossip is a means of chastising a person for bad behaviour and bringing about change.

The advantage of gossip over open confrontation is that an individual does not have to take responsibility for what has been said. People can put the blame on someone else. Campbell (1964:315) pointed out that, among nomadic shepherds he studied, there was no defence and no possibility of revenge against gossip, since accusations did not come from a single known source but from the community as a whole. In a similar vein, our informants likened anonymous suggestions and a notice on a tree to gossip.

Bergmann's argument (1993:142) that the subject cannot be directly affected by gossip arises from too rigid a definition of gossip. His analysis isolates a type of communication that is clearly defined, and from which the subject is excluded. Our respondents talked more widely about processes of communication, which incorporated varying degrees of seriousness and truth. For them, gossip works as a means of control on the assumption that, at some stage in the process, the story will reach the subject.

Bergmann is correct, however, in observing that people do not necessarily allow gossip to dictate their behaviour. He argues that gossip could only function as means of social control when people believe in it and guide their actions by it (1963:144). We have seen cases in which people resisted the gossip around them, as well as cases in which people adapted their behaviour in response to criticisms that came to them through gossip. As Merry has observed (1984:296), gossip is not uniformly effective and is more likely to control behaviour in situations where people are dependent on the community and there is a degree of common value that make shaming possible.

Where people do depend on neighbours for support, it can be very costly to create divisions in the community openly, and equally costly to ignore what people say. As far as our respondents are concerned, gossip serves many functions, including the important one of enabling people to avoid confrontation while making their complaints known to the community in general and the offending party in particular. Sometimes people correct their behaviour as a result of what they are told, or because they fear what might be said about them.

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