A BROTHER IN WEWOKA:
LABEL AND CONTEXT
IN ANTHROPOLOGIST-NATIVE RELATIONS

Introduction

Robert Paine (1969), writing on friendship, noted that whereas anthropologists focus on kinship to the neglect of friendship, kinship and friendship are related in many cultural practices. They are, as an intrinsic value of human life, woven into the fabric of social, political and economic exchanges. Thus the patterns of friendship in many cultures can be expected to vary according to certain structural relations which determine their development in a sociopolitical function of domination or equality in performances. This view is very much reflected in attempts to distinguish between male and female patterns of friendship (Nelson 1974; Lindholm and Lindholm 1979) and to emphasise the context-sensitiveness of friendship development (Herzfeld 1981, 1982; Jacobson 1981). For instance, Herzfeld (1981) hints in his studies of Greek towns in Crete and of Pefko that differences in social norms encourage the Cretans to see friendship as an extra-communal, spiritual kinship, whereas in Pefko, friends are socially inferior to kin. In Herzfeld's view, friendship is formulaic:

> ... under the guise of representing events in personal terms, it actually recasts them stereotypically. Thus, the attribution of friendship to political allies is in fact a metaphor for the instability of that relationship, which may, in addition, be essentially one of asymmetrical patronage (Herzfeld 1982: 655).

The use of metaphors or labels to describe friendship patterns in various cultures is not generally uncommon. What are less often emphasised in the literature are the context and dynamics of the linguistic usages (Jacobson 1981). For instance, in order to

indicate closeness in friendship, a southerner in the United States of America might say someone is a cousin even though the person is not a cousin according to basic genealogical criteria (Holland 1982; Lawuyi 1983). Similarly, a black American can describe a fellow Black or a friend as 'brother', even though they are not related. The term 'brother' signifies relations other than that of fictive kinship. In labelling their relationships to others, Blacks have invariably taken into account the situation of encounter and the impression and knowledge of people (Holland 1982).

In this paper, I wish to examine the notion of 'brother' as a label for friendship among a 'black' group known as Seminole Freedmen. The observations made are in respect of year-long participant-observation research in Wewoka, Oklahoma, in the United States of America, where the Seminole Freedmen reside. The fieldwork began in May 1983 and ended in May the following year. The paper is divided into three sections. The first considers the ethnographic setting for ethnic relations in Wewoka. The second is a brief description of my encounter with two Seminole Freedmen at a bar-room. Both Freedmen, in spite of the conflict between them, referred to me as 'brother'. The meaning of this is explored in the third section of the paper. The thrust of my argument is that the general semiotic understanding of 'brother' takes on a specific orientation in the context of anthropologist-native relations. For in Wewoka, where being black encodes a complex set of social and moral propositions, 'brother' serves two diametrically opposed semiotic functions: it homogenizes a black anthropologist with the native black group and heterogenizes on the basis of untested knowledge of the anthropologist, who is an outsider. The homo- / hetero-genization process is comprehended from the dimension of friendship, herein defined as shared body of knowledge and presuppositions which allows 'brothers' to predict what they can and cannot do. 'Brother' is thus a term in which a person *qua* person acquires meaning through the roles ascribed to friendship.

The Cultural Setting

Wewoka lies within Seminole county in the state of Oklahoma. The county has an area of 639 square miles, and in 1930, according to the 1980 U.S. Census figures, had a population of 79,621. Many people came to settle here because of the discovery of oil in the area during the early 1900s. But by 1980, the population had decreased to 27,743. This is because of the shift away from oil to the livestock business. In 1984, a large portion of the county was still non-industrialized and rural. The major link with the outside world is land transportation. The railway that passes through only picks up goods, not passengers. There is no seaport, and the airport in Seminole city, a few miles from Wewoka, handles small aircraft traffic only.

Seminole county headquarters is located at Wewoka. The city's population is, in the 1980 census, estimated at 5,480. This

represents an increase of only 196 over that of the previous decade. The adult population has been growing, but some of the younger generation, forced by lack of jobs, education, and recreational facilities, have had to migrate to the bigger cities in the state. Essentially, businesses thrive only on small profits, several shops have closed down and been relocated to such neighbouring cities as Seminole and Holdenville. Unemployment is high, especially since the remaining companies do not, in my estimation, expand enough to absorb one hundred new employees every year.

Ethnic distribution across Seminole county reveals much about the sociological implications of this little-industrialized economy on the organization of social relations. There are 21,453 Whites, 2,162 Blacks and 3,718 American Indians in the county. Of these figures, which are taken from the 1980 census data, only 3,683 Whites, 993 Blacks and 759 American Indians live in Wewoka city. The number of Blacks in Wewoka is higher than that in any other town in Seminole county. They are the major labour force recruited into the white-controlled establishments in the area. Many of the American Indians, by contrast, seek for and are recruited into employment in the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma.

The 1980 census estimates also show that two-thirds of the black population in Wewoka are under 65 years of age. This percentage is, of course, judging from the emphasis on black labour, higher than that of any other racial group. These Blacks usually only have a secondary education. Those with a higher education are, rather, to be found in cities whose environments are conducive to their pursuits as lawyers, administrators, doctors and engineers. Their link with Wewoka is mostly restricted to the occasions of funerals, the inauguration of pastors or deacons, marriage arrangements, and the Christmas season.

Whenever the blacks and members of other racial groups come home, they swell the number of those local residents who patronize the 'street'. The street embraces three major buildings at the junction of Cedar and Mekusukey streets. The businesses located on the street include beer parlours, gaming machines and discos. On non-festive occasions, the clients are mostly retired citizens, disabled soldiers or the unemployed. Businesses are maintained by the trickle of money slotted into juke boxes, the sale of beer and card games.

The ambience on the street is relaxed; indeed, to be on the street is considered fun. People dance, drink, smoke and gamble. Although fun or play is sometimes associated with unhealthy excitement, individuals are expected to exercise self-control. To have fun, individuals must tolerate the street talk - the abusive, insulting, derogatory, endearing speeches of 'mother-fucker', 'fuck your ass', 'asshole', 'darling' and 'honey' - which can elicit the response of excitement or anger. To respond angrily, even when a person to whom you have lent money, calls you a mother-fucker, is regarded as demeaning. Self-control is applauded.

With the sociological import of the street as a place of leisure, a forum of inter-ethnic and racial relations and as a place where identities are continually being restructured (Lawuyi 1985), as an anthropologist studying ethnic relations I was naturally drawn

into the street also.

Quite understandably, while I was still regarded a stranger few people wanted to associate with me. I would sit down in the bar and drink my beer alone, or invite people so willing to join me. As time went on, I developed my own friendship network. This included the young and the aged, male and female, university and non-university graduates. We would sit down and talk and sometimes dance to the music from the juke boxes. Any time I felt tired and wanted to sit down, I would be teased back to the dancing floor. It was difficult to obtain any peace, as the following incident shows.

At a bar, where I had gone to enjoy myself drinking beer and watching domino games, a black man, 27 years old, walked to my table and accused me of talking to his girl-friend who had just walked past my table. I thought he was either joking or drunk and would have ignored him except that he challenged me to a physical duel after sniffing contemptuously, 'you nigger'. I was still explaining myself to him when an onlooker joined in the dialogue and dared my antagonist to lay a hand on his 'brother' and see the consequences. My 'antagonist' withdrew from me and called my 'rescuer' a 'mother-fucker'. The quarrel ended after another onlooker bought drinks for the three of us.

My rescuer and I became friends after the bar-room incident. But then, whenever I met my antagonist on the road or in the bar, he would greet me with the Afro-American expression 'Hi brother'. I was caught in a double bind: myself against my 'brother', my 'brother' and I against my brother.

Among the Seminole Freedmen, the term 'brother', like that of cousin, can describe fictive or non-fictive relations. Both can, on the fictive level, enter into the kinship system as a designation for members of an extended family system that always includes three generations of kin. However, none of the terms plays a significant role in inheritance, as usually the eldest male child becomes the principal inheritor of his father's property.

The Seminole Freedmen were originally black slaves who escaped from their white masters and took refuge in inhospitable places like the swamps, river banks, mountains and forests of Florida (Porter 1971; Gallagher 1951; Opala 1981). The members of a band constitute the most inclusive political unit in traditional Seminole Freedmen society. The society then was located in Florida among the Seminole Indians, with whom the Seminole Freedmen formed a political alliance (Opala 1981; Genovese 1979). The alliance on several occasions fought white men who sought to restrict their freedom and dispossess them of their property (Coe 1974; Gallagher 1951; Opala 1981). The fighting unit was not often the individual band (Coe 1974), yet there were occasions when it acted alone in marauding neighbouring white settlements for survival goods like food and guns (Genovese 1979). Each successful raid emboldened the spirit of resistance against slavery and, more importantly, encouraged Blacks still working in the white cotton and coffee plantations in the south, especially in North and South Carolina and in Georgia, to work towards their own freedom (Willis 1963; Sefton 1972). As new immigrants joined the bands, their population grew.

Another process which facilitated the growth of the bands was intermarriage between the free black slaves on one hand, and between blacks and Indians on the other. The latter, inter-racial form of marriage was of politico-economic significance in that it legitimized the civic rights of the free slaves and was fundamental to their economic subsistence. The free slaves were leased lands by the Seminole Indians. After farming on the lands, the Seminole Freedmen compensated the Seminole Indians with at least one-third of their harvests (Covington 1978). This politico-economic relationship continued until 1832 when, in pursuance of the removal policy of Andrew Jackson, the Seminole Indians were induced to sign the Treaty of Payne's Landing at Fort Gibson, Oklahoma (Howard 1984). The treaty required the Seminole and the free slaves to relinquish their lands in Florida and migrate to Oklahoma, their present home. Although the Seminole Indians and the free slaves resisted the removal, they were nevertheless defeated and eventually relocated (Hudson 1976).

In short, the band was both a political and an economic unit. Its size varied from time to time in response to the vagaries of war and demographic shifts. It was organized around a male leader, usually the founder, who was succeeded by a male member of the band who was rich and powerful. Polygyny was extensively practised. Descent was bilateral. Members of co-resident lineages from the same sib recognized a closer kinship among themselves than with a co-resident lineage from a different sib that belonged to another band. In acknowledging a common affiliation with other lineages of their sib the Seminole Freedmen always refer to their African ancestry (Lawuyi 1985) as well as to their band, which today is either Dosar Barkus or Bruner. Members of these bands are spread into settlements such as Turkey Creek, Noble Town, Scipio, Thomas and Bruner. Each of these settlements is located near creeks or streams from which water can be drawn for drinking or for washing clothes.

All in all, each kin group is an independent unit and only relates to others horizontally through related sub-groups. Kinship is a mode of ordering rights and duties and besides is a means of ensuring social integration. However, it must be noted that because of the discovery of oil in Wewoka and its environs, as well as the growth of major towns in the Seminole area, many of the Seminole Freedmen settlements have become incorporated into big urban centres. Consequently the Seminole Freedmen settlements are now open to all social groups. Hence the settlements no longer rigidly mark Seminole Freedmen ethnic identity.

The terms 'brother' and 'cousin' would ordinarily be used to cover lineal and collateral kin in descending generations. But in other social contexts the terms cover non-kin. A brother or a cousin is different in the local fictive idiom from a 'buckra' or outsider. The terms describe a role prescribed or not, involving people in a certain form of socio-economic and political relationship. In this sense, the Africans and the Seminole Indians regarded each other as brothers, whereas the whites, the common enemy to those who had experienced colonial domination, are 'buckras'. The use of the term 'brother' or 'cousin' in the fictive sense therefore

implies a frame within which people are bonded in socially established meanings. Within this frame, to call one a brother or a cousin is to signal an intention or expectation. Much more is required of a brother than of a cousin.

Developing Friendship

In the light of the above discussion, the bar-room incident draws our attention to the conventional social-structural problem of opposition and complementation. This opposition is evidenced by a characteristic weakness of the formal organic bond between myself and my antagonist. Terms like 'nigger', which he used, are introduced into discourse when people become irritated, annoyed or provoked. In such instances of annoyance or dissatisfaction with another person's action, 'nigger' calls attention to a certain category and its associated cultural value (Basso 1979). The individual who is a 'nigger' becomes a non-person, one with a negative value from which the user seeks to dissociate himself or herself. Hence the use of 'nigger' signifies a lack of bond. Without it there is a tendency towards the negation or disruption of relations between 'insider and outsider', between husband and wife, and between generations (Balikci 1968).

In contrast, the complementary aspect of the bar-room encounter is evident in the exchange between myself and my rescuer. From the day he rescued me, I bought him drinks, he bought for me too, and we became friends. Patrons of the bar asked me about his movements and usually refused to believe that I did not know his whereabouts. Though the 'rescue' operation did not entail any specific obligations, the friendship that developed involved an effort to maintain it through adherence to the rules of balanced reciprocity (Reina 1959; Price 1978).

Aside from the exchange in beer, money and other material goods, the bar-room encounter has another significance that is rooted in the question, were the subsequent greetings by my former antagonist genuine or ironic? If ironic, how is this indicative of friendship? My view is that the term 'brother' is a denotational symbol for a certain sort of behaviour. Its meaning depends on the linkage of context and culture and the link between the antagonist, the rescuer and I. The Seminole Freedmen's culture limits the number of interpretive options we are permitted seriously to consider (Shweder 1977), just as, from Pefko rhetoric on friendship, the citizens' imaginations and expectations are trained on acceptable criteria for social identities in a perceived hostile environment (Herzfeld 1982). Among Pefko citizens, the rhetorical stratagems are supposed to resolve the paradox of their selfhood: do they belong to Pefko or to Crete?

The 'brother' label must have been a means by which my rescuer and antagonist both wanted to objectify their relationships with me, for it was through this label that we came to integrate our separateness by a sense of sharing. What we shared are meanings

that are not necessarily in behaviour itself. Though the meanings 'may seem to be inextricably part of the event, once an interpretation is made ... this phenomenological illusion should not mislead us into thinking that meanings are discovered' (Shweder 1977: 641).

In my relationships with my antagonist and my rescuer there are two seemingly disparate manifestations of friendship which are first, the skin-colour classification, which linked me as an African with a Black American community, and secondly, the attributive characteristics of Black American cultural knowledge. As Holland (1982: 16) points out, such attribution

> can be construed as supporting a central point suggested by the present data, namely that Americans use two distinctive knowledge systems in the process of interpreting behaviour. As derived from the research described here, one knowledge system has to do with situation, that is with the routinized or institutionalized aspects of life in the society, of people with whom one associates. The other has to do with person, that is, with the knowledge that one has about the characteristics of specific individuals, of types of individuals, and of humans in general, that transcend situation.

Knowledge of the situation in the bar-room revolved around my skin-colour. The black skin is, in Wewokan society, a major criterion in contrasting spheres of racial relations (Lawuyi 1985). Blacks form a 'family' that distinguishes them from the 'Whites' and the 'Reds'. Within such a 'family' is the domain of friends, the people who sometimes greet each other as 'brothers' or 'sisters'. The domain of friends is not, however, restricted to the Black family, since certain Whites and Reds fulfilling certain expectations are also regarded as friends. In fact, even in my own case, the wish to incorporate me into the 'family' circle is often countered by some of my negative attributes. One of such negative attributes is my 'funny accent'.

With my funny accent I could not pass as a *bona fide* member of the 'Black family'. On listening to my accent a barrage of questioning usually follows: 'Where are you from?', 'How did you come here?', 'Are you from Africa?', 'Do you still live in trees?', 'Why do you have robust health when other Africans are dying of hunger?'. These questions raise what Crapanzano would describe as 'ethnographic confrontation' (1977: 6). It suggests that at the instance of my encounters with fellow Blacks there was a disruption in our senses of our selves which is the 'reflexive awareness of a centered unity and continuity, an identity that oscillates between reification and resistance to reification' (ibid.: 7).

There was a general tendency on the part of my informants to consider my movement, speech and eating habits as African. Even my laughter was African. Seldom do they remember my nationality and they cared even less - except for the educated ones with university degrees - about my ethnicity. Africans seemed to them to share a common culture; they were an indivisible entity to my informants. It was on this African platform that we shared a common identity, since those who regarded themselves as having an African origin can

hardly remember the ethnic setting from which their ancestors were captured and sold as slaves.

My rescuer was one of those who considered himself an African. He had in the past contemplated travelling to Africa but had shelved the plan for lack of money. He had worked in Washington D.C. for several years as a government employee and had, he said, met and interacted with several Africans. The memories he had of the contacts helped to structure our relationship: he saw in me an opportunity of being informed about several African cultural practices he had heard about or had read in books. In fact, before the bar-room encounter we used to discuss African problems.

My antagonist, by contrast, had worked in Wewoka all his life. On finishing secondary education, he was employed as a guard in one of the industrial plants in the city. When we met in the bar-room he was unemployed because the general economic situation in America had led to severe retrenchment of workers. Hence, idle and without any work, he took to visiting the street. On the street, home brew, drunk in company, eliminated his thoughts about losing his job. Also, making passes to women was one way, in my opinion, of reasserting his manliness. There was no room in his world for identification with people outside the circle of friends he was used to. Indeed, despite the ideal attitude in the community that a person should mind his own business, the common expression of his latent hostility is to challenge people for having taken what was his. I was a victim of one of these hostilities because in his view I took his girl-friend. Hence I became a symbolic substitute for the job. And since my African identity had no meaning - until, as he confessed, after the encounter, when we had become friends - I did not fulfil his expectations of those relationships he classified as close or friendly. This led me to search for what friendship is to several of my informants.

The Conceptual Basis of Friendship

In my view, between why and how people form friendship is a cognitive structure that influences the strategies adopted before and after such friendship (Bourdieu 1977). The structure allows for the fact that gifts, words, challenges and even women that are exchanged in friendship relations receive their appropriate meaning from the response they trigger off, even if that response is a failure and is unable retrospectively to remove the intended meaning of the exchange. I discovered that in Wewoka, occasions such as New Year's Day, and Valentine's Day, are times for the exchange of gifts, when being friends becomes instrumental to symbolic or material exchanges, especially where costly articles like clothes, wrist-watches and even food were items of exchange. The costs of the articles seem to place a higher value on friendship. This is because, where the friendship has lasted a long while, those involved are linked by a knowledge structure of beliefs and propositions that provide generic categories. As a friend of mine who gave

me gifts at Christmas said:

> Oh yah! I have plenty friends. We are supposed to treat other people like you do yourself. A friend is somebody who treats you right, treats you as you treat yourself. You treat them lovely like I do you [reference is to me]. If you come to my house, I treat you. If I am cooking or getting ready to eat, I put on the table and offer you something to eat.

There were other people that talked to me on how to recognize friends. Their statements reveal that a stereotyped sequence of actions and knowledge of persons is productively used in the conceptualization of friendship. Thus a friend is one who adjusts to an elaborate code of behaviour ; such a friend treats the partner like himself or herself and thereby dissolves the conceptual distinction between self and other. Friendship also encourages performances such as the feeding and housing of friends. As a matter of fact, even when a friend's visit is unexpected, the setting is one that remains open and ready to do something for the sake of the friendship.

Yet true friendship takes time to develop. The following excerpt suggests that friends are tested, and that the perceived scores on such tests become feedback information that is moulded into explanatory accounts which excuse or justify continuity or change in friendship. A male friend said:

> Really, it takes me a while. I don't make snap judgements. A friend is somebody you can really depend on ... um ... have concern for you. Somebody you can share thoughts with and you don't hear them everytime you turn around.

It occurs to me that a very important element in friendship is trust. Trust comes through friends performing well on tasks which reinforce belief and suppositions about what a true friend should do. The context of such performances matter, as it accounts for the production and consumption of the meaning of behaviour. The Black who perceived me as a brother can, in another context, regard me as a nigger. Meaning in this context is in the realization of what the codes (i.e. brother and nigger) stand for. Where attempts are made to account for these codes, friendship is bounded by familiar roles adopted and acted out. As a female friend indicated:

> I have a good friend in Brooklyn, New York. We shared our training together and we have been friends, in fact sisters, since 1943 till now. She calls more than I do and we share thoughts. You cultivate these friendships and they seem to go on, more on and on.

In a nutshell, meaningful friendship is created through a fixation of imagination on at least an instant of behaviour. The correspondences to the fixated image of the friend, as for instance phoning regularly to inquire after one's welfare, account for the detachment of the meaning of friendship. Indeed, from such fixated

images come the notion of deviancy or unfriendly acts. Hence, in my research, I noticed that when people hear that their friends stole, raped, killed or travelled abroad they were surprised that such had happened without their knowledge or had never happened before. The reactions to the information sometimes take the form 'No, it cannot be my friend!'; 'I can't believe it'; 'That can't be true!'. These are expressions of surprise based on what has been established as standard expectations from friends.

As long as the fixated image is not contradicted by any other behaviour, there is no basis for surprise. The ability to predict what friends are capable of doing goes a long way in understanding the degree of the friends' commitment. As an elderly man, 66 years old, told me:

> A dog does not promise, yet is committed. We do not know whether a dog trusts or has confidence yet it is man's best friend. A dog will follow you, will protect you, will defend you. I remember on one occasion, my uncle went fishing and slipped into the water. It was his dog that saved him.

At the end of a long story, the informant concluded that the dog was well trained. Actually the dog was trained to discriminate between familiar and non-familiar objects and to place value on its friendship to the master. The value becomes a cultural knowledge that is, in turn, used to understand the behaviour of friends. For when a friend does not call or visit, does not inquire after one's welfare and is unpredictable in behaviour, the label of 'friend' may either be withdrawn or may be rephrased as that of a 'fair-weather' friend (Jacobson 1981).

Discussion and Conclusion

A central issue in my relationship with my former antagonist and my rescuer is their objectification of me as a brother.

In this paper, the situation in which 'brother' would appear to have two different meanings has been analysed as an important part of Black American culture, though at a level of abstraction higher than that of the cognitive models of individuals. The structure involves a basic set of assumptions about testing situations, predictability in behaviour and social categorization. In my view, brothers whose behaviour can be predicted are those that have been tested. The performance of brothers on such tests invariably lead to the labelling of persons as friends, cousins, or fair-weather friends.

On the one hand, I was a brother to my rescuer, who had met and interacted with other Africans and, consequently, saw me as a member of the African group. On the other hand, my former antagonist, lacking any experience similar to that of my rescuer, did not initially perceive me as a brother. I had to prove to him that I was indeed a brother.

Of course, the bar-room encounter was not in itself a deliberate test of friendship. However, it set up the interpretative frame within which messages of friendship were to be understood; brothers do not fight or quarrel but rather assume a responsibility for caring for each other. The frame, as encoded in the 'brother' label, thus contrasts with at least one other frame, that of outsider. Brothers are, of course, friends because the history of performances - so regular as to be predictable - heightens awareness of the act of expression and, in so doing, challenges brothers into greater responsibilities to each other. The labelling helps explain differences in relations between brothers and non-brothers rather than reifying them. It also reminds us that people are trying to work out solutions to basic problems of human existence.

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