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GHOSTS, IFALUK, AND TELEOLOGICAL FUNCTIONALISM

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IFALUK,¹ a small atoll in the Central Carolines (Micronesia), is inhabited by about 250 people, whose culture, with minor exceptions, reveals very few indications of acculturation.² The subsistence economy consists of fishing and horticulture, the former being men's work and the latter, women's. Politically, the society is governed by five hereditary chiefs, who are far from "chiefly," however, in their external characteristics. Descent is matrilineal and residence is matrilineal. Though clans and lineages are important social groups, the extended family is the basic unit for both economic and socialization functions. This culture is particularly notable for its ethic of non-aggression, and its emphasis on helpfulness, sharing, and cooperation.³

Ifaluk religion asserts the existence of two kinds of supernatural beings, or *alus*: high gods and ghosts. The former, though important, do not play as significant a role in the daily lives of the people as the latter. Ghosts are of two varieties—benevolent and malevolent. Benevolent ghosts (*alusisalup*) are the immortal souls of the benevolent dead, while malevolent ghosts (*alusengau*) are the souls of the malevolent dead. One's character in the next world is thus not a reward or punishment for activity in this one, but rather a persistence in time and space of one's mortal character.

Malevolent ghosts delight in causing evil. They are not only ultimately responsible for all immoral behavior, but, more importantly, for illness which they cause by indiscriminately possessing any member of their lineage. Benevolent ghosts attempt to help the people, and with their assistance the shaman may exorcise the malevolent spirits. These malevolent ghosts are the most feared and hated objects in Ifaluk by persons of all ages and both sexes. This fear and hatred, found on both a conscious and unconscious level, is attested to by abundant evidence, derived from linguistics, overt behavior, conscious verbal attitudes, projective tests, and dreams.⁴ As a consequence, most Ifaluk ceremonial life is concerned with these *alusengau*, and much of their non-ceremonial life is preoccupied with them.

We must now ask ourselves, what are the functions of the belief in the *alus* in Ifaluk?⁵ On a manifest level this belief is both functional and dysfunctional,

¹ The field work, on which this paper is based, took place in 1947-1948 as part of the Co-ordinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology, sponsored by the Pacific Science Board of the National Research Council.

² For a description of Ifaluk culture see Burrows and Spiro, (in press).

³ For a description and interpretation of this ethic, see Spiro, 1950b.

⁴ For a summary of this evidence, see Spiro, 1950b.

⁵ This analysis constitutes partial confirmation of a hypothesis used in the author's field work, a hypothesis derived from Hallowell (1940), that any society must provide certain socially accepta-

providing for both individual and group a consistent theory of disease. In the absence of scientific medicine, this function is not to be lightly dismissed. The two areas of life over which the Ifaluk have no technological control are illness and typhoons, and the belief in *alus* serves to restrict the area of uncertainty. For it affords not only an explanation for illness, but also techniques for its control, minimizing the anxieties arising from intellectual bewilderment in the face of crucial life crises, and the feeling of impotence to deal with them.

Furthermore, the belief serves to explain another problem—the existence of evil and defective people. Native psychological theory has it that man is born “good” and “normal.” In the absence of the concept of the *alus*, the people would be hard put to explain such phenomena as aggression and abnormality, for it also serves to explain these inexplicable and potentially dangerous phenomena. All abnormalities—in which the Ifaluk include violations of the ethic of non-aggression, as well as what we would label mental subnormality, neurosis, and psychosis—are termed *malebush*, and are explained by possession by an *alus*.⁶ The manifest functions of this belief, however, seem to be out-balanced by its obvious dysfunctions. The *alus* cause worry, fear, and anxiety, as well as sickness and death; and by causing the death of individuals they can, potentially, destroy the entire society. From the point of view of the people, it would be better if there were no *alus*.

We are thus presented with a difficult question: Why does such a manifestly dysfunctional belief continue to survive? To answer this question we must turn to other aspects of Ifaluk culture. This culture, we have observed, is characterized by a strong sanction against aggression. No display of aggression is permitted in interpersonal relationships; and in fact, no aggression is displayed at all. The people could not remember one instance of anti-social behavior, aside from the *malebush*, nor were any examples of it observed in the course of this investigation. To this striking fact another, equally striking, may be added: namely, that the absence of overt aggression in interpersonal relationships is found in persons who may be characterized as having a substantial amount of aggressive drive.⁷ But aggressive drives, like other imperious

ble outlets for the expression of aggression. After completing the first draft of the paper, the author read Kluckhohn's analysis of Navaho witchcraft (Kluckhohn, 1944) and was struck by the remarkable similarity between Kluckhohn's treatment of witchcraft and his own treatment of ghosts. This paper, therefore, is not to be taken as an original theoretical contribution, but as an independent test of a hypothesis.

⁶ The *malebush*, during our stay in Ifaluk, included one epileptic child, three subnormal children, one deaf-and-dumb mute, one agorophobic adult male, and two schizophrenics. In the treatment of these individuals the people act upon the logic of their belief. Since these individuals are not held to be responsible for their behavior, they are treated with kindness and concern, the only limitations to this kindness being set by the self preservation of the group. See Spiro, 1950a.

⁷ The evidence for this statement, derived from religion, mythology, dreams, art, non-institutionalized behavior patterns, and projective tests, may be found in Spiro, 1950b.

drives, demand expression; if they are not permitted expression they are deflected from their original goal and are either inverted or displaced.⁸ Some Ifaluk aggression is inverted; but that all aggression should be turned inward is impossible, assuming even the lowest possible level of psychological functioning. For if this were the case, we would have to predict the probable disintegration of personality, if not the destruction of the organism. This has not happened in Ifaluk, because the Ifaluk have a socially acceptable channel for the expression of aggression—the *alus*.

The *alus*, as already observed, are feared and hated; and this hatred is expressed in conversation, dreams, and fantasies, as well as in overt behavior patterns of public exorcism, ritual, and ceremony, whose purpose is to drive off the *alus* and to destroy them. Thus, though the intrinsically hated qualities of the *alus* are sufficient to arouse aggressive responses, the belief in their existence allows the individual to displace his other aggressions onto the *alus*, since all the hatred and hostility which is denied expression in interpersonal relationships can be directed against these evil ghosts. As Dollard, following Lasswell, has put it, in any instance of direct aggression, “there is always some displaced aggression accompanying it, and adding additional forces to the rational attack. Justifiable aggressive responses seem to break the way for irrational and unjustifiable hostilities. . . . The image of the incredibly hostile and amoral out-grouper is built up out of our own real antagonism plus our displaced aggression against him.”⁹

Thus, anti-social aggressive drives are canalized into culturally sanctioned, aggressive culture patterns. The possibility for this is important in any society: it is particularly important for the Ifaluk because of their ethic of non-aggression, as well as of the smallness of the land mass which they inhabit. Kluckhohn, for example, points out¹⁰ that belief in witchcraft provides an outlet for Navaho aggression and, as such, serves a crucial function for the Navaho, despite the fact that they have other channels for aggression as well. The Navaho show aggression in interpersonal relationships by quarreling, murder, and violent physical fighting. These avenues are closed to the Ifaluk; indeed, they are inconceivable to them. Furthermore, Kluckhohn points out, the Navaho can “withdraw” from unpleasant situations, either physically or emotionally, by drinking. The Ifaluk cannot “withdraw.” As Burrows has put it: “The people of Ifaluk are so few (two hundred fifty of them); their territory so restricted (about one half square mile of land surrounding a square mile of lagoon); and their lives all forced so much of the time into the same channels by the routine of getting a livelihood, that it would be nearly impossible for any part of them to keep aloof from the rest. So there is next to no segregation. Each individual surely has some face-to-face contact with every other.”¹¹ Nor

⁸ Cf. Dollard, *et al.*, 1939.

⁹ Dollard, 1938, p. 119.

¹⁰ 1944.

¹¹ Burrows, 1952, p. 16.

can they "withdraw" by drinking, since they have no liquor that is genuinely intoxicating.

Given this situation, therefore, as concerns both the physical and cultural reality, there is no way to deal with aggression except to displace it. Hence, a latent psychobiological function of the *alus* is to provide an outlet for Ifaluk aggressions, preventing the turning of all aggression inward, and thus precluding the collapse of Ifaluk personality. That this problem is not unique to Ifaluk, but is found with equal intensity on other tiny atolls, is revealed in Beaglehole's discussion of Puka-Puka. Here, too, we find an ethic of non-aggression in a tiny Pacific atoll, whose culture is similar to that of Ifaluk. And here, too, socially sanctioned channels exist for the expression of aggression, serving the same functions that the *alus* serve in Ifaluk. "Life is such," writes Beaglehole,¹² "that no one may get away from his fellow villagers. Privacy and solitude as we know them are almost non-existent. Day and night, month in and month out the individual is continuously in contact with others. He cannot get away from them no matter what the provocation. Were it not for certain socially approved ways of expressing otherwise repressed emotions the society would disintegrate under the weight of its own neuroses."

But the Ifaluk must deal with their anxieties, as well as with their aggressions. The Ifaluk experience certain anxieties in childhood which establish a permanent anxiety "set" in the Ifaluk personality.¹³ This anxiety is particularly crippling, for it is "free-floating"; that is, its source is unknown or repressed, so that there is no way of coping with it. In this connection, belief in *alus* serves another vital latent function for the individual, since it converts a free-floating anxiety into a culturally sanctioned, real fear. That is, it provides the people with a putative source of their anxiety—the *alus*—at the same time that it provides them with techniques to deal with this fear by the use of time-proven techniques, in the form of ritual, incantations, and herbs, whereby the imputed source of the anxiety may be manipulated and controlled.

Thus we see that the belief in the *alus* has certain consequences for the psychological functioning of the Ifaluk, which though they are unaware of them, are nonetheless vital and crucial for their functioning at an optimum level of psychological adjustment. For the Ifaluk individual, that is, the latent function of the cultural belief in *alus* is to protect him from psychological disorganization. Without this belief—or its *psychological equivalent*¹⁴—the tensions

¹² Beaglehole, 1937, p. 320. ¹³ Spiro, 1950b.

¹⁴ Belief in *alus* is not the only institution which could serve this vital function. There are a great number of other institutions which could—and in other cultures do—play the same psychological role that belief in malevolent ghosts serves in Ifaluk. This fact is expressed by the concept of "functional equivalence," which states, in the words of Merton, that "just as the same item may have multiple functions, so may the same function be diversely fulfilled by alternative items. Functional needs are . . . taken to be permissive, rather than determinant of specific social structures." (Merton, 1949, p. 25.)

arising within the individual, as a result of his anxieties and repressed aggressions, could well become unbearable.

But the belief in *alus* has important sociological functions, as well. If there were no *alus* and the people repressed their aggressions, the society, as well as individual personalities, would disintegrate. On this level, then, the consequences for the group follow from the consequences for the individual; if all individuals collapse, it follows that the group collapses. But the probabilities of the repression of all aggression in any society are very small. In all likelihood, the strength of the Ifaluk ethic of non-aggression would be weaker than the strength of the aggressive drives, because of the strength of the tensions created by the latter, so that these drives would seek overt expression.¹⁵ But this is exactly what could not occur in Ifaluk without leading to the disintegration of the entire society. The Ifaluk ethic of non-aggression is a necessary condition for the optimal adaptation of a society inhabiting a minute atoll. The minimal aggression permitted in other societies inhabiting large land masses does not lead to disastrous consequences; but here even this minimum cannot be permitted because of the impossibility of isolation. The physical presence of others is a constantly obtruding factor, and the existence of even a modicum of aggression could set up a "chain reaction" which could well get out of control. This fact is recognized by some of the people. Thus, our interpreter told of an individual who had offended others by his unseemly conduct, who had made no attempt to rebuke him. When asked for an explanation of their behavior, it was pointed out that any action on their part would have led to strife, and since "very small this place," other people would become involved, until "by'm-by no more people this place."

Even if the expression of aggression in interpersonal relationships would not lead to the physical destruction of Ifaluk society, it would result in the dissolution of the distinctive aspect of its culture—sharing, co-operation, and kindness toward others. Sharing and cooperation have enabled the Ifaluk to exploit their natural environment to its fullest extent with the technology at their disposal, and to live at peace with one another, in mutual trust and respect. In short, it has given them both physical and psychological security. The breakdown of the Ifaluk ethic of non-aggression, even a minimum of aggressive behavior, would destroy this mutual trust. It would create distrust and insecurity and, at the same time, destroy the positive attitudes that make cooperation and sharing possible, which would seriously reduce economic ef-

¹⁵ That the inhibition of aggression is psychologically disturbing not only follows from the theory of frustration, but is borne out in Ifaluk by empirical observation. To give but one example: After working four days in repairing a canoe-house, the men witnessed the collapse of the entire structure. This was a severely frustrating experience for the men, but none indicated his feelings by any overt expression. Later in the afternoon, however, one of the chiefs came to visit, saying he wanted to talk because he felt bad and his "head is very full," a phrase meaning inner turmoil.

iciency and psychological security. The disappearance of cooperation, then, would result in a precariously low level of adaptive integration.

With their belief in the *alus*, however, it is possible for the people to turn their aggressions from their fellows and direct them against a common enemy. The common hatred that results not only enables the people to displace most of their aggressions from the in-group to the out-group, but also serves to strengthen the bonds of group solidarity. For all the people may suffer the same fate—attack by the *alus*. All must defend themselves against this, and all attempt to defend others from it. The resultant solidarity is both expressed and symbolized in the medicine ceremonies, both therapeutic and prophylactic, which are occasions for convening the entire group.

Thus we again see that the belief in *alus* has certain latent consequences of which the people are unaware, but which are vital to the functioning of this society and the preservation of its culture. The absence of this belief, or of some other institution with the same functions, would be disastrous for Ifaluk society, as we know it today.

Having assessed the belief in malevolent ghosts in terms of the total social functioning of one society, it may be instructive to compare this belief with institutions in other societies, which have the same functional importance. Sorcery and witchcraft play the same functional role among the Ojibwa and Navaho, respectively, that ghosts play in Ifaluk. But we can now perceive the superiority of the belief in ghosts over witchcraft and sorcery for the achievement of their common latent end—the release of aggression. For though the latter beliefs serve to deflect some aggressive drives from other members of society onto the sorcerers or witches, they also serve to instigate other aggressive drives. Since witches and sorcerers are members of one's society, and since their identity is usually obscure, one tends to become suspicious, wary in interpersonal relationships, and insecure with one's fellows. Thus, though the belief in witches and sorcerers succeeds in deflecting aggressive drives and contributing to social solidarity, it also increases aggressive drives and decreases social solidarity. Belief in ghosts, however, serves the dual function of both decreasing in-group aggression and increasing group solidarity. It may not be irrelevant to observe in this connection that societies, such as Dobu, Kwoma, Ojibwa, and Navaho, which practice sorcery or witchcraft, are also characterized by individualism and insecurity, whereas Ifaluk is characterized by communalism and mutual trust.¹⁵

Thus we have observed that the belief in the *alus* is crucial to the psychological functioning of the individual, and to the survival of Ifaluk society and its culture. This analysis thus enables us to understand how an apparently

¹⁵ No immediate causal relationship is implied here, but it is not inconceivable that these two kinds of data could exist in a functional relationship.

irrational belief continues to survive with such tenacity. As Merton points out: "Seemingly irrational social patterns" may be seen to "perform a function for the group, although this function may be quite remote from the avowed purpose of the behavior."¹⁷

This interpretation of the Ifaluk malevolent ghosts is not meant to imply that no dysfunctions can be attributed to this belief. We have already indicated the important manifest dysfunctions. The latent dysfunctions are equally severe: the belief serves to drain energy from creative enterprise to that of defense against the *alus*; it serves to preclude investigations of alternative disease theories; it channels much economic activity into non-productive channels; finally, though it resolves many anxieties, it creates a very serious one in its own right—the anxiety created by fear of the *alus* itself.

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¹⁷ Merton, 1949, p. 64.