

# “EVERYTHING HAS COME UP TO THE OPEN SPACE”: TALKING ABOUT SEX IN AN EPIDEMIC

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on ethnographic research in the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea, this paper examines the language of HIV and AIDS awareness in relation to cultural context and lived experience. The “open space” metaphor describes the common ground where talk about sex is negotiated between different frameworks of meaning. I argue that effective communication about HIV prevention requires dialogical engagement with local understandings of gender, sexuality, and reproduction. The distinctiveness of the Trobriand context underscores the importance of engaging local voices to inform approaches to HIV communication.

**Keywords:** HIV/AIDS, HIV communication, Papua New Guinea, Trobriand Islands, gender, sexuality, reproduction.

## **Introduction: The Language of HIV and AIDS**

The global HIV pandemic has opened up talk about sex. Traditional barriers have been broken and new opportunities for discussion have been created. But how are we talking? What models of gender, sexuality, and reproduction are used to discuss HIV risks and behaviour change? How do people hear HIV and AIDS messages and relate them to their own lived experience? How do people make sense of the invasive yet invisible virus as it moves across cultural landscapes and becomes configured by words and images?

Based on findings from ethnographic fieldwork, this paper examines the language of HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention in relation to cultural meanings of gender, sexuality, and reproduction in the Trobriand Islands of Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG) (see map inset, overleaf).<sup>1</sup> The research was motivated by a concern to look more closely at the critical interface between women's reproductive choices and their risk for acquiring HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. I was particularly concerned with how the predominantly heterosexual HIV epidemic in PNG threatens women with a dilemma of choice between a cultural imperative that values women's childbearing role and the biomedical imperative for safe sex. My interest in the matrix of women's reproductive health and HIV gained impetus when I worked as coordinator for the development of PNG's national HIV/AIDS strategy in 1997.<sup>2</sup> My particular ethnographic engagement with the Trobriand Islands has long been shaped by my relatedness as wife, in-law, mother, and now grandmother. These connections provide me with an important grounding for pursuing scholarly research.

One of the leading theorists on the AIDS crisis, Paula Treichler, observes that AIDS is more than an epidemic disease; it is "an epidemic of meanings or signification" (1999:11). Social research has played an important role in exploring these meanings and demonstrating how the language of HIV and AIDS is laden with generalities and predominantly western assumptions about human sexuality, sexual dynamics, and gender power relations (Aggleton, Hart, and Davies 1989; Bolton and Singer 1992; Brummelhuis and Herdt 1995; Farmer 1997a; Feldman 1990; Feldman and Johnson 1986; Herdt and Lindenbaum 1992; Parker 2001; Schoepf 2001). The discourse is primarily derived from biomedicine, and gives little consideration to cultural specificity and local context apart from the 'cultural barriers,' or taboos and traditional beliefs that are viewed as impediments to the implementation of HIV/AIDS education programs and risk reduction (Airhihenbuwa and Obregon 2000:11; Gausset 2001:510). When made the focus of analysis and intervention, cultural practices are often viewed as exotic or immoral, and are devalued and discouraged (Farmer 1997b:424-25; Gausset 2001:511). While the discourse may argue that culture creates barriers, there is also talk about the 'breakdown' in culture as a major cause of social problems and a key determinant of contemporary patterns of risk behaviour. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of HIV prevention strategies in the developing world is the call for behaviour change in a context of continuous social flux and change.

Employing the language of disease prevention and control, HIV communication targets 'high-risk groups' and 'high-risk behaviours,' which are narrowly conceptualised categories that invoke subtexts of moral and social responsibility (Farmer 1997b:414; Kielmann 1997:403; Reid 1994:2). Prevention messages extol abstinence, partner reduction, mutual monogamy, condom use and avoidance of high-risk sexual practices (Gupta, Weiss, and Mane 1996:333). The predominant discourse

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork was carried out in December 2000 and January 2001, for my Master of Public Health (Tropical Health) thesis (Lepani 2001).

<sup>2</sup> The development of the Papua New Guinea National HIV/AIDS Medium Term Plan 1998-2002, was a ten-month consultative process that involved multi-sectoral participation of over eighty individuals and organisations comprising six working groups focused on priority areas for strategic planning.

favours individualistic models of behavioural change over cultural and structural models that situate sexual behaviours within social processes (Airhihenbuwa and Obregon 2000:9).<sup>3</sup> Individualist constructions of behaviour “ignore the connections between individuals, both the interpersonal and social relations in which they act, and the broader social structures which govern social practice” (Kippax and Crawford 1993:255). While there is increasing recognition of the importance of supportive environments to facilitate behaviour change (Parnell and Benton 1999), emphasis continues to be given to the notion of individual empowerment and the process of ‘negotiating safe sex’ to reduce risk (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Scott, Sharpe, Thomson 1992:144; Gupta et al. 1996:334). Furthermore, the discourse tends to overshadow the dilemma of choice that the virus presents to the vast majority of women regarding their reproductive roles, both biological and social, and their interrelated needs for fertility control and disease prevention.

## **The HIV/AIDS Situation in Papua New Guinea**

The concern about HIV communication becomes particularly urgent in the context of Papua New Guinea (PNG), where a huge diversity of languages and endogenous gender and sexual configurations interact with imported images, texts, and moralities to shape contemporary sexual culture. The sharp increase of HIV incidence in PNG over the past several years suggests that the country faces an epidemic of the same devastating proportions experienced in many countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. As of June 2001, the cumulative number of reported HIV cases since the first reported case in 1987 was 4075, with new cases notified in the first six months of 2001 representing a 15 per cent increase over the same period in the previous year (PNG National AIDS Council Secretariat [NACS] and Department of Health [DOH] 2001:3-4). The PNG National AIDS Council Secretariat estimates that the ratio of reported to unreported HIV cases could be as high as 1:4 (Centre for International Economics 2002:18).

Mode of transmission is reported in only 30 per cent of all reported cases, of which unprotected heterosexual intercourse accounts for 90 per cent of cases (PNG NACS and DOH 2001:3). Women of childbearing age (15 - 49 years) represent 47 per cent of all reported cases for which sex and age are known (PNG Central Public Health Laboratory 1999). Over 80 per cent of infected females are under 30 years of age, which mirrors the global pattern (Berer 1999:199). Since 1999, routine screening of antenatal patients at Port Moresby General Hospital has seen a sharp increase in HIV seroprevalence rates, which gives a strong indication of the extent of HIV infection in the general population (Malau and Crockett 2000:58). Parent to child transmission during pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding, increased from 2.8 per cent in 1996 to 9.1 per cent in 1999, of all reported cases where the mode of transmission is known (PNG Central Public Health Laboratory 1999).

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<sup>3</sup> The two main models applied to understanding and predicting sexual behaviour in relation to HIV risk are referred to as “social-cognitive” in the health psychology literature. They are known as the Health Belief Model and the Theory of Reasoned Action (Glanz and Rimer 1995).

Contributing to the escalating HIV epidemic in PNG is a situation of high prevalence of curable sexually transmitted infections (STI), estimated to be 10.6 per 1000 persons (Malau and Crockett 2000:58). Development factors such as increased population mobility, urban migration, limited opportunities for wage employment, and low levels of literacy influence the incidence of sexual practices that put people at risk for STI and HIV infection (National Sex and Reproduction Research Team [NSRRT] and Jenkins 1994; Jenkins 1997; Malau and Crockett 2000:58). These sexual practices include unprotected sex, multiple sexual partners, and transactional sex, or sex involving the exchange of cash or goods. Low levels of HIV/AIDS awareness and knowledge, and a high burden of infectious disease, including tuberculosis and malaria, are compounding the situation in PNG (PNG Ministry of Health 2000:21).

PNG's national multi-sectoral strategy for responding to the HIV epidemic calls for culturally appropriate approaches to providing information and resources for mitigating risk (GoPNG and UNAIDS 1998; Malau and Crockett 2000). The NACS, with support from the National HIV/AIDS Support Project (NHASP), has implemented a number of education and training activities to raise awareness about personal and group risk factors and to promote and enable behaviour change.<sup>4</sup> The phased national awareness campaign employs a range of popular media to convey information and key prevention messages, including pamphlets on the "basic facts" of HIV and AIDS, comic books, posters, newspapers, community awareness theatre, and radio and television. The key message of the campaign is derived from the "ABC" approach promoted by UNAIDS: "Protect Yourself from AIDS: Don't have sex, be faithful, or always use a condom."<sup>5</sup> The NACS has set a policy goal for 100 per cent condom use for people who are considered vulnerable to HIV transmission and infection (Dr. C. Malau, Director, PNG NACS, *pers. comm.*).

Lawrence Hammar observes that "the bulk of popular and health education materials in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere throughout the world still implies a simplicity of sexual risk that few if any ethnographic data bear out" (1998:52-53). While oversimplifying prevention measures, the messages carry a "heavy rhetorical burden," implying that all one needs to do to avoid infection is to avoid having sex with a prostitute, or not be a prostitute; "Follow God's Law"; and remain heterosexually monogamous (53). Hammar contends that the messages themselves are a "threat to public health" because they do not encourage people to consider personal risk in terms of culturally embedded relationships, instead obscuring the important social and economic ties through which transmission takes place (53).

I acknowledge that the content of HIV/AIDS awareness materials in PNG has improved somewhat since Hammar made this observation in the mid-1990s, notably in the way the National AIDS Council media campaigns have sought to personalise risk

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<sup>4</sup> Funded by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), NHASP commenced in October 2000. The project builds on the work of the previous AusAID-funded Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care Project, which finished in September of that year.

<sup>5</sup> The cornerstone of many HIV prevention programs throughout the world, the "ABC" slogan has been given various reiterations by different organisations but basically stands for "Abstain, Be faithful, use a Condom."

through narratives that situate personal stories within social relations. One such story tells of a woman who became infected by her husband, and she says, “I never thought AIDS would affect my family. I was always faithful to my husband, but he got the virus. It was only when I gave birth that I found out I had the AIDS virus...and now my baby has it too.” However, the seeming simplicity of prevention measures continues to resonate in the bottom line message, which states: “Don’t have sex, be faithful, or always use a condom.”<sup>6</sup>

## The Importance of Place

Armed with the dominant biomedical model that explains viral transmission and related risk factors; coupled by the equally persuasive approach to prevention based on behaviour change models; and compelled by the overwhelming urgency to take action in the face of impending devastation that the epidemic threatens, there is an understandable tendency to overlook the particulars of place and rely on broad generalisations to inform HIV intervention programs. But in the process of identifying risk groups and risk behaviours, categories become essentialised and decontextualised, and the replication of universal factors covers up cultural specificity. The cultural and linguistic diversity of PNG is an important reminder that the language of HIV/AIDS must not rush to generalise about contemporary experience, the impact of development, gender relations, and sexual dynamics (Jenkins 1993:55). The AIDS virus presents a tremendous threat to the general population, but the talk about the virus, and the talk about human sexuality that surrounds the virus, may also present a very real threat to indigenous cultural forms and the faculty of individuals and groups to negotiate the risk of infection.

I believe the relative boundedness of ‘place’ allows for the engagement of anthropological theory in ways that will assist appreciation of the diverse cultural contexts within which the HIV epidemic is occurring. Because place is such a dynamic social referent in PNG, and throughout the Pacific, I do not think we can engage theoretical analysis unless we have an empirical grounding in place—theories and models have to be ‘in place’ before we can proceed with practical applications.

So first, I begin with a brief description to help situate the ‘bounded’ place that is the focus of this paper. The Trobriand Islands are a group of six low-lying coral atolls in the Massim region off the eastern coast of PNG, with a total population of approximately 30,000 inhabitants of the Austronesian language group. The Trobriand Islands continue to hold a pivotal position in the famous Kula trade ring that has linked Massim island groups for over 2000 years (Leach and Leach 1983).

Like all PNG traditional societies, Trobriands has a subsistence economy based on reciprocal obligation, with yams and taro the staple food crops. Trobriand social organisation is characterised by a hereditary chieftainship and a matrilineal kinship system comprised of four main clan groups, *kumila*, and numerous sub-clans, *dala*,

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<sup>6</sup>The quoted text appears on a poster produced by the PNG National AIDS Council in 2001. It is also the voice over used for television and radio promotional spots that enact the same story.

which are the main units of social identity and economic exchange. Trobriand social cosmology is largely based on witchcraft and protective and preventive magic, which provide explanations for fertility, morbidity, and mortality, as well as people's psychological and behavioural attributes. The historical influences of colonisation, Christianity, and the cash economy have been absorbed by Trobriand society with remarkable resilience. Christian religious beliefs have been syncretised with Trobriand cosmology, and the indigenised church provides an important organisational framework for numerous community endeavours.

The Trobriand Islands are renowned in the annals of anthropological theory because of the monumental work of Bronislaw Malinowski (1922; 1927; 1929), who pioneered ethnographic methodology during his extended fieldwork on Kiriwina, the main island of the Trobriands, early last century. Revisiting Malinowski's work some fifty years later, Annette Weiner made another major contribution to anthropological theory with her ethnographic account of Trobriand social reproduction, *Women of Value, Men of Renown* (1976), which offered new perspectives on the integral position that women maintain in the Trobriand social universe.<sup>7</sup>

The matrilineal society of the Trobriands both challenges and instructs common assumptions about gender, sexuality, and reproduction in PNG and beyond. It presents a direct contrast to the 'sexual antagonism' theory that is used to characterise gender relations in many parts of PNG, particularly in the Highlands region where ideologies of male dominance and female pollution are most pronounced (Herdt and Poole 1982; Strathern 1987). Trobriand women hold a strong social and economic position, and are empowered by a sense of autonomy and control in the expression of their sexual and reproductive agency. Sexual freedom is culturally sanctioned for young people, many of whom have multiple sexual partners before marriage. The distinctiveness of the Trobriand context underscores the importance of engaging local voices to inform the HIV/AIDS discourse.

## **“Everything Has Come Up to the Open Space”**

Using the metaphor of “open space,” this paper and my preceding work argue for the importance of ethnographic research to inform the language used to talk about HIV and AIDS (Lepani 2001). What I mean by open space is the common ground of discourse where opportunities exist to develop HIV/AIDS education programs based on cultural context, recognising that people's behaviour and the choices they make are conditioned and informed by their social and cultural environment. The metaphor of open space comes from the following statement made by a woman participant in the first focus group discussion conducted during my fieldwork:

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<sup>7</sup> I use “universe” as a gloss to infer how Weiner uses the Trobriand cultural context to reveal and revitalise what she calls “the value of universal womanness” (1976:236). While Weiner's ethnography is significant for revealing the centrality of Trobriand women's position in mortuary exchange, her claims of universality, in an attempt to restore what she views as the inherent value of women's regenerative power, have been challenged for perpetuating Western notions (see Strathern 1981; Jolly 1992).

I think that to our culture...it is really taboo to talk about sex. And sitting with men and women together, especially with men and women we cannot talk about it. Unless there is only women around or there is only men then they can, you know, talk about it in their way...But times have come and passed and I feel now it is open, it is already open to anybody or everybody who can sit down and talk about it...to me, what I see and hear, it's already open...But now, open space, how will I say this? Yes, maybe, yes, the time when the change takes place. Because what our sister has said, that is one part of this, unless you sleep with the man you won't get your period and the other one is when you sleep with the man then you will have your *nunu* [breasts]...Everything has come up to the open space. Words and actions and all these things. That's why things have already changed, a very big change. Now it is 12 years of age, a kid can have sex. Before, no. Taboo. But I heard from my granny, it was about that age, too. It's the natural feeling, how will I explain?

(Taped group discussion, Port Moresby, 24/11/2000)

As all good metaphors do, "open space" lends itself to a number of interpretations, all of which illustrate the various issues that emerged during the study. Open space is clearly a metaphor for the factors of development that influence social transition, people's behaviours, and the cultural meanings attached to behaviours. The woman uses the metaphor to describe how barriers have been broken, issues have come into the open and are no longer hidden, people are able to sit down and talk about sex. The woman also uses the metaphor to consider the transitional phase of puberty in relation to a Trobriand belief that sexual activity helps young girls grow and mature into fertile women. Then she uses the metaphor to explain her view that young people in the Trobriands are engaging in sex at an earlier age, inferring that the social change that is taking place in open space has accelerated the transition between puberty and adulthood.

After pronouncing that "everything has come up to the open space," the woman hints at a cultural conundrum: Trobriand society is experiencing a period of great change, yet maybe things have not changed all that much. Maybe part of what is being experienced is the way cultural meanings are measured against, and safeguarded from, the factors of change—including new ways of talking—and consequently, how a belief system is held up to its own taboos. The woman hints at the difficulty of talking about sex when the prevailing assumptions do not fit. At times, perhaps, elusion is a better recourse than exegesis.

On this score, it is interesting to note that in all the focus group discussions and individual interviews conducted in my study, participants' initial capturing of 'culture' or 'custom' as a template, a reference point in an ahistorical field, gave way to the present tense of praxis, of culture in process, thus emphasising the imperative of culture, and the insistence, persistence, and resistance of culture in relation to social transformations. Far from providing the perfunctory assessment that the breakdown of traditional ways of life describes PNG's contemporary context of vulnerability to HIV and AIDS, participants in my study alluded to the ways in which culture is in constant

interaction with factors of change—“externally induced yet indigenously orchestrated,” as Sahlins describes the historical process of culture change (1985:viii).

To frame my paper, I have borrowed the speaker’s declaration that talk about sex has come up to the open space. To illustrate the importance of cultural context in the discourse on HIV and human sexualities, I propose to use the open space metaphor as an entry point to step into the gendered dimension of the Trobriand gift economy, and to consider how gender, sexuality, and reproduction are given meaning and expression in the public realm through the transaction of exchange objects. I then want to explore the private realm of youth sexuality to see in what ways it serves as the preparatory stage for the public, adult world of exchange.

## ***Sagali*: The “Open Space” of Female Sexual and Reproductive Agency**

The open space of the village clearing is where the value of Trobriand women is profoundly expressed. In the cyclical cosmology of Trobriand matrilineal kinship, women embody the power of biological and social reproduction. Women play the key role in mortuary exchange feasts, called *sagali*, which take place immediately after a death and then again after a period of mourning that lasts for approximately six to twelve months. The kinswomen of the deceased are the sponsors of *sagali*, responsible for accumulating and redistributing items of exchange. Women make thousands of small bundles of dried banana leaves and brightly coloured grass skirts, called *doba*, to use as currency for *sagali* exchanges. *Doba* has a modern equivalent—cotton fabric that women purchase by the bolt and cut into two metre length pieces. Women refer to *doba* as their work, *paisewa*; as objects of exchange, *doba* both embodies women’s labour and signifies the value of women’s labour in the public realm of transactions.

The importance and persistence of *sagali* in Trobriand society is immediately visible to even the most casual observers. The material evidence of *sagali* is everywhere: women scraping banana leaves for *doba*; strips of banana leaves drying in the sun; women alone or in groups tying bundles of *doba*; huge baskets of *doba* stored in the recesses of houses; women walking along the roads and tracks with bundles of *doba* on their heads.

Systems of reciprocal exchange within and between clan lineages are the hallmark of Melanesian sociality and are given elaborate articulation in ceremonies that mark life-cycle events. Marilyn Strathern’s pivotal book, *The Gender of the Gift*, provides an astute and carefully crafted evaluation of anthropological and feminist theories on Melanesian sociality, illuminating how both persons and objects assume the social form of persons in the gift economy (1988). There is constant interplay between personification and objectification of values invested in the social actors, the objects, and the transactions. The relation is dynamic and referential and continually on display as a feature of social reproduction, comprising the everyday activities that sustain a subsistence economy. Reiterating Strathern’s analysis, James Weiner explains that the relationality between people and objects of exchange is “both the site of sociality and the space within which the actor achieves a perspective on this sociality” (1995:xiii).

*The Gender of the Gift* also illuminates how male and female domains are not static binaries but mutually defined through social action. Gender is an intrinsic part of the relation between person and object and the vehicle for creating social value, made visible in the labour invested in the production of exchange objects and in the performance of the exchange event. Before I commenced fieldwork in the Trobriands, several PNG women provided me with words of advice about exploring the concept of gender. They urged me to look more closely at family and clan relationships, how they are manifested and the meanings they hold. They cautioned me against applying the binary, static categories of “male” and “female” in my investigation. While anthropological and feminist theories also caution against dividing the world into fixed, dichotomous categories, these “deliberate fictions,” as Strathern sets out in *The Gender of the Gift*, persist in Western renderings of gender and development issues and often obscure the dynamics of sociality (1988:6-7). Trobriand women are daughters, sisters, wives, mothers—often mothers before they are wives—aunties, grandmothers, in-laws, and widows. These multiple roles and relationships are constructed, given meaning, acted upon, maintained, and altered throughout the life span, and in the process, they configure women’s social status and shape the experience of gender.

The words of advice about gender resonate clearly with Trobriand matrilineal kinship. Trobriand kinship terms emphasise relationality between individuals over the sex of the individual; evidence, perhaps that theoretical depictions of gender, in the Melanesian context at least, cannot be explicated without examining the importance of kinship. The word for son and daughter is the same, *latu*, regardless of sex. Siblings of the opposite sex refer to each other as *luta*, whereas as siblings of the same sex distinguish between the older, *tuwala*, and the younger, *bwadala*. The mother’s brothers are of special significance to a child, as they are the closest senior male clan members. The term for the relationship, *kada*, is used reciprocally between uncle and niece or nephew. The father and his relatives are of a different clan from the child, and are designated by the category of *tabu*.<sup>8</sup>

Representing and working for the matrilineal clan, Trobriand women literally cast into the public realm an account of multiple social and economic relationships within and between clans by throwing down bundles of *doba* in the central clearing of the village during *sagali*. With a competitive nature similar to the renowned Kula trade and the yam harvest activities that are the pursuit of Trobriand men, the enactment, or “game” (*mwasawa*), of *sagali* compels women to throw down as much *doba* as possible to assert the vitality of their *dala*. The amount of *doba* redistributed by clanswomen not only unties the deceased from all worldly obligations, but is a direct statement about the strength of a woman’s social and economic relationship with both her husband’s clan and her father’s clan, members of which were mourners and supporters during the

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<sup>8</sup> The kinship term *tabu* is complex and holds multiple meanings, as expounded by Weiner (1979:339-340). Broadly, *tabu* refers to ancestral founders of *dala*; grandparents and grandchildren, reciprocally; father’s sister, father’s sister’s husband, and father’s sister’s daughter; and from a female ego’s standpoint, mother’s brother’s son and mother’s brother’s daughter. *Tabu* is not related to the notion of taboo, or *bomala* in Trobriand language.

mourning period. In this sense, *sagali* serves the interests of the living as much as it resolves the interests of the deceased.

My informants had this to say about *sagali*:

*Sagali* keeps calling us.

*Sagali* is in our blood, we can't give it up.

*Sagali* is too close to us.

One word to describe the status of women in Trobriand society: *sagali*.

I say it again: *sagali*. That is the value of women here.

(Various interview notes, December 2000–January 2001)

*Sagali* factors significantly in reproductive decisions. Women talk about growing their *dala*—having large families—in order to be strong for *sagali*.

Respect comes from the *dala*. That is why having many children is valued. Mothers are strong.

(Interview notes, 20/12/2000)

It is through the ladies where we have the *dala* growing. So when one lady gives birth, if she has a daughter, and that daughter gives birth then the *dala* goes on and it becomes bigger. In having a lot of people they would be making a lot of gardens, more food. And if somebody has to die then they would have the number of people to make *sagali* for that person.

(Taped discussion, Kavataria village, 12/01/2001)

The significance of *sagali* illustrates the cultural synchrony between biological and social reproduction, between sexuality and fertility. In their introduction to *Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure*, Jolly and Manderson recapture this synchrony by recognising that “sexual desire is entangled with broader questions of pleasure,” such as the “pleasures of ...collective sociality” and the “pleasures of fecundity” (1997:24). The procreative energy of *sagali* is an expression of genealogy—the desire to grow one's *dala*, to honour the spirit of a deceased clan member, ensure continuity and security through life stages, and assert personhood and collective identity.

Comparative studies of mortuary exchange rituals in the Massim region of PNG have interpreted the prominence of fertility and sexuality imagery as an attempt to restore social balance through symbolic representations of vitality and health. In the book *Death Rituals and Life in the Societies of the Kula Ring*, Damon suggests “sexual symbolism plays important roles...because the dependencies created by the production of children are being paid back at death, and the conditions for the reproduction of children in the future are being established” (1989:18-19).

In the enactment of *sagali*, the pragmatics of symbolism is made visible in numerous ways, exemplifying the synchrony between biological and social reproduction, and between sexuality and fertility. In one *sagali* I attended during fieldwork, a young pregnant woman was selected by her clanswomen to wear the *sepwana* skirt, which signifies the most important *sagali* distributions made in the name of the deceased's spouse and father. This was a notable choice. Not only was the young

woman in the last trimester of pregnancy with her first born child, she was her mother's first born daughter, and significantly, she was married to the *dala* of the deceased, which was also her father's *dala*. The referential dynamism between people and objects of exchange—how objects of exchange assume the social form of persons—was stunningly displayed. The young woman's personhood quite literally embodied matrilineal identity and at the same time, it was projected onto the objects of exchange. She was at once both subject and object. The aesthetics of generational fecundity were given centre stage in the public realm.

## **The Private Space of Youth Sexuality**

Returning to the pith of the statement that frames my discussion and lends itself to the title of my paper—"Everything has come up to the open space," I would now like to consider more closely the hidden, private realm of sexual behaviour that is increasingly talked about in the open, especially as part of the project of HIV and AIDS awareness.

In Trobriand society, the period of adolescence is a time of sexual freedom, individual choice, experimentation, and the search for potential partners in the open, yet hidden, space of young people's autonomy. First sexual activity is culturally valued as an important transitional point in the physical and social development of a young person. Sexuality encompasses attractiveness, strength, fitness, goodness, and the pursuit of desire; sex is seen as a prerequisite to grow into a healthy, strong woman or man. There are rules to follow and restrictions about whom one can pursue and where encounters take place, but overall youth is a time when human sexuality is celebrated.

In Trobs, there is plenty of sexual freedom among youth. This is nature, not taboo. The choice remains with the young people themselves.

(Interview notes, 23/11/2000)

Young people negotiate their sexual encounters through peer messengers, and they often use love magic to win the attention of the person they desire. Young women express confidence in their sexual autonomy and exercise the right to reject the advances of suitors they find undesirable.

I enjoy myself through relationships. I choose my own partner based on what I want. What I agree.

(Taped interview, Orabesi village, 09/01/2001)

If the boy wants the girl, it's all up to him to discover. He can ask her and if the girl agrees with him then they can go from there...Each one is different in their personality, but as we have the freedom, so if I disagree with a boy, then he will just go away and find someone else to occupy his time. He won't try to pull me.

(Taped discussion, Orabesi village, 13/01/2001)

The sexual freedom enjoyed by young Trobriand girls is signified by the word *kapugula*, the activity of going out at night to walk around with groups of friends and look for sexual partners.

*Kapugula*. Go out. Young girls, they go free. They get it from their grandmothers and mothers, that they are free to go around.

(Taped interview, Obwelia village, 18/12/2000)

But freedom is enjoyed under cover—the place of desire is hidden from the public realm. Young people’s sexual relationships are not publicly recognised, for that would immediately oblige economic relationships between families and clans. *Katupwana* means “to hide,” to protect from public view, and to prevent brothers and sisters from seeing each other with their partners. A young girl must also hide her sexual activities from her father, who represents the critical social link to another *dala*—a link that takes on new significance through marriage, when sociality is publicly enacted through affinal relations.

The kinship category of *luta*, or cross-sex sibling, is of particular significance here. Malinowski explains how the *luta* relationship holds the “supreme taboo” that prohibits “any erotic dealings...between brother and sister,” and by extension, between any male and female of the same *dala* or clan (1929:519). Weiner elaborates on the “wide range of taboos associated with sexual and social separation” that maintain the *luta* relationship (1976:208). She demonstrates how taboos serve to reinforce the important exchange relationship that is developed over time between cross-sex siblings, which is linked to the equally important relationship a woman has with her father’s *dala*, ideally through marriage.

The following statement indicates how taboo operates to protect future economic relationships between clans through marriage, in addition to maintaining sexual proscriptions within clans:

One thing to understand from the beginning—sisters are very taboo for brothers. They are very, very important people regarding the boy. For the girl, the father and the brother are very important when it comes to *tabu* because she will need their support for *sagali*.

(Interview notes, 20/12/2000)

The *dala* is what binds the brother-sister relationship, but it also holds the ultimate risk of unsafe sex. This is the concept of *sovasova*, a sickness that is believed to result from having sexual relations with one’s own clan members. The symptoms of *sovasova* are remarkably similar to the onset of AIDS: weight loss, nausea, and malaise. The breach that results in *sovasova* is reputedly common between members of the same *kumila*, although less frequent between members of the same *dala*, but the “supreme taboo” between biological siblings is strictly adhered to.

Shame is identified as the reason for hiding one’s sexual activities from cross-sex siblings. But shame results from accidentally allowing the relationship to be viewed publicly, not from engaging in sexual acts. So in this sense, hiding to maintain privacy and discretion—to avoid “feeling shame,” as informants call it—is not necessarily a negative concept; rather, it serves to protect, to make sexual encounters safe. Shame also serves to ensure women’s autonomy and prerogative in engaging in sexual relations, and to protect against coercion. Participants identified shame as the reason why a man would not force a woman to have sexual relations; however, shame can also

make a young woman submit to unwanted sexual advances, to protect the man's sense of pride.

If a girl disagrees it would be shameful for the man. He must study her first and make sure she agrees.

(Interview notes, 6/12/2000)

I just agreed for that time because I don't want to make him feel shy or ashamed, so I just involved myself with him.

(Taped interview, 16/01/2001)

Gift exchange is an important feature of sexual relationships among young people in the Trobriands. Study participants spoke of how mothers, grandmothers, maternal aunts and uncles—all close members of *dala*—encourage daughters to look for partners in order to receive *buwala*, or gifts from sexual partners. *Buwala* is evidence of a young girl's ability to attract partners, and it indicates the "fitness" of a potential husband, who will help to grow the girl's *dala* and expand the economic network. *Buwala* illustrates how relationships are built, how young people work towards having steady partners, rehearsing their future economic roles as married adults. Strathern's analysis of social action is helpful here in understanding how sexuality is a productive resource for creating relationships "in a world *where social relations are the objects of people's dealings with one another*" (1988:172, original emphasis); the focus of exchange is the "capabilities of relations, not the attributes of things" (1988:173).

Young people identify their sexual partners not by name but by clan, village, or place of belonging. The expression of place identity in sexual networks both reflects and reinforces social networks and attendant exchange relations between lineages. Consequently, intimate relationships do not remain bounded within the private domain of desire. Sexual alliances are subject to, contested, validated, or dismissed by the social networks within which they operate. The intimacy of a sexual encounter extends beyond the union of two individuals and represents the union of clan lines. Inter-subjective couplings are not self-definable but need to be inscribed in wider social networks in order to be acknowledged. In this sense, also, sexuality can be viewed as a productive resource. Yet, the hidden place of youth sexuality, of *katupwana*, allows space and time for relationships to be explored and tested before they are obligated within the public realm of inter-clan exchange.

The relationship of *katabula*, or ideal sex partner and potential spouse, provides an understanding of the value of youth sexuality in Trobriand society in relation to the regenerative power of the *dala*, as well as the influence mothers and maternal uncles have in their children's search for the right marital partner. In contrast to the sex taboo between members of the same clan, *katabula* involves the ideal cross-cousin marriage partner. For a boy, the ideal union is with his father's sister's daughter, so that he marries into his father's *dala*. Likewise, the ideal partner for a girl is her mother's brother's son, that is, the son of her *kada*, or maternal uncle. The pool of potential *katabula* partners includes the offspring of each parents' *dala* cousins, who are also identified as "brothers" and "sisters" (*luta*). The *katabula* partnership represents what informants call a "criss-cross" strategy for reinforcing the important *sagali* exchange

ties between in-laws and, thereby, ensuring that *dala* resources stay between two lineages joined by marriage. I was told that the planning for this type of alliance “all comes in the line of *dala*” and was done primarily between women and their maternal uncles.

The autonomy and freedom of childhood and youth sexuality extends for a long period in the Trobriand generative cycle and then it abruptly stops with the onset of childbearing and yam gardening for exchange, both productive activities generally given articulation through marriage and affinal sociality. Research participants talked about having a succession of steady partners before finding the “right partner” to marry. One young woman explained how the period of sexual freedom goes “until our life stops,” meaning that critical point of transition from youth to motherhood and marriage (Taped discussion, Orabesi village, 09/01/2001). Yet, the assertion “I am still a young girl if I want,” made by a twenty-year old mother who did not want to stay in marriage with her son’s father, indicates the power of personal agency in constructing life narratives (Journal entry, 10 June 1990). It also hints at the way in which sexuality is as productive a resource as fertility in forming and transforming social relations.

Marriage and childbearing confer full adult status in Trobriand society, which in turn secures economic support through an expanding network of obligatory exchange relationships between the spouses’ respective *dala*. Unlike the elaborate bride price ceremonies that distinguish most PNG societies (Gardner and Weiner 1992), the act of marriage in the Trobriands is an inconspicuous event, occurring when a young man and woman share a meal of yams together for the first time. The shared meal takes place in the open at the husband’s parents’ dwelling. The meal signifies the new marital bond, and for the first time the young couple can be seen together in public.

During the last trimester of pregnancy, a married woman returns home to live “under the parents’ roof,” where she remains for the event of childbirth and until the baby is weaned (Lepani 2001:75). During this time, her husband will visit and bring garden food to support his in-laws; he may also take up residence in his in-laws’ household, but he should not sleep with his wife until the baby is weaned. Periods of sexual abstinence after childbirth and during lactation are customary in many parts of PNG, and are viewed as a form of fertility control to ensure the health and well-being of the mother and the baby. Jolly has argued that continence can also be viewed as a further elaboration of social reproduction, being “generative of fertility and growth” (2001:178).

Of course, conjugal continence is also likely to influence infidelity. Research participants made the point that although the husband’s economic support and presence continue throughout the period of abstinence, men often become more mobile when their wives are residing under their parents’ roof. Several women gave personal accounts of how, during the period of abstinence, their husbands went on inter-island Kula trade expeditions, or travelled to other parts of PNG in search of wage employment or to visit relatives.

## Talking about Sex in an Epidemic

I would now like to consider how the talk about sex in HIV communication can be informed by cultural context. Without doubt, practices of safe sex must be promoted and supported in order to prevent the spread of HIV. In the book *Gendered Epidemic: Representations of Women in the Age of AIDS*, John Erni refers to “the imploding disjunction” between how safe sex is promoted and the “striking forms of differences surrounding it” (1998:19). For this very reason, the diverse cultural contexts, settings, and circumstances within which safe sex is to be practiced need to inform the way education about HIV and AIDS is designed and delivered.

What, then, does “safe sex” mean from the Trobriand perspective? My research findings suggest that sexual activity is regarded as natural, healthy, and safe. Sex is life affirming, not life threatening; it is not associated with risk, apart from the risk of breaking cultural taboos. For young people, safe sex comes in hiding, in being active in the darkness of night, away from public view. Young people also perceive spatial boundaries of safety in their search for partners—from one village to the next, one island to the next.

The use of traditional herbs and spells to prevent unwanted pregnancy gives women a sense of “safety” in sexual activity. Herbs and spells are also used to make love magic, as well as magic that causes illness. The knowledge of herbs is a highly valued clan resource and herbs are often acquired through close relatives, which itself imparts a sense of safety through blood identity. Magic is a powerful cultural construct that relates directly to notions of risk and vulnerability, as well as explanatory causes for people’s behaviour. The implications for HIV communication are considerable, and suggest possible opportunities for identifying explanatory models for the way HIV silently invades the human body.

Women also talk about “safe” in relation to their fertility cycles. For sexually active women, the concept of “safe sex” is analogous to the ovulation method, the knowledge of which is imparted by mothers and grandmothers as well as learned from textbooks. The sense that sexual activity is “safe” also derives from the importance of maintaining and re-enacting Trobriand cultural values that are manifested in the expression of sexuality, most importantly, the regeneration of the clan through childbearing and reciprocal exchange relations.

HIV is generally viewed as something foreign. Risk is associated with those who come from outside—boat crews, tourists, Papua New Guineans from other areas of the country, and *dimdim* (white people). There is some recognition in the Trobriands that HIV risk is present, but there is little evidence to suggest that people are able to personalise potential risk in terms of their own sexual behaviour. However, within the safe domain of the *dala* lies the major risk of *sovasova*, the sickness that results from having sexual relations with one’s own clan members. Perhaps this concept holds a key opportunity to build on the cultural meaning of disease prevention and “safe sex,” and to communicate the importance of HIV risk prevention.

The Trobriand context shows that having multiple partners is a feature of sexual activity among single youth in their search for a potential spouse. Serial monogamy is

the norm in many cultural contexts. HIV and AIDS messages say that the steady partner, or “sticking to one partner,” is safe. This message may communicate a false sense of safety for people whose sexual networks involve moving from one “faithful” partner to the next. The practice of sexual abstinence during the last trimester of pregnancy and lactation creates a situation of potential vulnerability for women whose partners do not remain monogamous. HIV and AIDS messages are required to address this particular vulnerability and bring the recognition of potential risk into open space.

With regards to the issue of “transactional sex,” I believe more respectful evaluation should be given to the productive quality of sexuality, how sexual expression is used towards producing sociality, or the “capabilities of relations” (Strathern 1988:172). Sexuality is a resource—not a “commodity,” or for that matter a “gift” per se, but a productive resource that can be put to work at will, as desired, in creating social relationships and networks. As Western observers, it is important that we suspend our commodity logic when evaluating transactional sex and take caution when ascribing the analysis of exploitation to ways in which sexuality is expressed as a resource.

I would suggest that *buwala*, or the exchange of gifts for sex, might be an important cultural practice for potential intervention in the Trobriand context. HIV and AIDS messages could target mothers, aunties, grandmothers, and maternal uncles for their strategic role in providing guidance and encouragement to young sexually active clan members. Encouraging condom use could be promoted as a form of *buwala*, by emphasising the value of showing respect and appreciation for the partner.

The following statement made by a Trobriand woman health worker at the district health centre on Kiriwina is instructive for what it reveals about the cultural values of youth sexuality and women’s agency in negotiating sexual encounters:

[Condom use] is up to the daughters and mothers to discuss. When the mother encourages her daughter to go out, she should tell her to take condom. Double-up! Take several condoms when they go out! We need to think more about how to encourage the women to use the condoms with their partners. This idea has been thought about before. After one HIV awareness session that Sister gave in a village, an old widow got up and said that there should be notices written in big letters and put up at the market and the trade stores that say: “All single women must be supplied with condoms!”

(Interview notes, Losuia Health Centre, 11/12/2000)

While the old widow’s proposition might throw into question the gender power dynamics inherent in ascribing responsibility for protected sex, it is, nonetheless, a measure of community receptiveness to the idea of normative condom use. Significantly, the anecdote points to the importance of community-based needs assessment and participatory approaches for promoting environments that enable safe sex practices.

Overall, it would appear that the Trobriand view of sexuality and sexual behaviour is more congruent with the notion of “healthy sex” over that of “safe sex.” HIV/AIDS education programs might be more effective if emphasis was given to the promotion of healthy sex, including information and resources on sexual hygiene,

recognition of signs and symptoms of STIs, and the preventive role of reproductive health services. The argument for promoting healthy sex can be extended to include the “dimension of cultural survival—investing locally in the future of peoples and clans,” as suggested by Bernard Broughton (2000:65). Certainly, the value inherent in Trobriand *dala* identity and regeneration provides a powerful theme for promoting healthy sex for cultural survival.

This leads me to the wider field of Trobriand sociality and how the dynamics of gift exchange might inform the discourse on HIV and AIDS. Firstly, *sagali* underscores the position of women in Trobriand society and their sense of empowerment and self-worth. Women’s empowerment has been identified as a critical prerequisite for the balance of power in interpersonal relations, controlling the circumstances in which sexual encounters take place, and women’s ability to negotiate safe sex (Gupta 2002; Heise and Elias 1995; Kippax et al. 1990; Long and Ankrah 1996; Reid 1995; Weiss, Whelan and Gupta 2000; Zierler and Krieger 1997). HIV and AIDS messages developed in respect of women’s role and value in biological and social reproduction have greater potential to communicate and reinforce the importance of empowerment as a resource in HIV risk minimisation.

Secondly, exchange networks provide a useful analogy for thinking about sexual networks. Like exchange networks, sexual networks are dynamic social processes that shift across the life span and reflect numerous motivational factors. The operative value of reciprocal exchange as a mechanism for resource distribution and assertion of lineage identity is important to recognise in relation to people’s motivations for forming sexual relationships. Likewise, recognising the interplay between biological and social reproduction brings deeper meaning to the concepts of sexual networking and multiple partners, and can contribute towards a better understanding of behavioural factors that shape the HIV epidemic. Approaching the analogy from a different angle in a broad lens, the potential impact of AIDS on the stability of Melanesian exchange systems to cope with the demands of social obligation in response to unprecedented death and decimation is urgent cause for action.

Finally, I want to consider more closely the notion of “women’s empowerment,” a resounding theme in current HIV/AIDS discourse, backed by assertions that gender inequality is the root cause of the HIV epidemic (Gupta 2002:184). Empowerment is usually cast in terms of what occurs in the public realm—political equality, control over resources, control over decision-making, and opportunities for formal education and employment (Sen, Germain, and Chen 1994; United Nations 1995). In HIV/AIDS discourse, the notion extends to the balance of power in the private realm of sexual relations (Heise and Elias 1995:931; Long and Ankrah 1996:11-12).

However, embedded in HIV prevention messages are dangerous assumptions about women’s ability to control the circumstances in which sex takes place. Numerous behavioural studies from a wide range of social and cultural contexts show that gender inequalities within sexual relationships make it difficult for women to negotiate condom use with their partners (Jenkins 1997; Lear 1995; NSRRT and Jenkins 1994; Sobo 1995). Congruent to the empowerment rhetoric is language that conjures women as

either passive “victims” or promiscuous “vectors” in relation to HIV risk (Sacks 1996; Savage 1996). Countering these powerful moral constructs often results in negating women’s sexuality in the name of empowerment.

Trobriand women view themselves as active partners able to exercise a measure of control in sexual relations. Indeed, the Trobriand context makes an important case for reclaiming pleasure in constructions of sexuality and the ways sex is talked about in HIV/AIDS discourse. Messages that communicate negative images about women’s sexuality in relation to their risks for acquiring HIV could potentially undermine Trobriand women’s sense of empowerment and worth.

How else might the empowerment rhetoric translate in the Trobriand context? Empowerment in relation to what? To women’s own sense of personhood? To their partners? Their productive and reproductive labour? Or in relation to a weak state and a less than adequate health system? At what point does the empowerment rhetoric subsume and essentialise all women into the dominant/subordinate gender power binary, and in so doing run the risk of alienating women who through their sexual and reproductive agency do experience empowerment?

At times, I find the empowerment rhetoric emits a tone of deception in the way it construes victimisation and attributes blame for risk and vulnerability to the dynamics of interpersonal relations. The rhetoric of empowerment for a woman in a resource-poor setting does not adequately confront the structural factors within which HIV prevention and treatment is positioned in the global political economy. In the end, the rhetorical message seems to be that PNG women are left with the rubric of their own sociality as the only possible recourse against HIV vulnerability and risk.

For Trobriand women, the issue, as I see it, has more to do with empowerment in the structural sense, in relation to access to better sexual and reproductive health services, and the resources that enable safe sex practices, specifically condoms. HIV prevention efforts need to address issues of condom distribution, the practicalities of condom use, and condom disposal, and not assume that practice is the same in every setting.

## **Conclusion**

The enduring dynamics of Melanesian sociality might indeed be the source of increased vulnerability to HIV transmission in the Trobriands and in PNG, but sociality is also the site of resiliency and response. Analysis that blames either cultural traditions or the disintegration of traditional ways for fuelling the epidemic is too rushed and perfunctory. Further, it may pre-empt possible strategies that hold promise for effective responses at local levels. In the process of “globalising the facts” about sex and HIV/AIDS, essentialised concepts get transposed onto cultural constructs (Pigg 2001). However, a balance has to be struck between universal discourse and cultural relativity if unambiguous messages about the risk of viral transmission are to be effective. This is the ground of open space to be negotiated when talking about sex.

A hand drawn poster by the lab technician at Losuia Health Centre in the Trobriands, tacked up on the wall in the clinic waiting area, provides a small but

significant illustration of the importance of place and local voices in communication about HIV and AIDS. The poster depicts various situations identified as risks for STI and HIV transmission. The message in Kiriwina language states: “AIDS can come from all these activities from the hiding place: harvest festivities, when people gather for lovemaking, on the road, the place full of coconuts. AIDS has already come to our place. Use condoms each time you have sex male or female” (Field notes, 16/12/2000).



**Fig. 1:** HIV/AIDS awareness poster in Kiriwina language, Losuia District Health Centre

As long as talk remains the most tangible resource in the prevention of AIDS, especially in resource-poor countries like Papua New Guinea where the capacity to provide voluntary testing and clinical interventions remains limited, it is imperative that cultural understanding and not moral scrutiny inform talk. We know that HIV does not respect culture. Our talk about HIV should.

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