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Address by Professor Marilyn Strathern

Obligations and Relationships

Your Excellency, Chairman, Members of the Society

It is an honour to have been asked to address you. I am in particular very conscious of the many Pacific interests that are represented here, and that the AGM is an opportunity to get a sense of the larger picture of the region in the context of world affairs. But whole worlds may be encapsulated in small things too, and I thought I would talk about some truths that were brought home to me through a set of events that took place in one small corner of the Pacific, recently and vividly in my mind but now some eight years ago.

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One of the privileges of being a social anthropologist, essentially someone who works through relationships established with people, is the often enduring character of those relationships. I am sure it is privilege that is shared with many others working across the Pacific. In my own case the part of the Pacific that holds me is the Mt Hagen area in the Western Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea. And stunning as the landscape is, and fascinating as new developments are, what holds me are people. In particular I think on those whom I lived with and got to know very well. – I use the odd expression 'think on' to convey the Hagen sense of having sympathy for or being *sori* for people, keeping people in mind. -- But it is not just that I know them well, it is that our relationship is a fact of life.

I might not have put it like that if I hadn't also become a bit accustomed to their ways of thinking, and learnt something of the value that they put on sustaining relations. What is true of many peoples everywhere has a special inflection in this part of Papua New Guinea that comes from the way relationships are given material or substantial expression. Where we might think that you best show your feelings for someone through courtesies or gestures that are cultivated apart from other aspects of life such as politics or commerce, Hagen people do just the opposite: relations are most appropriately acted out through transactions of all kinds. One of the most important parts of a funeral, for example, at which people congregate to pay their respects, is the literal payments that pass between various relatives of the deceased. Amidst the mourning, the crying, the keening, you will see people standing up with kina notes in their hands intended as gifts to others. This is the moment at which kin on the person's mothers' side and kin on the father's side, or various sets of in-

laws, finally settle the obligations that were part and parcel of the relationships among them that the deceased had activated.

Anyone who knows anything about what Papua New Guineans themselves call their *wantok sistim* will know that where you are related, there is an obligation to recognise the relationship – in, gifts, loans, loyalty, or whatever, and generally in acting with the relationship in mind. – I was delighted to see that *Wantok Support* is the name of a new organisation to support PNG citizens in the UK and abroad. -- Mind you, the *wantok sistim* is a terrible trap for modern day politicians who muster their support on the basis of their relations with their constituency, either personally or through group ties. 2006 was the last time I had the good fortune to be in Hagen, and I remember someone running for election talking about the fact that few people appreciated the burden of obligation he felt under to be constantly acknowledging the support he was amassing – having to kill pigs day after day to to meet his supporters' expectations. (The pigs would be distributed as cooked pork.)

The way people respond to the demands of others is of interest right across the social spectrum – from business enterprises in rural areas to national level politics. That same year, 2006, a fellow anthropologist (from Cambridge) organised a workshop in Port Moresby intended to explore collaborative practices such as networking and the *wantok* system in Papua New Guinea, in order to highlight some of the pressures that accompany the high value put on keeping up connections and relations. People, we could say, make one another accountable to themselves all the time, although that can take forms that run right across the kinds of accountability that today's public institutions demand.

This in itself is an interesting topic, and one not very far from people's opinions about how their politicians and leaders behave, or what procedures for good governance need to be in place. Clearly it comes from a much larger set of ideas to do with how people weigh up the obligations they see that relationships entail. All very familiar, and I am sure familiar to many of you too. However, I thought I would share with you the outcome of the experience of being in Mt Hagen for a brief period in 2006 with an anthropological colleague, who had worked in another part of the Hagen area (Kaugel). In brief, that further spell of fieldwork threw a spanner in the works – and forced me to think about the very concept of obligation that I had been taking for granted ever since I began working in Hagen in 1964.

I am not going to go into how it came about, but will just say that a factor was that my colleague was writing in French; we were not disagreeing on the analysis of what we observed -- the problem seemed simply that we were using language differently. The French term for 'obligation' has to do with 'necessity' and 'constraint' (that is, absence of choice), and is often used in juridical contexts, whereas aside from its legal usage the notion in English is as often linked to ideas of morality and implies the possibility of making judgments about a person's behaviour.

You might think this was splitting hairs. But one of the things anthropologists have to be on guard against is surreptitiously introducing inappropriate connotations into their descriptions. The question my colleague raised was about the appropriateness of the judgmental overtones in the English connotation of obligation. It adds a second tier to the way a relationship is thought about. You do not just fail in maintaining a relationship, the implication is, you fail too in the obligations it creates. That might seem another hair to split! Yet there is more here than just a debate between academics. Let me expand on that briefly.

Kinship obligations and the law

It all began with a notorious 'human rights case' that was in the newspapers when I was in PNG on a previous occasion, in 1997. This concerned a Western Highlands woman, Miriam, from an area adjacent to Mt Hagen, who had been marked as part of a compensation payment that one tribal group was handing over to another after the shooting of the young woman's father. Miriam's marriage would have sealed the friendly relations that the groups now wanted to establish. The situation was complex, but basically she agreed to the proposed marriage. She hadn't wanted to marry so soon, and had other aspirations for her career, but apparently she agreed out of a sense that she was doing it 'as a kinswoman', among other things protecting her younger sisters from being put in the same position.

The two groups were taken to court by a Human Rights watch NGO (ICRAF). The judge in the case said that 'treating a woman like money or pigs' (the other elements of the settlement) was against the PNG National Constitution. Compensation payment involving marriage was dismissed as a 'bad custom'. The judge said Papua New Guineans have to choose between bad customs to be thrown away and good customs to keep and he stopped the settlement from being completed. Miriam's constitutional right to be treated in an equal way to men had been infringed, regardless (he was at pains to add) of the human rights perspective.

Now an affidavit was presented at the hearing by a scholar from the Anthropology and Sociology Department at the University of Papua New Guinea, who came from the very area. He showed how the proposed marriage also fitted into other expectations held by the group who would have received the bride – for example, the marriage could be regarded as a reciprocation of one made two generations before by her grandmother who came from that group. Reflecting on the case later, he asked if the emphasis on the woman's 'human rights' was going to make kinship disappear. By kinship he meant the recognition of the ties that hold families and relatives together. There was a public welfare issue here among others, since the wellbeing of many Papua New Guineans depends on the kinship infrastructure, on families and extended networks of kinsfolk. Anyway, his question was: would a discourse about rights sweep away kinship and its obligations? Of course this was only a single case, and the circumstances rather extreme. Nonetheless, if one were to criticise the assumptions of the human rights advocates, it might be to raise a query about how obligations to kin are to figure in public discourse.

Miriam apparently wanted to fulfil her obligations. I was intrigued that the Papua New Guinean anthropologist from the area should have taken the exclusive focus on rights as an attack on kinship obligations and expectations. Now, to an English speaker, the force of using a term such as obligation in this context is that it implies a moral order. To recognise an obligation is to recognise a duty, and in English it is easy to talk of people judging others depending on whether or not they fulfil or carry out their duties. So to comment on someone's obligation is to set up a framework by which he/she can be held accountable. The conclusion I came to was that, in this kind of context at least, one might indeed want to to raise the general question about what institutions and procedures are doing in ignoring the kinds of moral claims that people have on one another, especially kin-based claims.

However, in retrospect, what seemed a very reasonable question to raise in English would be far harder to raise in French! If the idea of 'rights' is a clumsy tool to apply in a context defined partly by expectations and claims among people related to one another, is not the idea of 'obligation' as equally clumsy? Is it not going to land us in another set of problems, for example, how the observer, like the judge, chooses between which obligations to emphasise? Is this English term the best way, in fact, to comprehend what goes on between kin in parts of Papua New Guinea such as this? Of course there is no escaping the English language and all it stands for in the way its users think and organise concepts. But we can be conscious of the effect of language, and try not to prejudge situations. 'Obligation' has judgemental overtones. Are these overtones appropriate or not appropriate to the situation being described? Is it helpful to think of Miriam having 'oligations' to meet?

Hauskrai

I am afraid I am not going to answer the question directly. Much of it depends on the purpose of the description and the audience one is addressing. So I leave that specific question open. Let me instead go back to the funerals that took place in 2006: they provide something of an indirect answer.

From the end of July to the beginning of September there were in the smallish clan section of the Kawelka people, Mt. Hagen, five deaths and the sixth death of someone from the other section of the clan whose body was flown up from Port Moresby. The premature death of a leader, of a small child, of three very old women: for each of these there were several days of collective mourning at the house of the principal mourners, *hauskrai* in Pidgin. The first three deaths, within little more than a week of one another, were gathered together in a common 'finishing' of the hauskrai when the mourners killed pigs and distributed pork to those who had supported them. Some spoke of going to the funeral as 'going to eat pig'.

The principal mourners, immediate children or (in case of the child) parents of the deceased, and close kin, were supported throughout the mourning by more distant kin, by in-laws, other relatives and those with connections to the deceased from all over: they came with food, firewood and above all money. This support is recognised at the end of the mourning period: hence the distribution of pork. Throughout, money was in constant flow. Money was publicly collected for the coffin-boxes, cement gravestones and the carpentry, as well as *haus kapa* (tin roof) that goes over the grave, and for the support of the work of the mourners. The principal mourners held an open collection of further money among themselves to raise funds for purchasing pigs, greens and pork flaps that formed part of the return presentation to the supporters. Some return of money may already have been given to supporters, for example, to those who might not be back for the final part of the sequence. Where appropriate, money may also have been returned already by the principal mourners to representatives of maternal kin before they received pig at the end.

A whole spectrum of kin relations is thus made evident – accompanied by the flow of substance: food / pig / money – and this is nothing new. The unusual number of deaths meant that some people spent a large part of this six week period doing little but attending the various *hauskrai*. And this is the principal point. Attendance was not something people could or would wish to get out of,

despite the very real constraints on time and mobility. And it would be unthinkable for close clan kin, maternal kin or in-laws, not to be present. There was some latitude about when and for how long mourners came, but absolutely no question about going and contributing as appropriate. Women, who led the singing, were more consistent and longer attendees than men, but men and women alike had to be there. At the 'finishing' people could act as representatives of particular groups or kin, but one could not send substitutes to the *hauskrai* itself.

Now, everyone present at a *hauskrai* is there because of a connection, a relation. And the relationship – to the deceased, to the principal mourners -- puts them into a certain condition, a state of being *sori* (a highly emotive form of sympathy), which at once evinces and affects how they feel and act. If someone doesn't come, and doesn't make an appearance, or bring food or money, then it is said that that person has created an absence that blocks his or her relationship with the mourners, making it impossible to resume the relationship later as though nothing had happened. He or she has 'cut the rope', that is, the tie. In other words, there are consequences to not attending, as well as to attending.

It would be very tempting to say that people are obliged to come and if they don't come are not fulfilling their obligations. This seems a straightforward enough description in English. However I now obviously want to ask whether the concept of 'obligation', with its English connotations, adds anything to the rest of the description. Maybe it actually obscures some of what is going on.

There are consequences to not attending when people expect one to. Yet in a way the consequence has already happened: non-attendance is the broken relationship, the road to future relations being already blocked. To appear at the *hauskrai* of a close kinsman is part of what being in that relationship itself means; something more than the measure of the value one puts on it, though we could say that too, it is much closer to what English speakers might phrase as indeed 'a fact of life'.

Of all the components of a relationship that are brought forward at different times, at that moment attendance at the funeral is the significant one. We don't need to say, 'The relationship and its obligations': relationships imply certain ways of being and acting, put people's feelings into certain states. When I said it could even be that to talk of obligation obscures the basis of the relationship, I meant its imperative character: the imperative lies in what it is appropriate to do. This sense of what is appropriate is to be found -- registered, an anthropologist might say -- in the bodily condition of the person. 'Good' thoughts and feelings are turned into 'bad' thoughts and feelings when someone feels compassion and sympathy (*sori*) for the deceased's absence, and the bad thoughts must be suffered by the person. They have to 'feel' it. People describe themselves as overcome – they can't do anything else, they can only act through bodies that have been put into a particular state, in this case, through crying in company. It is an experience meant to make people feel physically wretched.

We could call this a moral imperative, insofar as people are acting according to received values that carry expectations about behaviour. But it is not a moral imperative based on judging the intentions and acts of others as failure on their part. So what would it sound like to put to one side the vocabulary of obligation? To imagine that 'obligations' do not exist as a virtue as they do in English?

In English one can remind people to fulfil their obligations or duties. Indeed, one can even talk in a general way of obligations between certain kin, such as a child's obligations to its parents. In these

parts of Hagen, you would instead speak of specific enactments of the relationship – the boy remembers to bring firewood home, the girl helps her mother in the gardens, they go to school when the fees have been paid. It is true that a lot of time is spent commenting on the acts of others and their consequences. But that is because, and importantly, those acts reveal the kind of person someone is. You see what a person is like by what they do. One doesn't try, and it wouldn't work, to alter other people's behaviour by appealing to what they ought to be doing – though one may grumble very strenuously about the effects that their actions have.

Perhaps this explains why if people can't come to a *hauskrai* and have no real excuse, it is pointless to chastise them. One doesn't say anything to them. I was told, 'If you meet them later, you don't say a word!' In other words, the response to hearing this or that person didn't attend is not to accost them, or think of them as failing in a duty – though it may well lead to much speculation about what their action means for oneself and others (i.e. the relationships involved). They would have to act out a desire to mend things subsequently. Thus it would only be possible to re-establish the relationship if they brought something material in their hand and made a contribution after all or gave something to provide the relationship with a basis again. This would have to be a substantial item such as prized food or money.

Feeling under a compulsion to act is best understood as part of the bodily or physical state that persons evince in relationships to one another. Indeed, one can also understand the condition of being *sori*, and the ill state of the bodies of the mourners, as a statement about the person that needs no further qualification. All this makes it easier to understand the imperative of attendance at *hauskrai*, and of the many transactions that take place there. What is being acted out is not 'good behaviour' open to others' judgements but rather the very connections that tie people, manifested in the presence of persons and their physical being.

Yet questions remain. Why do supporters give mourners food? Not for their enjoyment but, I was told, to feed them so that they can cry properly, that is, to render their bodies able to sustain the crying that the state of their feelings demands. Why do supporters come and help in this way? Because, I was told, they will be given pig, that is, partake of the substance that is shared out and distributed to everyone with connections. And why does money circulate between mourners and supporters? My own answer is that these days money serves as a substantial basis for everything – it is turned from food and pigs sold -- or otherwise marketed or given to others -- into the food and pork that will feed people.

Now criticism is often made of *hauskrai*, especially from those concerned with development policy or business, for the inroads it makes into peoples' lives, the demands on their time, the scale of expenditure. Of course, in response to such criticism it can all be explained away in abstract terms, for English-speakers, as a matter of people having to fulfil obligations. And perhaps this is an appealing rhetoric. But then we would not really understand the huge outlay of resources either. What waste, indeed, that seems! Nor would we understand the way people phrase the imperative, 'I go [to the funeral] [in order] to eat pig'. What open self-interest that too seems! If instead we leave aside the judgemental vocabulary of obligation, duty and the rest as personal virtues, we see more clearly the extent to which the physical / bodily basis of people's relationships, weakened by a death, requires new input of substance, and affirmation through the circulation of food, pigs, money.

But during the course of this exercise, we have also found another bit of vocabulary that refers to virtue in one of its original senses (the qualities manifested in something).

Re-visiting

Showing 'the kind of person you are' doesn't sound much in English. It seems of little force, and hardly summons an image of dignity. But there is a dignity I think in the way people I know in Hagen treat relationships as a fact of life, as there is in the way relations among the living must be nourished. To the extent to which people lead their own lives, it is how they act in those relations that shows the kind of person they are. When I began looking at things this way, then many daily interactions began to make sense, including something I had always been aware of, that Hageners rarely speculate over what is in other people's minds: speculation is all over the effects that can be attributed to their acts.

If it is an anthropologist's privilege to be able to sustain long term relationships with people, every new encounter opens up new questions. Revisiting previous taken for granted concepts is also something that anthropology offers those concerned with the contemporary practicalities of life, including how to think about the compulsion in the demands that kin and *wantoks* make. It matters how one chooses to describe things and what gets in and what gets left out of description. I have taken up a term, obligation, for its bearing on how people in the Hagen area respond to the imperatives of relationship. They are ready enough to react to what others do, and this, we could say, is where accountability rests. Paradoxically, that goes along with reticence in actually making judgements about people. There is no need to, because they themselves show you the kind of person they are. This is highly relevant to thinking about wantok connections, and about those occasions on which people show an unexpected tolerance or resignation to the way others behave. *Mi no save; laik bilong em*!

In speaking of my gratitude, my thanks for having learnt so much from the peoples of the Pacific, in English I can say that I acknowledge my obligations to them as well. In something a bit closer to the way my hosts in Hagen might express it, I show what kind of person I am by 'thinking on' our relationships, and acting accordingly.

Thank you.

Marilyn Strathern