

## DEEP INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AMONG THE TURKANA

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**ABSTRACT** This report deals with how the Turkana people manage their involvement in situational activities. The Turkana often beg another for something. When begging, they are intensely absorbed in their emotion. The beggar's behavior seems dually characterized: the childish behavior with insufficient control over the self and the tactical one for negotiation. Also in situations other than begging, they are often deeply involved in immediate interactions. They, as participants in the interaction, persist in having their way and display the unperturbed self. They refuse anything provisional about themselves. Also within the level of assumed "reality" which attendants in the gathering sustain, they persist in refusing anything provisional. They affirmatively front whatever is presented. They never bother themselves with whether the "reality" sustained is true or false. While they are lively within the "reality" which is shared by all attendants, they are in any situations required to be deeply involved in their activities.

**Key Words:** Social interactions; Communication; Social relationship; Involvement; Turkana.

### INTRODUCTION

In this report, I examine the everyday interactions among the Turkana in the northwestern part of the Turkana territory, northwestern Kenya. I concentrate on how they manage their "involvement" (Goffman, 1963) in an activity conducted within a social situation. They often seem to be too deeply involved in the immediate interaction at hand as if they were totally absorbed in their emotion.

The concept of "involvement," in Goffman's definition, refers to the capacity of an individual to give, or withhold from giving, his concerted attention to some activity at hand (Goffman, 1963: 43). In the common sense institutionalized in our society, the individual in a gathering is required to give visible evidence that he has not wholly given himself up to the main focus of attention. If an individual, sharing an office with others, extremely immerses himself in a task, his colleagues may feel that he improperly handles himself in the situation, or that he is "overinvolved in his activity."

The Turkana frequently show instances which make us feel they are overinvolved in the situation. Such incidents embarrass us, and we think that they should reallocate their involvement in a more acceptable way. By analyzing this kind of instances, I describe how the Turkana conduct situational activities, and elucidate the Turkana way of social life.

## THE TURKANA WAY OF "BEGGING"

### I. Childish Selfishness

The Turkana often request or beg another for something. "Continual begging" is "inherent in Turkana social life" (Gulliver, 1951: 7). When they demand something of others, their behavior seems childish. They repeat their demand even when they are once refused. It seems that they attempt to get the object they desire by any means.

It was not rare for the beggar to express anger or aggression in the course of their begging. When I refuse their demands, they often said, "How selfish you are!" One day a man, familiar to me, brought his wife and demanded me sugar for his wife. When I refused, he almost flew into a rage and loudly claimed that even though he was a good friend of mine and thus begging me for the sugar, I was too mean to give it to him (Kitamura, 1990).

There is another trait which makes us feel they are childish. When they beg another for something, they turn a deaf ear to the latter's apology of refusal. They seem not at all to consider the addressee's concern or convenience.

The following is one of such instances that I witnessed during my fieldwork. On one day, at the lunch time, many people had gathered in my homestead. Only a few of them were served with meal and tea. I directed my assistant to make another three cups of tea for three old men. Though several young men brought their own cups, all but one left when I declared, "Only three cups of tea will be made." The man who remained held a cup and required my assistant to fill it. I again restrained him until he seemed to give up the attempt. Then, he tried to take one of the three cups that my assistant filled with tea.

I felt, at that time, that he might have resigned himself at least in such a situation that there were too many people. When one refuses a demand, any attempts to make a beggar consent to give up his demand get nowhere. One can only say, "No!" Among the Turkana, those who demand something of others behave as if they could not sufficiently control themselves and as if they could not think of others as complexly motivated as themselves.

### II. Competent Negotiator

The behavior in the course of their begging also appears as that of competent negotiators. The beggar soon establishes the absolute dominance over the addressee, and intensely urges him to react cooperatively.

At the initial stage of communication, the Turkana try to draw the addressee's attention regardless of his convenience. They sometimes push, poke, or shake the addressee's body with their hands or with the wooden sticks and clubs that every Turkana man always carries. They attempt to attract the addressee's attention even when he is talking with another person, and may even repeat the addressee's name until he responds. Their willful behavior aimed at leading the course of interaction is

consistent. This feature is prominent in their begging.

Other conspicuous aspects of their methods to lead the begging interaction can be detected in the utterances heard in this interaction. They often demand an immediate answer, as in the case of demanding a decision between two or more possible choices designated by them. A woman living in a neighboring hamlet asked me to buy her a cooking pot; I explained that I had not enough money to do so. After repeating her demand several times, she suddenly said, "There are two kinds of people. One is the kind that gives thing asked for at once, and the other is the kind of person that puts it off until tomorrow. Which kind are you?" (Kitamura, 1990).

In various situations, the Turkana frequently ask, "Is it good or bad?" The answer to this kind of question is obvious to both the speaker and the addressee. Typically in begging interactions, they say, "Is it good or bad 'to beg others for something'?" In this manner, they strictly limit the possibility of the addressee's refusal and make his attention focus on their own need.

There is another method which the Turkana use to lead the course of an interaction to make it accord to their own will. When the addressee expresses a concern independent of the addresser's will, the addresser tries to force the addressee to revise his utterance. Once, while negotiating with a sheep trader, I declared that I would not buy at a price higher than a particular limit. The people around quickly reproved me. They insisted that I should reconsider awarding the bargained price offered by the trader. In a like manner, an employee of mine reprimanded me for not being concerned with her request for a pay raise after I refused her, explaining that since my financial reserves were almost non-existent, I could not afford her a raise (Kitamura, 1990).

The childish selfishness with insufficient control over the self is inconsistent with the behavior of competent negotiators. The beggar's behavior seems dually characterized. Although their emotional demands might be interpreted as infantile behavior, such acts may also be interpreted as the tactical behavior aimed at leading the negotiation for their own benefit. The anger expressed by the beggar when he is refused cannot be thought of as only a pretended one. In such situations they sometimes became so totally absorbed in their emotion that they no longer have any regard for their appearances.

In the following, I analyze everyday interactions other than begging, focusing on their willful behavior aimed at getting absorbed in their emotion and refusing to withdraw from their previous commitment in the interaction at hand.

## REFUSAL OF WITHDRAWING FROM ONE'S PREVIOUS COMMITMENT

### I. Unconcernedness in Lying

Ohta (1986) has pointed out that there are often inserted lies in the utterances of both sides involved in a begging interaction among the Turkana. They do not charge the partner with lying even though the utterance is obvious to be a lie. If the object

begged is out of sight, one can, in order to refuse, say, "I do not have it."

Not only do the Turkana unconcernedly tell a lie but also they never admit having lied even if they are accused. The following exemplifies this: A man demanded sugar from me for mixing with blood to drink in a certain ritual. Another person explained me that the ritual was to be conducted in pray for a young cow which had just copulated for the first time to be pregnant. After a while, however, I found the animal blooded was male and asked the person why they blooded the male animal. He answered that they would also blood the cow, which they were looking for. In the end they did nothing but drunk blood. The next day they explained me that they had at first intended to use it for curing a sick child but later changed their mind.

In such situations they eagerly invent a story by way of excuse. Although they do not mind telling a lie, they attempt to make their utterance truthful. At such a time, it seems that they aim at obtaining the partner's agreement by making up such a story as to satisfy the partner. In other words, they may intend to negotiate with the partner for a mutual agreement.

## II. Willful Behavior Aimed at Having One's Way without Apology

We sometimes reconcile a quarrel by breaking into it and proposing that both sides of the opponents, forgiving the previous circumstances, withdraw their emotional involvement. At that time, the opponents may stop disputing and finally make peace with each other. Also among the Turkana, those around a quarrel try to reconcile it in their own way. However, their way differs from ours: They tend only to throw words of restraint towards one side who is a closer relative, or in such a manner that a person whom they intend to address is obscure. Thus their attempt to reconcile a dispute may, at most, serve to prevent it from escalating.

It is, of course, the participants that prolong the quarrel. They do not at all think of withdrawing themselves from it by their own will. A quarrel once having started does not easily come to an end. People around it can only wait for it to become gradually cool after it reaches the peak. The Turkana may refuse to retreat from their previous involvement especially when they are absorbed in their emotion.

In a like manner, they may reject to make a apology for troubling another. The following illustrates this: One day, after a lunch, when we were having a coffee, a man who was talking to another person stretched his arm with the intention to hold the latter's arm without looking at him. His hand hit the partner's cup and hot coffee was scattered over the partner's arms and legs. For a moment, there was an awkward silence. Then the speaker repeated the words and the actions which he had done just before the silence, and continued his speech as if nothing had happened. The partner, staring unmovingly in the direction of his cup, looked angry, but did not make any overt protest. After a while the speaker ceased from telling his story. Then the people other than the two amusingly talked to each other about the incident and the embarrassed atmosphere was dissolved.

In such a situation, although we may become upset and make a humble apology, the Turkana do not apologize. I frequently observed similar incidents during my

fieldwork: a case where a man spat at a person sitting next although he meant to spit on the ground, and another one where a man picked up and threw a twig, which struck a nearby person. What is common to all these examples is the fact that there was an awkward silence for a moment. An awkward atmosphere is developed not only because the troubler does not apologize, but also because the sufferer deliberately express his anger and discomfort. By doing this, the sufferer virtually manifests that he never overlooks the partner's fault. Neither the troubler nor the sufferer means to propose that they pass it over.

## STAGY BEHAVIOR IN NEGOTIATING

### I. Attachment to Keeping up Appearances

Although it is, for the Turkana, a matter of course that they push the course of an interaction ahead without any mutual agreement between the participants to pass the present interactional hitch over, it is not always easy also for the Turkana to do so. In the following, where the sufferer could not plainly express his anger, he seemed to be in difficulty: An old man came to me and sat on the ground next to me. While he begged me for a blanket, my assistant, who had sat on a chair at a distance from me, stood up and left. After a while, the old man rose and walked with affected steps towards the chair. He was on the point of reaching it, when my assistant came back and was seated. He stopped in front of the chair and stood still for a lengthy period. He subsequently talked to another old man sitting nearby and finally left.

At that time, I came near bursting into laughter. For us, this kind of incongruity in an interaction should be passed over with laughter. In such situations, laughing together is the manifestation of agreement with overlooking the present incongruity. The Turkana, however, do not laugh. A strange impression of there being no laughter is intensified by their stagy behavior aimed at keeping their unperturbed appearances. Differing from us, who cannot avoid fleeing out of a gathering circle when no-one laughs in such situations, they dare to remain there without any defensive acts.

In every society, there are conventional obligations which guide the individuals in the presence of others. We are concerned with the rules with respect to the gathering as a whole, as opposed to only a portion of those present. These rules designate situational obligations, or situational proprieties. By virtue of this kind of rules, we laugh all together in a situation like the above. Further, we take care not to engage ourselves to concerns of only a portion of the people present. This, however, cannot be applied to the Turkana.

Itani, who has studied the Turkana people in the same area as mine, wrote the following incident encountered in his fieldwork (Itani, 1982: 111). At a drinking party in the evening, he jokingly talked about an event in the daytime in which, when he tried to take a photograph, he was nearly thrown a stick at by a man who was present at the party. Hearing it, an old man stood to tell the man, "What a rude act you did to

our friend! I will kill you now!”

In this case, the old man abused his relative to his face in the presence of others, although we usually avoid doing such things. Moreover, he did it in an exaggerated manner. By performing this stacy act, he seems to have aimed at impressing Itani as a good friend of his. The Turkana tend to be eager to express their friendship with a certain person. In spite of their calculated way of acting, they are in fact eager for a friendship with him. These exaggerated acts may be interpreted as products of their attachment to their own model of expressing friendship.

## II. Performance with Intense Absorption in One's Emotion

As seen in the cases above, their behavior is fully affected by the performer's intention on the stage. However, they do not have any mind for hiding the truth for their own benefits, even when they virtually tell a lie. They exaggeratingly act in negotiation, and act on what they believe to be a model of acting. Among the Turkana, such performances must not be thought of as something feigned. Those are the direct expression of the participant's concerns. It does not matter, for them, whether an utterance in an interaction is a lie or not.

They, as performers in an immediate interaction, concentrate themselves on leading the course of the interaction in accordance with their own will. The following incident typically illustrates this: Two thieves killed a goat of my assistant, X. On arriving at the scene, we found that these thieves were X's relatives who can, in their cultural norm, at any time eat his animals without his consent. However, X and his brother, who had been taking care of the goat herd, attempted again and again to strike the thieves with their sticks, and were held back by those around them. They were so excited that they sometimes, freeing themselves of the restraint, in fact struck the thieves and even attempted to throw a spear-like pointed stick at them. At last, they were pressed down on the ground. They cried in their vexation, hitting the ground with their hands. The thieves took the meat of the goat without any compensation. When I started for home, X followed me at a distance. He had completely returned to his usual self when he caught up to me.

The behavior displayed by X appeared like a performance on the stage. He chose thinnest sticks when he struck the thieves, and he never threw the spear-like one at them though he attempted to do so. Further, he cried in an exaggerated manner, and at last he too easily became calm. However, his behavior can be distinguished from performing acts on two points. First, this is not for a play exhibited to audience but for a negotiation over a certain issue with particular persons in real life. In this case, he made a strong appeal to the opponents against their thief-like act, with the intention to prevent such an act from occurring again in future. Second, although a performer on the stage is not required to become absorbed in the emotion of his part in a drama, he was without doubt filled with real anger and regret. His feeling of anger itself was not a pretended one.

This kind of behavior, as well as the begging behavior above, seems to have two contradictory characters: what is calculated, but what is not pretended. Those who

conduct this kind of behavior attend to an interaction at hand in such an attitude as follows: They, making themselves absorbed in their emotion, play a game in real earnest. They do not face up to a negotiation in reliance on their own calculated tactics, but they do with confidence in themselves.

## DISCUSSION

### I. Refusal of a “Dual Reality”

The Turkana tend to aim at displaying the unperturbed self. They may refuse to withdraw from their involvement. They never admit having lied even when they are accused. Also they never apologize for troubling another. They persist in having their way without any hesitation.

Even their childish behavior in begging interactions can be understood as a case of their willful behavior aimed at having their way. It is not because they cannot control themselves that they emotionally demand something of others. Their exaggerated behavior observed in the course of negotiation has a character common with a performance on the stage. That seems to be a performance with intense absorption in the emotion of their part. They, when in an immediate interaction, dare to make themselves absorbed in their emotion.

They are attached to an unwavering self image. Neither participant means to propose that they pass the present interactional hitch over, even when they feel uneasy in such circumstances. In this sense, they persist in refusing anything provisional about themselves.

On the other hand, aside from matters of participants in an immediate interaction, people in their presence also persist in refusing anything provisional within the level of assumed “reality” which they sustain. They do not laugh when they are confronted with an overt incongruity in the interaction. They do not intend to propose that the participants agree to overlooking the present incongruity. In a like manner, they accept any emotionally exaggerated and stagy behavior, no matter how far it seems to be from the truth. Hence they never charge others with lying.

In short, the Turkana do not take notice of any other reality than what is presented. They never admit “a dual reality.” They affirmatively front whatever is presented. Hence they never bother with whether the reality sustained here is true or false. They are lively within the “reality” which is shared by all attendants in the gathering.

### II. Deep Involvement

To paraphrase Goffman (1963), who deals with Anglo-American society, the rules designating situational proprieties govern the allocation of the individual’s involvement within the situation. Through the governance of these rules the individual finds that some of his capacity of involvement is reserved for the gathering as a whole. The individual is required to give visible evidence that he has not wholly given him-

self up to the main focus of attention. Some self-command or self-possession will typically be required and exhibited.

In our society, there are few situations which allow complete absorption in a situational task, which is induced when a real crisis comes. Only in such situations as examinations and competitive sports, deep involvement is tolerated.

Take, for example, an instance of competitive sports. Although it can be said, within Goffman's context, that deep involvement of players is tolerated in the game, it can also be said that players are required to be deeply involved in the game. The game will be spoiled if the players are not immersed in their play. The players never reallocate their involvement in a more acceptable way. They never bother with whether the reality sustained here is true or false. The game of sports is a place where not only players but also spectators can obtain a lively experience.

The Turkana way of conducting situational activities is just the same as that of players in the game, although the Turkana do not have any off time. They make a move according to a sense of game, that is the sense of necessity indwelling in a game itself. Through exchange of moves, they negotiate a certain issue and establish and pursue the relationship with each other. In any situations, therefore, they are required to be deeply involved in their activities.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** This study was financed by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, Japan (Monbusho International Scientific Research Program No. 63041026). I am grateful to Prof. G. S. Were, Director of the Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi, for his official support necessary for our research team. I am particularly indebted to Dr. S. Sato of Tsukuba University, the research team director, for giving me great help in conducting fieldwork, Dr. I. Ohta, my field colleague, for his cooperation and useful discussion, and to Prof. M. Kakeya and other staff of the Department of Human Behavior Studies, Hirosaki University, for encouraging this study. I would like to express my appreciation to my Turkana friends for their generous assistance.

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—Received *February 1, 1990*

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