

Emotion Process in Social Dramas and Dramatic Tales: An Example from Chuuk Lagoon

A recurring tension in anthropological theory exists between understanding human social and cultural diversity in terms of dynamic, open processes, on the one hand, and in terms of underlying atemporal causal forms and structures, on the other hand (Turner 1974; Ingold 2011). In the anthropological study of emotion, this tension has long been present and rarely adequately resolved, although the processual approach is now the dominant perspective (Röttger-Rössler 2002). Reflecting on this tension over two decades ago, Birgitt Röttger-Rössler (2002: 158) wrote, “Emotion sollte nicht als ein statisches Phänomen, als interner Zustand, sondern als relationaler Prozess verstanden werden, in dem kulturelle, soziale, individuelle und biologische Faktoren auf gleichberechtigte Weise interagieren“. Röttger-Rössler emphasizes further that emotions are part of living social and cultural worlds that are deeply integrated into a wide range of other biological, social, cultural, and ecological developmental systems.

More recently, Catherine Lutz (2017: 189) has written how the anthropological study of emotions since the 1980s greatly enriches our understanding of human lives and communities. Lutz notes that, “An orientation toward the emotional has directed us to focus more intensely on what matters to the communities we study, what moves them through the day, and thus what makes the emergent material and social worlds in which we are immersed”. But the emotional in social and cultural processes within these social and cultural worlds, at least in more reflexive moments, also orient the community’s or group’s members themselves around what matters, how they might relate to it, and the intensity with which these concerns can and should matter personally and collectively.

Emotional dimensions of social life are actively shaped and organized in socialization processes to help orient new members toward the norms and values of the group. Recently, Röttger-Rössler and colleagues (2015) have developed the concept of “socializing emotions” as a processual unit of analysis that can illuminate these processes further. They define socializing emotions as, “emotions that are culturally emphasized and elaborated in order to support and mediate the transmission of social norms and values to children” (p. 188). By generating emotional dimensions of important socializing experiences, children learn not only to understand important social norms or values conceptually but to experience them in affecting ways, motivating them toward the norms and values and the engagement in social relations that matter in socially appropriate ways.

One of the persistent methodological challenges in the cross-cultural and ethnographic study of emotions is that there tends to be an empirical focus on particular emotions or categories of emotion as opposed to the dynamic social relational processes in which emotions are embedded. This is particularly a problem in cross-cultural comparison, even of the type where an ethnographer compares her or his own cultural understanding of emotion to those present in an ethnographic site (Schneegg and Lowe 2020). This focus on specific kinds of emotion in a

comparative framework tends to bring about more of a focus on atemporal forms and structures that are products of social activity rather than the dynamic messiness of social and cultural processes themselves (Turner 1974).

My own ethnographic work on the emotionally intense crises that can often precede youths suicide attempts in the Micronesian islands of Chuuk Lagoon has also oscillated between these two theoretical poles (Lowe 2020, 2022). This chapter, however, focuses on the social and cultural processes associated with these crises. It makes use of two theoretical constructs from anthropology to do so. First, Victor Turner's concept of social dramas and, second, Allen Johnson's (2000) idea of emotion stories. I turn to a brief discussion of these in the next section.

Social Dramas and Emotion Stories as Emotionally Intense Processual Units

In his ethnographic study of the Ndembu people in central Africa, Victor Turner observed that conflict between the villagers were a regular feature of everyday life, in addition to a range of relatively harmonious cooperative sacred and secular actions. Turner (1974: 33) labeled these aharmonic or discordant "public episodes of tensional irruption" as "social dramas." The study of social dramas matters because they bring important processes of a society that are often muted in social life into starker contrast, rendering them more visible to anthropologists and members of the community the anthropologist is studying. As conflicts that have erupted into public view, social dramas also matter because they mark opportunities for both the contestants and other interested onlookers to become more reflexive about the conflict, to consider what is at stake, and what could or should be done to address the problem. During these reflexive moments, cultural resources such as existing narratives can be brought to bear to help make sense of what might be going on. Thus, there can be a dynamic or dialectical relationship between social dramas and the repertoire of dramatic narratives that circulate in the community at the time (Turner 1980).

In his mature work, Turner (1974: 38–42) identified social drama as a universal processual unit found in all human societies. Social drama has a stable, recognizable sequential structure consisting of four parts. First, a breach in everyday, norm-governed social relations takes place among interested individuals or groups in each community or organization. Second, there is a period of mounting crisis following the breach that can grow to include all members of the social groups to which the conflicting members belong. The crisis stage, Turner argues, includes liminal characteristics where the current dominant ordering of relations itself is opened for critique and possible reorganization. Third, the escalating crisis is followed by attempts at redressive action that are aimed at resolving the crisis and limiting its spread. This is also a liminal phase where the outcome of redressive actions remain uncertain and the possibilities for redressive action are open. During this third phase, the impacted members of a community are most reflexive or self-consciously aware of problems or structural tensions that are generally subdued in everyday, more harmonious social processes. Redressive actions can fail. The social drama can then revert to the crisis phase, escalating the conflict and its potential social and personal dangers further. The fourth and final phase results in either the reintegration of the aggrieved parties into the larger group, often with a shift in social relations from the previous

state to accommodate the reconciliation, or there is a public recognition that the breach between the affected participants is irreparable and that the two sides may ultimately settle into a spatial separation of the two conflicting sides (Turner 1980: 151). Either outcome, reconciliation, or separation, may be marked by formal public rituals that mark the resolution of the conflict.

The next concept is the “emotion story” (Johnson 2000). Emotion stories are generally found in traditional tales (i.e., folktales) that circulate in a community. Not surprisingly, these stories are often stereotypical renditions of common social dramas and the social and cultural processes that generate them in the everyday life of a group or community (Johnson 2000; Lowe and Johnson 2007). The emotion story can be analytically summarized as an emotion schema that describes a basic sequence of emotions that proceeds through a narrative. According to Johnson (2000) a basic emotion schema often lies under the surface of even complex, detailed traditional tales. While the story itself may be complex, the emotion story is often quite simple such as love found, love lost, and then found again, with specific kinds of emotions being associated with each phase of this simple emotional plot sequence. Johnson (2000) found that a single emotion schema for a narrative sequence of emotions can be found in an entire corpus of traditional stories. The narrative structure of this emotion schema, therefore, reflects social relational, cultural and affective dynamics that are important in that group or community. This sequence and the themes explored in the stories reflect a part of social life that people find interesting and important to experience and explore together. These stories, often told in the company of children, are important ways that the cultural repertoire for thinking about and responding to both relevant social dramas and the emotional sequences that accompany them that matter in the community at the time.

Sewi and Silfia: A Case of a Social Drama from Chuuk

Perhaps these points could be demonstrated through a reading of an ethnographic case from my fieldwork in Chuuk Lagoon that describes a particular social drama and its resolution. I will begin with an example of a social drama of the type that often has the potential to end tragically in a suicide attempt (Hezel 1987). The details of this case were collected both through my own direct observation and through detailed discussions shortly afterward with the key actors involved to get the details as correct as possible from my interlocutors’ points of view. This case reflects a conflict and its resolution that took place between several young adult siblings (an unmarried young man, an unmarried young woman, and their married oldest brother, their *mwáánichi*, Goodenough 1978) who either all shared a household or lived in nearby houses with their spouses and children. While social dramas between adult siblings is not an everyday occurrence, they do occur with some frequency throughout any given year. This is true even among siblings that are close and those who actively help one another on an everyday basis.

A summary of the social drama is as follows: late one afternoon, Sewi (all names as pseudonyms), a young unmarried man in his mid-20s, arrived at the household compound where he generally stayed. He found his adult sisters there working on the construction site of a planned family meeting house. Seeing these women doing the heavy work of leveling the soil for the building’s foundation, Sewi felt ashamed (*sááw*) that his sisters were doing the work that he should have been doing himself. He left and returned a while later very drunk. He then got into an argument with one of his younger sisters, Silfia, who was angry (*ssoung*) with him because

Sewi was not helping with this important joint-family construction project. At some point in their argument, Silfia slapped Sewi on the head. This is considered a highly disrespectful act as the head is normatively considered to be sacred in Chuuk. In touching Sewi's head in this way, Silfia's moral breach, admittedly in connection to Sewi's shirking of normative expectations to help on the family project, led to an open physical fight between the two on the road near the house.

Hearing the commotion on the road, Sewi's oldest brother, Erikio, and I ran down from our house nearby to see what was happening. Seeing his younger brother hitting their sister, Erikio instantly was enraged and ran over to intervene. He grabbed the much smaller Sewi and threw him into the mangrove trees near the edge of the road. Erikio and Sewi then wrestled for a moment until Erikio was able to restrain his younger brother. After this, the entire group of siblings (Sewi, Silfia, and Erikio) went up to their oldest sister's house, which was nearest on the road, so that Erikio could find out why the two were fighting. Erikio was still very angry (*ssoong*) with his younger brother for hitting Silfia, but he also felt some regret for treating Sewi so harshly on the road. After finding out the details of the conflict Erikio scolded both of his siblings for fighting, but blamed Sewi primarily. As he lectured them on how siblings ought to treat one another, particularly brothers and sisters, Erikio massaged Sewi who was sore from being thrown into the mangroves.

Often, a social drama like this would end here, with an apparent reconciliation among the conflicting parties. But, in this case, Sewi, still very drunk, escalated the crisis further. Sewi was still ashamed (*sááw*) for what he had done and for his brother's harsh scolding after the fight. He may have also been silently feeling angry (*ssoong*) with his brother for failing to understand him and taking his sister's side. As the group was concluding their discussion, Sewi suddenly got up and ran away from the house saying that he was going to go and hang himself. He ran up the side of the nearby mountain and into the bush.

For reasons that remain unclear, the family did not immediately pursue Sewi even though the threat of suicide was of genuine concern. However, when Sewi had not returned after an hour or so, Erikio sent two of Sewi's younger brothers to find him. The siblings' father was also summoned from the neighboring district where he resided at that time. A short time after their father had arrived Sewi was found sitting with some friends drinking. His brothers convinced him to return to Erikio's house. After discussing the matter with Erikio and their father outside of the house, Sewi apologized to them and to his siblings who had gathered. After his apologies, his apparent shame/fear seemed to subside, and his mood picked up quite a bit. The family again accepted him and had forgiven his actions. Sewi did leave a week later to stay with relatives on the urban island of Wèèné. Several months later he returned to reside with his siblings on Feefen.

One can clearly identify the four phases of the social drama in this ethnographic account. The conflict emerges in response to a series of moral or ethical breaches, first Sewi's shirking of his responsibilities to help his sister and then Silfia disrespectfully slapping her brother on the head during their public fight on the road. This is followed by an escalating crisis that would rapidly grow to include other siblings such as Erikio who joined the fight before subduing Sewi. The initial attempt at redressive action, mainly with Erikio harshly scolding his two younger siblings, while also physically tending to Sewi's wounds, led to a return to the crisis phase with Sewi running off and threatening to hang himself. A second attempt at redressive action occurred, this time widening the participants to include Sewi's younger brothers and the siblings' father. With their father's and other siblings' help, all involved were able to come together again

and discuss what had happened more amicably, this time ending with Sewi formally apologizing and seeking forgiveness (*omwusomwus*), a common ritual of reconciliation in Chuuk, to all involved. Sewi was visibly relieved and in a better mood after. Sewi did leave the scene for several months, but he eventually returned to be part of his sister's household again.

An Emotion Story from Chuuk

There is a well-established genre of traditional stories in Chuuk that are concerned with stereotypical social dramas of various kinds (Lowe and Johnson 2007). A number of these reflect the social drama of Sewi, Silfia, and Erikio well. A good example is the tale, "The Boy and the Birds." I first encountered this traditional story at a meeting of Oceania anthropologists in the late 1990s. At that time, the late Chuukese cultural historian, Joachim Peter was working on his idea of the importance of the idea of Oceanic horizon and mobility for people in the islands of Chuuk State (Peter 2000). John Fisher (1954) also recorded a version of the story during his field work on Chuuk and Pohnpei in the 1950s, suggesting its ongoing salience as a living traditional tale long told in these islands.

Fischer's (1954) version of the story begins with a married couple giving birth to a baby boy. However, the boy's mother died when the boy was four and his father remarried. The stepmother is described as greatly hating the boy, while the father loved him dearly. He showed his love by getting him chickens to eat and the father made the boy a special red bowl for food that they kept in the house. If the boy was ever upset or angry, his father would tell him to come to him so he could get his red bowl and some chicken to eat, and this assuaged the boy's distress.

One day the boy and his father had gone to the cook house to prepare breadfruit pudding (*kkón*) for the family. The boy went out onto the reef to play and find some fish to bring to his father in the cookhouse. After a while, the boy decided he was hungry and went to the house to ask his stepmother for something to eat. His stepmother responded cruelly, "I laugh at your hunger! Why don't you go dig up your mother's bones and munch them, if you say that you are hungry?!"

Hurt and angry upon hearing this, the boy fled to the reef. There he encountered a group of migratory sea birds (*wurupap*). Sitting among the birds, they asked the boy what he was doing there. He responded, "I have run away because of what that woman that married papa said – I told her I was hungry and she said I should go dig up my mother's bones and munch them." Hearing this they invited the boy to join them, plucking out some of their feathers and sticking them into the boy's arms and back so he could fly.

When the father returned to the house, he asked his wife where the boy had gone. She replied that she did not know where he had gone. The father looked toward the sea and saw that his son was now with the birds. He grabbed a coconut shell with a small portion of the freshly prepared breadfruit pudding, calling to the boy "Come and get your breadfruit pudding here."

The birds chose to respond in unison on behalf of the boy, "I won't go to you because your wife said I should go dig up my mother's bones and munch on them." They then flew away further out onto the reef.

The boy's father chased after them, swimming out to the reef, calling again, "Come and get this coconut shell of breadfruit poi for it is getting cold." The boy and the birds again responded,

“I won’t go to you because your wife said I should go dig up my mother’s bones and munch on them.” They then flew away further out onto a coral shoal further out to sea.

This pattern repeats two more times, for a total of four. After the fourth time, the birds decide to fly higher into the sky and not to land again. As the father swam out to chase them, sharks surrounded him and began to bite him. Then the spirit of his dead mother changed into a shark and joined the others. At this point, the birds decided to trick the boy and kill him, turning over in the air three times, causing the boy’s feathers to fall out. The boy plummeted to the sea and landed in his mother’s mouth where he stayed in her stomach. This is where the story ends.

One can intuit a narrative emotion schema in the tale. The tale opens by setting a discordant mood (Throop 2014), the stepmother hates the child while the father loves him dearly. Interestingly this discordant mood also reflects underlying social relational tension as the boy has no kin tie to his stepmother other than via the father’s marriage, and a tenuous one to his father because Chuuk is a matrilineal society. The story sets up a moral breach where the stepmother behaves cruelly to the boy. The boy reacts with what one might infer as anger, hurt, and/or sadness and runs away. Upon discovering the boy’s flight from home, the father reacts with alarm, possibly fear, and concern for his son. The story then repeats a sequence where the father seeks to assuage his son by offering some food in a coconut bowl, but the boy, under the influence of his new peers (the birds) rebuffs these attempts and instead flies further and further away. During this sequence, the boy remains angry over what his stepmother had done, and possibly also over his father’s failure to protect him from the stepmother. The father remains fearful and concerned over what might happen to his beloved son and motivated to continue to try and bring his son home again. The tale ends tragically for the father who loses his son to the sharks. For the boy, the tragedy of the ending is less clear as he ultimately rejoins his mother, the true source of his matrilineal kin-based identity. One might infer that this offers the boy peace and belonging that had been absent in his father’s household after he married the stepmother.

Discussion and Conclusions

There are three main points to take away from these two examples. First, one can appreciate the value of taking a processual approach in the anthropological study of emotion. In ethnographic observations such as the social drama involving Sewi and his family, emotions do not appear as discrete units separated or separable from other aspects of social and cultural life. Instead, the emotional dimensions of social drama emerge as an interplay of local social relations and shared meanings and values that have become problematic in meaningful ways. As the social drama unfolds through its processual stages, different bundles of emotion emerge, depending on the social relations involved in the conflict. In recurrent social dramas, local understandings of these bundles may be simplified into simple narrative schemas that can then be deployed in the fashioning, telling, and creative retelling of stories and tales. As an example, the story of “The Boy and the Birds” simplifies the kind of social drama that emerged among Sewi and his siblings into a basic structure where an older family member treats a junior family member badly or unfairly, the junior family member runs away in anger or shame, often placing themselves in some kind of danger thereafter. Then, another, more loving older family member attempts redressive action, but often too late to avoid tragedy.

Second, we see that both the social drama and the emotion story involve emotionally engaging dramatic action to mark things that matter in the everyday life of a community. Some of these are dominant relations of power, social obligation, and their associated norms and values. But, alternative social relations, alternative social obligations or personal desires, and contestations of norms and values are also in play. In other words, these are sites where what matters is most actively and creatively challenged suggesting the possibility for the emergence of new social relations and the valuing of different ideals and forms of behavior (Turner 1980). In the case of Sewi and his siblings, for example, there is a clear contest between how a young unmarried adult ought to spend her or his free time, socializing in the company of friends or helping with important family projects. Given local values of cross-sex sibling avoidance and an associated broad incest taboo, this choice is particularly fraught for young men who are generally expected to avoid their sisters and female cousins in everyday activity (Goodenough 1978). So, time spent with peers can be a creative way to realize this value, but at the expense of other values such as being on hand to help in family projects. Other structural tensions that matter in Chuuk, such as those associated with strong matrilineality are also dramatized in the story of “The Boy and the Birds”.

Finally, social dramas and associated traditional tales with a common emotion schema provide important means of working through these structural tensions and finding ways of resolving the emotionally intense conflicts that they can produce. Social dramas are lived experiences that allow members to negotiate the things that matter and how they ought to matter, thereby providing important socialization experiences to those involved and those who observe as bystanders that can be useful lessons for future conflicts. Since the outcome of social dramas is uncertain as they enter the crisis and redressive action phases, they afford both experienced members and new members of a community the opportunities to creatively innovate alternative ways of addressing the conflict and the underlying structural problems that can generate them. Social dramas might therefore be considered another important socialization device in addition to the idea of socializing emotions. Whereas the latter are considered ways of reinforcing important social norms and values to new members of a community, the former can be important, emotionally intense forms of experience that allow also for creativity and innovation of new forms of social relations and cultural values to emerge (Turner 1980).

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