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Managing Confrontations: Lessons from Abroad

Deborah Tannen

It is almost an article of faith for many Americans that disputes should be settled by the disputing parties without outside interference. Parents often send their children back to the playroom or playground with instructions to settle fights for themselves. Relatives and friends can be heard to say, "It's between the two of you. I'm not getting in the middle." The Western view of intermediaries is reflected in the fate of Mercutio in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: When he tries to break up a sword fight between his friend Romeo and Romeo's enemy Tybalt, Mercutio is accidentally speared and killed, living just long enough to utter the now-famous curse, "A plague on both your houses!" Even psychologists tend to regard it as a sign of maturity when someone settles disputes without third parties, whose intervention may be regarded as unhealthy and inappropriate enmeshment.

Yet many people of the world expect conflicts to be resolved by intermediaries. This reflects an emphasis on harmony and interdependence: the tendency to see individuals as located inextricably in a social network, in contrast to Americans' tendency to glorify independence and see the individual as the fundamental human unit. To manage disputes ranging from private family matters to public conflicts between villages, cultures develop both habitual ethics and formal proceedings, just as we have assumptions about how to fight fair as well as legal trials. Some cultures have ways of settling private disputes that involve the participation of others; these can be formally ritualized events or informal ways of involving the community in settling disputes. We cannot simply adopt the rituals of another culture, but thinking about them can give us pause and perhaps even ideas for devising our own new ways to manage conflict.

The Calming Power of Intermediaries

Takie Sugiyama Lebra explains the many benefits that the Japanese see in using intermediaries to settle disputes. For one thing, intermediaries provide a motivation to settle the conflict: to save face for them. A go-between can also offer the needed apology without the principal losing face and can absorb rejections without taking them personally. This benefit is particularly clear in the use of matchmakers or marriage brokers, a practice common in many cultures of the world: it avoids the risk of a potential bride (or her family) rejecting a suitor to his face. Finally, intermediaries can put pressure on someone to act properly without risking the direct conflict that can ensue when people make demands for their own benefit, as when neighbors pressure a son or daughter-in-law to stop neglecting a parent or parent-in-law. In other words, community pressure takes the place of a humiliating one-on-one confrontation: "You never call me!"

Using third parties to settle disputes is not limited to Asian societies. Many cultures of the Pacific also make habitual use of this practice, often in the form of rituals in the sense that they are formalized enough to have names and standard structures or rules. As in Asian culture, they typically draw on hierarchical relations to maintain harmony.

In native Hawaiian culture, for example, there is a word, *ho'oponopono* (to set things right), for a ceremony in which family members invite an elder or other high-ranking mediator to oversee the resolution of a dispute. As described by Stephen Boggs and Malcolm Naea Chun, the leader invites disputants to air their feelings and encourages them to apologize and forgive each other. The leader calls on a higher power—God and Church—to offer forgiveness, too. Hierarchical social relations play a major role, as they do in another ritual, *ho'opapa*, a verbal contest of wits and insults that can be played either for fun or in earnest combat, to establish superiority between rivals. But in the case of the dispute resolution ritual, there is no competition for superiority among the disputants, who are equal in their subordination to the elder who brokers the truce.

Karen Watson-Gegeo and David Gegeo describe a similar ritual among the Kwara'ae of the Solomon Islands. *Fa'amanata'anga* is held at home, in private, within a family, often after a meal. Here, too,

hierarchical social relations are key. The ritual is presided over by a senior family member, who brings the weight of his standing to the peace-making mission and also emphasizes both his own stature and the seriousness of the event by speaking in a formal, high rhetoric to exhort the disputants to end their conflict.

One of the most intriguing accounts of how disputes are settled in this part of the world, described by Lamont Lindstrom, is found on the island of Tanna in the South Pacific. Conflicts among villagers or between villages are discussed publicly by groups of adult men at special meetings that last all day. These meetings differ strikingly from our idea of conflict resolution in that they are not designed to reconcile the individual accounts of disputing parties and elicit the truth of what happened. Instead, all the people present, disputants as well as others, come to a public agreement about what happened and how the conflict should be settled. They speak of these events not as competitions or warfare among opposing interests but as voyages through space in which they all take part—joint voyages in which all travelers reach the same destination. They perceive the conclusion not as a balancing of competing individual interests or even a compromise but of a consensus flowing from the interaction of all. Here, too, hierarchy plays a role, as the ones who begin to articulate the sense of the group tend to be those with greater social standing. These meetings do not always settle disputes once and for all, but the very participation of the disputants overcomes a degree of antagonism and displays a willingness to come to some meeting of minds.

A Fijian Indian community offers yet another contrast. According to Donald Brenneis, it is not common in this culture for outsiders to get involved in settling disputes. But there are times when disputes arise among men that others feel are serious enough to require intervention. A committee is formed that interviews disputants and witnesses beforehand, in order to compare accounts and to formulate questions to ask at the formal proceeding, called a *panacayat*. Like *nemawashi*, the Japanese custom of consulting individuals in private prior to a meeting, this seems a much better way of gathering information than forcing people to speak in a high-pressure public event. Typically, one party is not blamed; instead it is shown that both parties are guilty of minor errors and no one is seriously at fault. A common comment on

the process is "There were two wrongs and now it is right," an interesting variation on our "Two wrongs don't make a right."

All these examples show that the intervention of others can be effective in settling disputes, especially when the intervention is part of culturally ritualized proceedings.

Cockfighting in Bali

Just as rituals for settling disputes are invaluable cultural resources, so the benefits of ritual fighting—as compared to the real thing—stand out in relief when viewed against the backdrop of an unfamiliar culture. Seeing the elaboration of these rituals in different forms helps us understand the role that ritual oppositions can play: not only to reinforce, display, achieve, and challenge status, but also to reinforce social bonds and alliances and as a safety valve for the expression of opposition.

The island of Bali is now part of Indonesia, and the Indonesian government (like the Dutch colonists before it) has outlawed cockfighting because it regards it as unbecoming and embarrassing. But Clifford Geertz and his anthropologist wife, Hildred, were not long in the Balinese village they had chosen to study before they found themselves in the midst of a large cockfight organized by the village chief in the public square—an event that was summarily broken up by a surprise police raid. After extensive fieldwork in the village, Geertz learned that participating in cockfights is inextricably interwoven with the Balinese social fabric.

Men (this is one of the few areas of Balinese culture that is limited to men) raise cocks, which they lovingly tend and periodically pit against others' cocks in the public arena of the cockfight. (The Balinese word for "cock" has the same double meaning that the English word has.) At the cockfight, people bet in complicated and formally structured ways. But the betting is not simply a matter of trying to pick the winner for financial gain, as it is for Americans gambling at a race track. On Bali, betting on cocks is a way of reinforcing or challenging status hierarchies and kinship alliances in the village. (Once again, what in the United States is a matter of individual choice and consequence, in other cultures is inseparable from a complex social network.)

People are expected to bet on the cocks of their kin against the cocks of their enemies. But if a cockfight is held in a different village, everyone is expected to bet on the cock from his own village—and this is one way that solidarity can be created among former enemies. If feuding families patch up their differences, betting on each other's cocks is a way of formally demonstrating their rapprochement. And refusal to take part in this enterprise is not the mark of a prudent and refined citizen. Far from it; it is taken as a show of arrogance, evidence that a man thinks himself too good for the likes of his covillagers. In other words, betting on a cock is a requisite public display of support for and alliance with the man whose cock you bet on.

The Balinese cockfight does not reflect a highly agonistic society but just the opposite. Balinese obsessively avoid confrontational behavior in their everyday lives. And the cockfight is kept to highly cooperative rules. Geertz notes that he never heard anyone question the umpire's decision, either during a cockfight or after, although men certainly talked a lot about other aspects of the fights after they were over. How strikingly this contrasts with American sports events, at which players and spectators loudly deride the umpires, and commentators and conversationalists rehash their anger at what they saw as the wrong calls long after the event.

"Hold Me Coatl": Ritual Fighting in Ireland

Fights do not have to involve animals to be ritual. Fights between humans can also be ritual—not only in a boxing or wrestling ring but on the streets of a neighborhood or on the small, isolated Gaelic-speaking island of Tory in Ireland, as described by Robin Fox. Whereas the Balinese allow cocks to fight in their place, the Tory islanders fight each other—but their fights are no less ritualized. Living on Tory Island, Fox observed that fights among men were frequent, yet it was rare for anyone to get hurt. Although they seemed at first to break out at random, Fox figured out that the fights erupted when certain circumstances prevailed and that they followed certain rules—not rules in the sense that the players could recount them but rules in the sense that an anthropologist could discern them. And on Tory Island, as on the island of Bali, the fights were a way of displaying and negotiating kinship alliances and feuds.

Fights broke out only when there was a critical mass of onlookers, some of whom were kin of each individual involved in the fight and some of whom were kin to both (not difficult, I surmise, on an island of three hundred inhabitants.) Under these circumstances, one man could loudly curse and threaten another, who could loudly curse and threaten back, and both could rely on their kin to restrain them, preventing them from hurting each other.

Everything about the fight was structured so that the two men could seem eager to exchange blows without ever landing one. This paradox is embodied in a gesture that Fox describes: a man who threatens to hit another makes a display of taking off his coat, as he announces to his supporters, "Hold me coat!" On the surface, this is a prelude to physical assault. But in reality, a man would get only as far as pulling his jacket off his back and down his arms, stopping at a point where his half-removed jacket effectively pinned his arms behind him. At that moment, the very gesture that symbolically announced his intention to fight immobilized his arms. His supporters would take it from there, struggling with him to push his jacket back on as they admonished him to keep his cool.

The fights would end when the mother of one combatant (or another female relative if a mother could not be found) was brought into the fray, and the audience parted to make room for her. She would implore the fighter to come home and stop fighting. This gave the man the pretext to end the fight on the grounds that he could not deny his mother, who, he could aver, had saved his opponent from certain damage. As one fighter put it, "I'd have had yer blood if me mother hadn't come. Ye can thank her that you're not in pieces on the road, ye scum."

Since blows were never actually exchanged, one might well question whether what happened was really a fight. But Tory Islanders do not doubt that that's what it was. Indeed, as one such incident ended, a man turned to Fox and said, "Well, and wasn't that the great fight, for sure?"

An outsider might ask, "If no one is ever hurt and blows are not actually exchanged, why bother?" Fox explains that, first, these fights were a form of entertainment, providing excitement for both participants and onlookers. Second, they became fodder for talk: towns-

people would discuss the details long after, and in the talking, the fight took on more violence and drama. Fights also provided a means for the participants to display their masculine prowess. The men who had taken part in a fight were regarded with increased respect for a time after, and they comported themselves with a bit more swagger and verbal aggression. Furthermore, they provided role models for boys. This comes clear in Fox's description of how the children behaved during these fights. Whereas "Most of the little girls stood some way off with their mothers, who had banded together to deplore the episode—quietly," the boys responded quite differently.

[A]ll around milled little boys imitating their elders, cursing, fluffing, swaggering, threatening. It was particularly fascinating to see how the children learned the whole sequence of behavior. Anything that the men did, they would imitate, shouting the same things, strutting and swaggering.

Reading this I recalled my own amusement, when I lived in Greece, at seeing little boys arguing with each other and adopting the same hand gestures, facial expressions, and ritualized imprecations that I had seen so often used by adult Greek men when they argued.

When the conditions for ritual fighting break down, an altercation can turn into the real thing, and people can be hurt. According to Fox, there were situations in which Tory Islanders became involved in literal fights and were badly hurt. This happened when they were in London bars, where the network of kin was not available to intervene.

Lessons for America?

Neither the use of intermediaries nor ritual fighting provides a prescription for curing the ills of America's "argument culture." They do show, though, that aggression, conflict, and opposition can be used creatively to accomplish a wide range of human goals, including building solidarity in relationships.

In some cases we do not have enough agonism—that is, not enough *ritual* means of displaying opposition, not enough routinized and culturally controlled ways to manage and contain inevitable conflict. In fact, the dangers of our culture lie not in the open expression of opposition, but in an *overapplication* of agonism: using opposition as a required and ubiquitous way to approach issues, rather than

as one of many possible ways of getting things done by talk. The examples of other cultures suggest possibilities we might not otherwise consider—although we will have to cure the problems of our own body politic in ways that are consonant with our own cultural heritage. Glimpsing through the corners of our eyes how other cultures handle conflict and opposition, we can proceed with our eyes focused on that goal.

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Developing Civil Society: Can the Workplace Replace Bowling?

Alan Wolfe

Treatments of suburban life in the 1950s featured a sharp contrast between the world of work and the world of community. The former, populated by men, emphasized hierarchy, obedience, material rewards, and formal procedures, while the latter, dominated by women, was characterized by voluntarism, friendships, talk, leisure, and—at least in the account of feminist social critic Betty Friedan—great unhappiness. Now that the proverbial commuter railroad platform is crowded not only with men but with women, and now that the trains run earlier in the morning and later in the evening to accommodate the frenetic work schedules of a more competitive capitalism, the ties of trust and mutual dependence upon which communities rely have been as radically transformed as company loyalties and employer-employee relations.

In my recent book, *One Nation After All*, I report on interviews with 200 Americans around the country. The interviews dealt with moral matters that are at the heart of contemporary concerns. As they talked to us about their perceptions of their suburban communities, middle-class Americans painted portraits of their community ties that give strong support to the idea that America is depleting its "social capital." Here is a sprinkling of their comments:

"It's almost as if we set up our own islands. It's a street full of islands. And, you know, we would love to have a great relationship and great neighbors and that sort of thing, but it has just never evolved."