

The Joy of Work as Participation*

by Dorothy Lee



* Excerpted from *Freedom and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1959).

It was in a domestic situation that I had the moment of discovery of which I want to write now. It was Christmas Eve; I was working late at night, listening to the desultory talk of my husband and my brother-in-law. I was exhausted after a day of housework, of coping with two small children, of Christmas preparations; but I had to finish making bedding for a doll crib, and I was working against time, wishing I were in bed.

I had been living a life of conflict since my marriage, since I had felt that I owed it to my profession to continue my work in anthropology. This meant that I had to organize my life so that my housewifely duties did not encroach unduly on my professional work; and I had to justify everything that I did as a housewife, as something imposed by the exigencies of my budget or by my role as wife and mother. In this way, I did not have to feel guilty toward my profession. The doll blanket I was making that night was amply justified; it would give happiness to my three-year-old daughter, and it had been necessary for me to take the time to make crib and bedding, for I could not afford to buy them.

As I sewed this Christmas Eve, I was suddenly astonished to discover that I had started to add an entirely unpremeditated and unnecessary edging of embroidery; and, simultaneously, I was aware of a deep enjoyment in what I was doing. It was a feeling that had nothing to do with the pleasure the work would give to my daughter on the morrow; it had nothing to do with a sense of achievement, or of virtue in duty accomplished. And I knew that I had never liked to embroider. There was no justification for my work; yet it was the source of such a deep satisfaction, that the late hour and my fatigue had ceased to exist for me.

At this moment of discovery, I knew that I was experiencing what it meant to be a social being, not merely Dorothy Lee, an individual; I knew that I had truly become a mother, a wife, a neighbour, a teacher. I realized that some boundary had disappeared, so that I was working in a social medium; that I was not working for the future pleasure of a distant daughter, but rather within a relationship unaffected by temporality or physical absence. What gave meaning to my work was the medium in which I was working—the medium of love, in a broad sense. So far, my rationalization and justification of my work had obscured this meaning, had cut me off from my own social context. It suddenly became clear to me that it did not matter whether I was scrubbing the kitchen floor or darning stockings or zipping up snowsuits; these all had meaning, not in themselves, but in terms of the situation of which they

were a part. They contained social value because they implemented the value of the social situation.

This was a tremendous discovery for me, illuminating in a flash my experience and my thinking. My mind went immediately to the Tikopia, about whom I had been reading, and I said to myself, "This is the way the Tikopia work." I had been puzzled about the motivating forces in the life of the Tikopia. These were people who were without organized leadership in working, yet who carried out large undertakings. And without any authority to impose legislation and mete out punishment, the business of the village was carried out, and law and order were maintained. Raymond Firth, the ethnographer, answering the unspoken questions of western readers, spoke of obligations, duty, fear of adverse opinion, as motivations. I did not like his choice of words, because he spoke of the obligation to perform unpleasant tasks, for example, and yet the situations he described brimmed with joy. Now I saw that the Tikopia did not need external incentives.

This was all very well, but when I came to examine my discovery, I could not explain it in any rational or acceptable way. My society did not structure working situations as occasions which contained their own satisfaction; and it assumed the existence of aggregates or collections of individuals, not of a social continuum. I had learned to believe in the existence of a distinct self, relating itself externally to work as a means to an end with external incentives and external rewards. Yet it was obvious that if I got satisfactions from participating in a situation, there must be some medium, some continuum, within which this participation can take place. If my family and I were aspects of one whole, there must be some positive apprehension of a continuity which made me an aspect of my family, not a separate member; it was not enough to say that my physical being and my sensory experience did not in themselves prescribe the limits of the self.

And this is how I came to study the definition of the self among the Tikopia. It seemed to me that only on the basis of just such an assumption of continuity could their relations to man and nature and the divine, their words and phrasings and ceremonials be understood. I went back to Raymond Firth's books on the Tikopia, and read each detail without placing it automatically against my own conception of the self. And so I was able to see a conception of identity radically different from mine; I found a social definition of the self. I found that here I could not speak of man's relations with his universe, but rather of a universal interrelatedness, because man was

not the focus from which relations flowed. I found a named and recognized medium of social continuity, implemented in social acts, not in words. And I found, for example, that an act of fondling or an embrace was not phrased as a “demonstration” or an “expression” of affection—that is, starting from the ego and defined in terms of the emotions of the ego, but rather as an act of moral support or of comforting or of sharing, as a social act. I found a system of childrearing which trained toward increasing interdependence and socialization, instead of toward personal self-reliance and individuation. And here I found work whose motivation lay in the situation itself, a situation which included the worker and his society, the activity and its end, and whose satisfaction lay in social value.

What I say below is based on three books by Raymond Firth, *We the Tikopia, Primitive Polynesian Economy*, and *The Work of the Gods* parts I and II. The interpretation is usually my own, based on intensive and detailed reading of this rich source of data.

In Firth’s presentation, the newborn Tikopia is not helped to recognize, discover, develop—or is it create?—his own separate identity; in fact, he is not treated as if he had such a separate identity. In my own culture, I had learned to speak of an infant as an “addition” to the family; and my planning for the coming baby had been in terms of something added. I found an additional room, additional furniture and added implements; I took out an additional insurance policy. But Firth spoke as if the child were no such addition. He spoke of the “entrance” of the child into a family circle, and everything he subsequently described conveyed the impression of a swelling of this circle, of an enhancement of social participation and social good.

From birth on, among the Tikopia, the infant is gradually and systematically introduced to a widening circle. At first, he is physically close to his mother, held and suckled and comforted when awake, in immediate tactile contact. Soon the female aunts and other older relatives share this close care of, or involvement in, the infant. Then the father and the older male relatives begin to nurse the child, seeking his companionship. More and more distant relatives come, male and female; and the child is introduced to their society deliberately, so that his affections and dependences should be spread widely. At some point during this process, the child is also introduced to the companionship of youths and maidens and little children. The infant may be turned over to the care of a six-year-old brother, who will be seen carrying him around, nuzzling and playing with him, and otherwise

showing his enjoyment of him. Adolescent boys and girls, exchanging flirtatious talk in the shade, may choose to hold an infant in their arms.

This is not merely a recognition of the dependence of the infant. It is an expression of the interdependence within the social unit. Close and distant relatives leave their homes and their occupations to be with a little grandchild or niece or cousin several times removed; or to carry a young relative off for a visit, or down to the beach where the men sit together talking. It is not for lack of babysitters that babies are taken along by their parents when they go gardening. Firth speaks of how a man, called away from talk of men by his wife to stay with the baby, leaves the group with a sense of dignity, not of annoyance and interruption.

Many Tikopia parents go even further in widening the circle in which their children participate. They lend them out as “adhering” children to other households; then the children are parts of two family circles, sharing the intimate details of living with either, at their choice. Older children or adults may be invited to become adhering brothers or sisters or other relatives.

The structure of life within the family rests on the assumption that there is social continuity, and that this is good. In our own society, where we assume individual identity, we keep the physical entities strictly separate; only in sexual relations do we allow physical mingling. We do not like to breathe the breath of others, or feel the breath of others; and, evoking the sanction of sanitation, we even gave up for many years the most effective way of resuscitating the drowning, since it involved giving them our breath. We protect privacy with the sanction of health and sanitation; it is good to have a room of one’s own and unhealthy to share it with five others. It used to be merely a question of enough fresh air; it has since been transformed into a question of mental health; whatever the sanction, it does ensure privacy.

In our society, clothing separates mother and child; is it to protect each from the hazards of a sudden draft? It was 102°F in my hospital room when I was first allowed to hold my baby; yet both baby and mother were carefully swathed in cloth which kept them to that degree distinct. Clothing, in fact, guards everyone against cutaneous contact with others, except perhaps, at the beach. We have divided our benches into individual units; our seats in school, on the train, on the bus. Even our solid sofas, planned for social groupings, have demarcating lines or separate pillows to help individuals keep apart. But the Tikopia help the self to be continuous with its society through their physical arrangements. They find it good

to sleep side by side crowding each other, next to their children or their parents or their brothers and sisters, mixing sexes and generations; and if a widow finds herself alone in her one-room house, she may adopt a child or brother to allay her intolerable privacy.

In our society, we protect ourselves from each other's secretions in the interest of sanitation. Who but very young children would think of sharing toothbrushes? But among the Tikopia people like to chew the half masticated betel wads of others; and these are passed with affection from older to younger, from brother to sister.

In the area of food, also, we erect a sanitary barrier around the individual. A mother is urged never to taste food she cooks with the same spoon which she uses for stirring; and this, even though the temperature of the food is such that it oftentimes will kill any germs she might introduce from her mouth. Indeed, the disgust aroused if she acts otherwise may have less to do with the logic of sanitation, than with the thought that the mother's saliva might thus be introduced into the food. And, of course, when it comes to the care of infants, the mother is urged to be even more careful. So machinery chews the baby's food into a mash, bottlewarmers and other mechanical devices bring the child's food to body temperature, boiling water sterilizes away the mother's tactile contact, bottles and cups and spoons separate the mother from the mouth of the child.

The Tikopia mother phrases all feeding as physical continuity. If she is not suckling the child, she maintains this continuity in some other way. She masticates the solid food herself, partly digesting it with her saliva before bending down to put it into the baby's mouth with her lips, like a bird feeding its young. The water she gives the baby is also mixed with her saliva first and warmed with her own body warmth in her mouth, before it is given to the baby with her lips.

Something of this is carried on into the family meal—or rather household meal, for a number of other relatives often live in the house, or share the meal of the day. The older members are deliberately given portions too large for them, and the younger members portions too small, so that the elder can pass their leavings to the younger. It is not a question of neatly cutting off the portion one cannot eat, and putting it aside; the Tikopia use no tools other than their hands in eating. The leavings are passed on bearing the marks of the eaters' fingers, which, carefully licked clean, have slid down the side of the heap. And the guest from another district is given an enormous portion, so that he can have his own leavings to take home. This is not the same as taking a gift from

the storehouse; this is taking a share of a social occasion away with him.

Work among the Tikopia is also socially conceived and structured; and if a man has to work alone, he will probably try to take a little child along. In our culture, the private office is a mark of status, an ideal; and a man has really arrived when he can even have a receptionist to guard him from any social intrusion without his private consent. Our kitchen planners, caught between ideals of privacy and efficiency on the one hand, and the new teachings of child specialists on the other, have not yet managed to introduce the child into the kitchen as anything much better than a necessary evil.

To the Tikopia, an American kitchen, with the mother mainly concerned with having everything within reach and no one under foot, would be an atrocity. When they prepare the meal, after they have returned from their gardening and other food-getting occupations, the whole Tikopia household works together. Nothing is within reach, and children fill this gap, fetching and carrying and running errands, forming a bridge between adult and adult. Father and mother, the unmarried aunt, the grandmother, the brother-in-law, all work together, firing the oven, scraping taro, grating coconut. One gets fiber for making a coconut strainer, another squeezes out the coconut cream, another is nursing the baby. While they wait for the food to bake, they carve cups out of coconut shell, or plait sinnet, or play. Jokes and anecdotes fly back and forth. No one apparently wants to be alone so as to concentrate or to work more efficiently.

The work situations which Raymond Firth presents always convey this joy and sheer satisfaction, at least to this reader. There seems to be no compulsion to work. When Firth speaks of "obligations," he probably does so to explain to his Western readers how it is that a man will work without external coercion of any sort. But we find the Tikopia often choosing these "obligations." For example, Firth tells how the husbands of women married out of a family group have the obligation to fire and tend the ovens when this family group performs a public celebration. He speaks too of the sons of widowed women, who are the guests of honour on such occasions, but who nevertheless choose to assume the role of their dead fathers and come instead as cooks; here is choice, not compulsion. People choose to make contributions to the donor during a great giftgiving occasion, even though they are to participate in the occasion as recipients, whether they have made a contribution or not. People manage to discover obscure avenues of relationship which enable them to assume such "obligations;" this

means that they will have to get and prepare and plait sinnet, or dig and scrape taro, or get pandanus and beat it into bark cloth; it also means a fuller participation and involvement in the social situation.

In our own culture, we do have what we call cooperative undertakings, and we urge parents to plan cooperative work for the family. But these are proposed ultimately for the benefit of the individual, so that the end is a collective end. It would be a mistake to see the Tikopia situation as a cooperative one in this sense. Cooperation, like altruism, presupposes our own definition of a discrete self.

In the use they make of kinship terms, also, the Tikopia define the individual socially. Kinship terms, of course, always do define the individual on a social basis, and, to my knowledge, they are present in all societies. But not everywhere are they used as they are used among the Tikopia. Here the personal name is rarely used. Brothers and sisters call each other by kinship terms, and parents call their children "son" and "daughter" when they do not have to specify. In addressing or referring to older people, when specification is necessary, the name of the dwelling is used, such as "mother's brother from —," not the personal name.

In the kind of terms which they choose to use, the Tikopia show the extent to which they view the individual as social. It seems to be a common practice, for example, to refer to, or address a relative, not in terms of his relation to oneself, but in terms of his relation to a common relative, thus widening the circle, and bringing in another relation by implication. A child, speaking to his mother's brother, will probably refer to his father as "your brother-in-law." A father may call out to his sons, "You brethren." A man may address his son-in-law as "You brother-in-law linked (that is, related as brother-in-law) to my son" thus evoking a fourth relative. A man may call his father-in-law *grandfather*-linked, thus introducing his own child into the term. And when non-kin speak of others who may be considered to be related to one another in however distant a manner, they often refer to them in terms of this mutual relationship, not in terms of who they are as individuals. For example, Firth tells of seeing two women going by, his asking who they were. The answer came: "They are father's-sister-linked" (they are a woman and her brother's daughter). Firth was asking for a definition of their identities; what he got was a completely social definition, and still did not know "who" they were. He adds that even when accepting the answer given he was left puzzled, because the relationship, when he finally worked it out, was so tenuous and obscure. Yet his informant chose this as the basis for his definition.

The individual is known also in terms of another definition. When he marries and is the head of a household, he and his wife are known by the name of their house plot. In fact, there is a continuity between *fenua* (land) and people which is evidenced in the use of the word. A man says "My *fenua*, it is Tikopia," and he also says, "*Fenua* has made speech," and "*Fenua* is many" (many people are present). *Fenua* is also used to refer to the placenta.

This continuity with land-society has found expression, negatively and disastrously, in intense nostalgia during absence. Recruiting for plantation labor was prohibited in Tikopia when repeated experience showed that almost all the men died when away from home. On one occasion, the twenty men taken to Guadalcanal were absolved from all plantation work and allowed to fish all day by way of arousing in them an interest in life; but, in spite of this treatment, only one of the twenty survived to return to Tikopia. An attempt by the Melanesian Mission to send boys away to school in 1928 met with failure, and all three had to be sent back by the next boat.

The Tikopia are continuous with their dead society as well. Under the floor of their houses, or just outside beneath the eaves, dwell their dead relatives. The presence of the dead is taken for granted, and there is frequent communication with them. One long dead ancestor even became a Christian, as he happened to be inhabiting a living Tikopia at the time when this man was being baptized. A dead Tikopia who dwelt under the floor of Raymond Firth's house objected to the crowds who gathered when the ethnographer played the gramophone, and Firth had to give up the recreation. There may be merely a matter-of-fact awareness of the presence of the dead, or there may be specific contact in a dream, or through a medium.

The land "belongs" to the dead, and is under their care; so that their descendants walk carefully and in awareness on the land of their fathers. When a social offence is perpetrated, such as an incestuous marriage, it is the dead relatives who punish the living. At the beginning of a meal, some food is flung casually at the graves of the dead relatives; and, in fact, the relationship throughout has the casualness of an assured continuity. When the definite presence of a dead one is desired, a man will ask a medium to bring him for a visit. On one such occasion, Firth reports that the man who had issued the invitation had started on some occupation by the time his dead nephew arrived; so he simply asked the medium to offer the dead some betel nut and to tell him that his host was too busy to chew it with him.

The deities of the Tikopia are their early dead ancestors, so these also are eventually their relatives. They are addressed as grandparents, in terms implying a more relaxed relationship than the term for father or father's sister. They are treated with the same respect and concern accorded relatives. For example, Firth describes how an expert, repairing a canoe from which the three inhabiting deities had been removed lest they be disturbed by the disruption to their body, worked furiously against time and worried because the gods were being deprived of their body. It was a question of sympathy, not of currying favor. And with their gods, the Tikopia feel so comfortable that they play jokes on even the highest of them.

I have spoken of affection, sympathy, concern. The Tikopia have one word which covers these concepts and similar ones: *arofa*. Grief, gratitude, moral support, pride in, appreciation of another, all these are also included under this term. In fact, this is the term for social warmth, the social emotion, the continuity of which I have been speaking. *Arofa* and the acts of *arofa*, exist only among people who are socially continuous, kin and people who have shared living over a period of time. A man does not speak of feeling *arofa* for his sweetheart; in fact, the correct marriage is phrased as a violent and hostile abduction from the *arofa* group, separating an individual from it in the way a strand is removed from a cord. Later, however, there is *arofa* between husband and wife. A man dividing his property, his clubs and spears, sinnet belts and ornaments, among his sons and grandsons, feels that he will now be "properly present" in his descendants; and such heirlooms are *tau-arofa* (bond-of-*arofa*).¹ Men and women wear *tau-arofa* of dead and living relatives: teeth, bored and suspended on a cord; hair made into a circlet, a waistcloth. Women in particular wear circlets made of the hair of sons or brothers or husbands or fathers. These are visible forms of *arofa*.

Arofa exists in the concrete act, as the Tikopia say; and such acts are many. Whenever an individual is in a position of strain or crisis, *arofa* is shown by his relatives through physical contact. If a small child wanders away from his father and is frightened or hurt, he runs back to be held in his father's arms. When he is older, this same physical contact gives him comfort and support under similar circumstances. When a boy or girl appears for the first time at the sacred dances of Marae, male relatives on the mother's side crowd around the novice, shielding the dancer from the eyes of the curious, holding up his arms, going with him through the motions of the dance. When a Tikopia is ill, the mother's brother will come and offer his back as support to the sick one, or hold him in his

arms. A more inclusive group of relatives representing the complete social unit, assembles thickly at a time of birth, marriage, death.

The continuity of the individual with the social unit is particularly in evidence during the rites of the Firing of the Oven of Youth, when the operation of superincision is performed on the young boys who are being initiated into the society of men. Nowadays the operation is performed with a razor blade, but earlier a sharp shell was used; and, in any case, it is still a painful performance, particularly as the operator is often not expert and not sure. It is an introduction to the society of men, not an ordeal to try fortitude; and the whole procedure is imbued with *arofa* in so many specific ways, that, in the end, the boys are said not to feel pain at the time of the operation.

Preparation for the rites begins months before the occasion. From now on the coming rites colour the life of the large group of kin. Gardens are planted because of the additional food needed, coconuts are used frugally with an eye to the coming rites. Sinnet is made into cords for gifts, mats are woven, bark cloth is beaten, the reef is dragged; the whole social unit is involved to a greater or lesser extent. A few days before the actual operation, the boy is invited to the houses of relatives. There he is given food and smeared with vermilion turmeric. At each household, a female relative give him a new loincloth; and the boy removes the one he is wearing and gives it to her to tie around her neck, as an act of *arofa*. At this time, his relatives begin to practice the singing of dirges whose general theme is *arofa*. In the meantime, taro is being dug by groups of men, women, and children, food is being collected in a huge pile, and preparations are being completed.

On the day of the operation, the boy continues the visiting of relatives, who smear him with turmeric and give him new waistcloths as before. From early morning the assembled relatives sing dirges, mourning the shedding of the boy's blood, the injury to his flesh. As one group finishes, another group takes up the mourning. Men wail and sob, beating their breasts, women cut themselves with knives and gouge their flesh with their nails. By this time, the relatives have laid the boy's pain on their own necks, they have injured their own flesh, they have wept and mourned for his pain and injury. Those who were not mourning have been busy working for the great gift-giving which is the main part of these rites. They have been plaiting sinnet, grating taro, peeling bananas, kneading, working together.

It is finally time for the operation, the occasion for all the preparations. The boy is carried into the house on

the back of his mother's brother, dressed in a new waistcloth by female relatives, and covered with beads and other valuables. His uncle carries him to the place of operation, and sits holding him in his arms. Around them presses the group of near relatives, body close against body, giving support in this period of crisis. A general wailing began when the boy was brought to the house, and now the women are crying gently. Everyone has wailed and mourned, except the boy. His pain, his fear, his injury have been shared by all, diffused in time and in space through the *arofa* of his group.

There is no song of rejoicing when the operation is over; there is no singling out of the boy. If there is any feeling of achievement, it is that of the leader of the rites, who says, "Our work is good, let us sit and chew betel." The group plunges into an intricate series of gift-giving situations, which, according to Firth, are the most important event of the day. The boy, on this important day when he receives his painful mark of his initiation into the status of manhood, has furnished merely the occasion for a particularly intense and prolonged social participation. Now comes an extensive web of contributions to the main gift which has been prepared by many people over a period of months. There are gifts and counter-gifts, according to established structure, until everyone has had an active share in the great gift-giving occasion. As the mats and barkcloths will be distributed to every household, carrying with them some contact are received, the boy is made to lie between them; subsequently, these with the boy. In this and other ways, the boy comes eventually in touch with his whole social unit.

Such are the occasions marking the new status which comes from an introduction into the widening circle of adult society; in their function, they may be compared to commencement in our society, or to the Bar Mitzvah. Yet no individual achievement is celebrated; though many gifts are given and received, none are given to the boy himself and for himself, except for the transient flow of loincloths. Thus, while the boy is the occasion for the rites, the main focus is the involvement of the whole society in the ceremony.

Before the incision rites, another occasion has been celebrated in a mild way in the growing boy's life; this was his first experience of torchlight fishing. At this time, also, no one is concerned with the boy's achievement, and in fact he has achieved nothing except that he has joined a crew. He is not even given a torch to hold or a net to use. He merely paddles with the rest of the crew; and it is this step in increasing socialization which is marked with a firing of the ovens, and a gift-giving.

Social development, not increased individuation, is celebrated and the only gift given to the boy is one which he is to take to his parents.

Society appears as the referent in other ways. The commonest curse, used casually and without offence, is a "social" one: "May your father eat filth." Even fathers use this to their children. Birth control and infanticide are carried on in the name of society, so that there should be enough for all. Gift exchanges are carried on in such a way that everyone in the unit participates in giving; gifts from a household are announced in the names of all, including those of the young children. If some giver's name is omitted by some oversight, some relative may whisper to have one of his gifts announced in the name of the slighted giver, so that this man too, can have a share in the occasion.

With such a definition of the self within the medium of *arofa*, work can take place among the Tikopia without coercion, without the incentive of reward or the fear of punishment, without the spur of individual profit; because work as participation is meaningful.

NOTES

1 I have found no term in English which will convey the meaning of tau. Firth, faced with this predicament, uses the word "linked," which, I think, implies even more strongly a prior separation. Consanguine and affinal kin as well as certain forms of "property" are referred to with tau.