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PROCREATION AMONG THE TROBRIAND ISLANDERS

By LEO AUSTEN¹

IN an article published in *Man*² concerning the beliefs which the Trobriand Islanders hold about procreation, Dr. Malinowski quotes from his valuable paper on the *Baloma*, or spirits of the dead,³ that "the state of knowledge in Kiriwina is just at the point where there is a vague idea as to some nexus between sexual connection and pregnancy, whereas there is no idea whatever concerning the man's contribution towards the new life which is being formed in the mother's body."

As A. R. M. Trobriands, I considered it necessary to find out for myself "the state of knowledge in Kiriwina," more especially whether the natives had any ideas concerning the fertilizing influence of semen. In making these enquiries I found that gradually I covered the greater part of the Kiriwinan concept of procreation, and the following is the result of such research.

During the seven months I was investigating I at first used a Kiriwinan interpreter, who spoke good English; but later on I took down the statements in the Kiriwinan language and translated them myself.

As Malinowski has said, "a virgin cannot conceive." A Trobriand woman must be opened up, and though in the various myths of origin the female can be opened up or pierced by lime water from a stalactite, or by some natural object, the Kiriwinan of to-day considers that sexual intercourse is the only true and proper method.

For a long time I was unable to obtain any evidence that confirmed Malinowski's statement that the natives believed a girl could open herself up by mechanical means. All said "*eseki* (I

¹ Assistant Resident Magistrate in charge of the Trobriand Islands district of the South-Eastern Division of Papua.

² *Man*, 1932, No. 44.

³ *Journ. Roy. Anth. Inst.*, 1916, p. 407.

don't know) ; perhaps it is possible. Our myths say so." However, later; when quoting a case of Sapphism, which had occurred during my time in Kiriwina, I obtained very definite statements that a "mad" woman, who might not have had any intercourse with a male, could open herself by using a banana, or a small taitu (yam) called *tokuluwedi*. In my earlier questioning I had overlooked the fact that such a perverted method would be looked upon as an extraordinary procedure in a society where intercourse between the sexes begins at such an early age, and the Kiriwinans could not follow what I was trying to discover. Once they realized that I was speaking of something that was decidedly unusual (and in fact they had no knowledge of any actual case), I was astonished at the very definite opinions held.

To the native mind, perhaps the most important idea concerning sexual intercourse is that it is purely a source of pleasure. This notion seems to outweigh all other considerations, and looms first and foremost in their daily thoughts.

There is also another association connected with sexual intercourse, and to married people it is very vital. This conception is: *Until the menstrual flow has ceased, a female cannot conceive; and the monthly flow of menstrual blood is checked by sexual intercourse.* This is an acknowledgement made by all, and is an idea found throughout Kiriwina. It is not of modern introduction, and is considered to have been handed down from generation to generation.

The Trobriander says quite definitely that the menstrual flow is checked by "hammering" against the lower part of the uterus or the menstrual blood (*i tutu kaipitala*; or *i tutu kala buiavi*). *Kaipita* is a word used in the every-day language for the small cylindrical mortar in which the old men crush their betel nut. Before placing it in the mouth the old men crush the betel nut in a *kaipita* mortar and mix with it lime and a small portion of the *moia* fruit. This mixture has a reddish rather blood-like colour. It was fortunate for me that I heard an old woman using the word *kaipitala* during one of the discussions, and I could not understand the reference until I was informed privately that the old woman had used a "shame" word that is seldom employed in public in the sense in which she had used it. It turned out that she was referring

to the upper part of the vagina, or as near as I could ascertain, to the narrow channel between the vagina and the uterus. The Trobriander has very vague ideas of the anatomy of the organs of generation, and it was therefore very difficult to find out definitely which part was referred to by the word *kaipita* (in its anatomical sense), but from a *post mortem* examination of a sow the position seems to lie between the upper part of the vagina and the lower part of the uterus. There is no doubt that *kaipita* is used in reference to the human body, and once I had heard this word I found in private discussions that the native was quite willing to talk about it. It is, in fact, a key-word to any discussion concerning menstrual blood; but at the same time it is considered to be a word "belonging to the women" and it is seldom used in its sexual sense by the average man, and no bachelor, if he knows its sexual meaning (and many do not), ever dreams of discussing or using this word in its sexual sense in his intercourse with girls.

One of the main arguments which I put forth against sexual intercourse checking the menstrual flow was that so few single girls became pregnant. It was pointed out to me that sexual intercourse did not cause pregnancy. Pregnancy required other conditions besides merely a stoppage of the menses. Invariably this was the form of the statement made by the natives: "Single girls are so active physically. They are always running about. Their lovers are numerous. For this reason their menstrual blood capsizes always at the proper time. Should a girl form an attachment with one boy, and the two sleep together night after night, then it would be possible for the single girl to have her menstrual flow checked. Likewise with married people." Here again one came up against a vagueness that could not be clearly explained by the natives, but I gathered that what they were trying to imply was that love-sick girls were more sluggish in their movements, and so there was more chance of the "hammering" taking effect.

Other interesting statements gave the following information: "If a woman's uterus is not properly placed (i.e., turned slightly sideways or upwards), no amount of hammering would check the monthly flow. It capsizes always." Fat women are not so inclined to pregnancy, "for with blood they flow over."

The Kiriwinans also considered that if a "mad" woman were to use a banana or a small taitu as a phallus, she would in time check the menstrual flow. It would have the same effect as sexual intercourse with one lover. Again, in the mythical tale of Tudava they seemed quite certain that the action of the lime water (*litukwa*) dripping from a stalactite on Ilouma (or Bolitukwa) would, after opening her up, "hammer" back the menstrual blood. I visited the famous cave near Labai, and was the first European to see the stalactite (*Kaibua*) under which Ilouma lay when "opened up" by the drips from this stalactite. It is probably just a coincidence that the stalactite *Kaibua* is more phallic in shape than the average ones I have seen in the many caves on Kiriwina, but the shape of the stalactite seems to play no part in the story, and none had made any mention of its shape until I drew attention to it. Even then they were not greatly interested. As the cave was tabu except to a certain favoured few, there were not many natives who had seen this stalactite.

A girl who is "shut" (*kalapatu*), i.e., a virgin, cannot be opened up by only one act. Her "shut-offness" requires more than mere defloration; she must be "opened up." There seems to be no word in the Kiriwinan language for "hymen." The act of piercing is not at all considered as an act to break down the hymen, but purely as "opening up the tightness," or, rather, enlarging the cavity of the vagina. Really, to use the word "piercing" is quite wrong, for it conveys the idea of defloration, and this is not intended.

In the myth referred to above, there is no association of *litukwa* (the lime water) with *momona* (semen). This was very definite. The natives pointed out to me that the action of *litukwa*, in this story, was merely to enlarge the vagina and hammer back the menstrual blood. The Trobriand Island native does *not* know of the fertilizing agency of the male seed. In my interviews with some fifty intelligent natives, drawn from all parts of the Trobriand group of islands, not one believed that male semen, or any part of it, entered the uterus. *Momona* was something connected with the act of intercourse (as an action of pleasure). It was "just like water," and it all came away afterwards. However, two of my more intelligent informants told me they thought a slight residue of

momona did not come away, but adhered to the walls and the top of the vagina. One described it thus: "Soup is made in a cooking pot. The soup is poured off. A very small portion adheres to the sides of the cooking pot. This when cold is gluey. So with *momona*. A slight film adheres to the sides of the vagina, and it may close the top." (It is interesting to note that there is no word in Kiriwina for "*os uteri*," but this is not to be wondered at when we realize how little the native knows about the organs of generation.) The other native's comparison was with the film coating the lips of his mouth when he waked in the morning. When I asked why it was, then, that single girls did not have the menstrual flow checked by this film, both gave the same answer: "Single girls are too active physically. The mouth of the uterus cannot remain closed. At its proper time each moon, the menstrual blood always flows." The two men were also very emphatic in saying that no *momona* could enter the uterus. No other natives confirmed these statements concerning "the film adhering to the walls of the vagina," and I have no hesitation in taking these ideas merely as thoughts expressed by men who had been reflecting on the problem, and not as a concept current throughout Kiriwina.

There was nevertheless a general opinion that no girl, single or married, took any precautions to rid herself of *momona* in order to prevent conception. When I discussed the matter invariably the answer was in these terms: "Why should our girls do this? *Momona* does not cause pregnancy. It is like water. When intercourse is completed, it comes away by itself. We have never heard of such a practice." The natives questioned were married men and women and a few single men. Naturally I could not question single girls, but had such a practice been in vogue, I must have heard some hint or innuendo, as I went into the matter very thoroughly.

Other means are used to prevent pregnancy, or rather to keep the menstrual flow each month, but so far I have been unable to obtain the slightest evidence of any effective contraceptive. Eating charmed leaves, or drinking boiled salt water must be more magical than efficacious. One middle-aged woman told me that she had stopped further pregnancy by drinking boiled sea water, and that she had had no further signs of pregnancy, but in her case it was more

than probable that she was already having her change of life. That many girls have aborted when they found themselves pregnant, I know. One girl in particular had three abortions in a comparatively short period. Surely, if a practical method of contraception were available, that girl would have known of it from her female relations. In times gone by, certain old women were acquainted with a kneading process by which they could procure abortion, but nowadays carrying heavy weights is the usual, though not always successful, method. Still, from the many enquiries I made I am inclined to think that the number of abortions performed by single girls is comparatively small. Whether this fact is due to a single girl changing her lovers so often, and beginning her sexual life at so early an age, is a matter on which I cannot express an opinion.

In order to show how "vague" is the native idea connecting the act of coition with pregnancy (and it is certainly not at all well defined), it will be necessary to give a *résumé* of the native ideas of procreation, from the cessation of the menses up to "the time the child is ready for birth."

As I have stated previously, it is the general opinion throughout Kiriwina that the cessation of the menses is due to sexual intercourse. All my informants were very consistent upon this point, but when it came to a discussion of what took place after the cessation of the menstrual flow, it was found that there were two parallel theories to account for pregnancy. One, and this included by far the greater number of my informants, laid it down with no uncertainty that the *baloma*, or the reincarnating *waiwaia* (spirit child) was undoubtedly the cause of pregnancy. The other, and this was not at all considered the prevailing opinion, stated that the child was merely formed out of the mother's blood, and that the reincarnating *waiwaia* was not the controlling principle. This latter view, held by a few married women, broke down when they were asked whether their own children possessed a *baloma*, for they all answered in the affirmative; then, when question as to how the *baloma* arrived inside their children's bodies, they fell back on the first theory.

Still, despite this there is no doubt that women who have no pathological symptoms during pregnancy, and are not visited by the *baloma* in dreams are apt to discredit an ancient belief which must

have prevailed throughout the district in the past. As time goes on, I consider that more and more of the people will be content to accept the second deduction, unless the native mission teachers stress the fact that the vital spark of life is due to the presence of the soul or spirit. In both cases, however, there was no doubt that "man's contribution towards the new life in the mother's body" was nil.

Let us take the first theory and see what the prevailing opinion is. After a woman has missed her menstrual period, the blood filling up the uterus is said to intermix with some water-like fluid from the woman's body. Where the fluid comes from is unknown. It is certainly not considered to be *momona*, which cannot enter the uterus. It is supposed to come from some part of the woman's body near the stomach. (One cannot speculate how this idea was arrived at, but perhaps the amount of watery fluid coming away at a confinement may have given rise to this notion.) When she finds that two periods have been missed the woman usually tells her mothers and cousins of this fact, and that she may be pregnant. During the next few weeks, which may bring her into the third month of her pregnancy, she probably dreams⁴ that a spirit child, or reincarnating *waiwaia* is brought to her by some *baloma* or spirit of a dead relative. This spirit child is said to be placed on her head. It is not supposed to be made of bodily substance; it is like the wind, or such stuff as are dreamed of in other dreams. They say: "*Waiwaia gala tagisi. Komaidona vivila imimimisi. Gala bigisaisi waiwaia. Makawala imimi i doki usi kouro i mai tuta i mamata i moiki gala.*" "Spirit child we do not see. All women dream (but) they shall not see the spirit child. Likewise she dreams, she thinks of banana and yam; it comes all the time (but) she wakes up; she catches in the hand not."

At the time when the spirit child is presented to the pregnant woman the breasts have begun to swell. The blood of the woman has been increasing in quantity, and apparently flowing up towards

⁴ I am not satisfied that a woman dreams only of a child coming to her. On my return I shall investigate these dreams thoroughly, as I have an idea that it will be found that dreaming of other things, such as a snake or a creek, are taken to foretell the coming of the spirit child.

the head, for on the reception of the *waiwai* the spirit child flows slowly downwards on the tide of blood, causing dizziness, headaches and vomiting attacks. According to native statements, the blood in the womb immediately begins to undergo a change as soon as the spirit child is placed upon the head, and an embryo (*veguvegu*) is brought into existence (*ibubuli*). To the native mind there is only blood and water in the uterus until the third month. As the spirit child is descending, the *veguvegu* is said to change again into a rat-like thing with its covering of membranes, and the name for the whole is now *kapora kikoni*, i.e., "bundle-rolled-up rat." In this stage the embryo was described as having rudimentary limbs like a newly born rat. When questioned the natives said that many had seen the *kapora kikoni* when a woman had aborted.

The spirit child reaching the woman's breasts has enlarged and darkened them considerably. It flows on down and enters into the belly of the woman, and her "bigness" increases rapidly. Their ideas on times are most vague, and it would seem that the foetus keeps its name of *kapora kikoni* until a month or so before the time for confinement, when its name is changed to *imilagwadi* ("it-simulating-child"). For some time I had been under the impression that the months of pregnancy, according to native ideas, began at the cessation of the menses, but eventually I found out that the natives counted their months of pregnancy from the time that the breasts began to swell, and the previous months during which the menstrual blood had ceased to flow were not considered at all. Therefore the time for the changing of the *kapora kikoni* to the *imilagwadi* is during the latter part of the fourth or early in the fifth month of pregnancy (by native reckoning), and it is at this time that the woman leaves her husband and goes to her parents' house. The *imilagwadi* increases rapidly in size while the pregnant woman is living with her parents, and when the time for birth is ready (*kalatuta valulu*) it is here that the child is born.

One of my best informants, who did not believe in the reincarnating *waiwai* being the cause of pregnancy, still accepted the belief that pregnancy did not take place until after the second month

from the cessation of the menses. She was an old woman, married about forty years ago, had had five children, and on no occasion had she dreamt of a *baloma* bringing her a spirit child. She was the strongest advocate of the belief that the blood in the uterus brought the child into existence without the aid of a reincarnating *waiwaia*. Her ideas concerning the visitation of the *baloma* were, therefore, naturally vague, and she had never bothered to formulate a reason why the average woman believed in the coming of the spirit child while she herself did not. As a matter of fact, it did not greatly interest her; she herself had never been prone to "morning sickness," and this no doubt strengthened her belief. Except for the fact that she held an unorthodox opinion concerning the primary cause of pregnancy, her ideas concerning the various stages in the growth of the foetus were quite orthodox. I would say that she stressed the point that sexual intercourse caused the cessation of the menstrual flow, and because of this cessation the increased blood in the uterus set up some change which she could not account for, and out of this the *vegwegu* was brought into existence. In this instance we can see a closer association of the "vague idea" concerning sexual intercourse and pregnancy, but even so, there is nothing one could grasp at to show that the husband was considered in any other way responsible for pregnancy, for she herself did not think for a moment that the father made any contribution to the life of any of her children. And this fact was brought out forcibly by some few other married women who were unorthodox enough to believe that children were brought into existence by the "turning over" of the blood in the uterus. Yet, as I have said, when the point cropped up as to whether their children possessed a *baloma* or spirit, they were ready to fall back upon the orthodox idea of a reincarnating *waiwaia*.

As Malinowski has so clearly shown, the reincarnating *waiwaia* is said to be found "floating on drift logs, or on leaves, boughs, dead seaweed, sea-scum, and other light substances which litter the surface of the sea." The following incantation, used by certain old medicine women, brings out this point forcibly. It is used to produce fertility in a barren woman. The magic is called *Kai*

katuvilela kwega, or "the turning-over of the *kwega*," and the words used are as follows:

Tubugu Namasalu ; tubugu Milivala ; tubugu Nukusaguiau ;
Kuma katuvila kalakwega agu lilatau ;
Katuvila gavogi ; katuvila kwoi'iavi ;
Akatuvili gwadim gana ;
Akatuvili gwadim tauwori ;
Akatuvili gwadim popewa ;
Akatuvili gwadim deiaga ;
Akatuvili.

The translation is: "Oh my ancestor Namasalu; oh my ancestor Milivala; oh my ancestor Nukusaguiau; you come, her *kwega* leaf turns over, my patient; it turns over at sunrise; it turns over at sunset; I turn it over, thy child on the fringe of the sea-beach; I turn it over thy child in the *tauwori* (a seaweed); I turn it over thy child in the *popewa* (sea-scum); I turn it over thy child on the edge of the reef; I turn it over."

The first line is an exhortation to some mythical ancestors. The second seems to be an invitation to one of them to come and, apparently, assist in transporting a *waiwaia* to the medicine woman's patient. It has been said elsewhere that the people believe that the menstrual blood, after it has ceased to flow, begins to "turn over," and that this process has something to do with the bringing into existence of the *veguvegu*, or rather in preparing a mixture of blood out of which the spirit child, on its reception by the pregnant woman, will bring into existence the *veguvegu*. The incantation is breathed over two *kwega* leaves, which are then rolled up and given to the patient, who chews them with lime and *moiia*, and swallows the mixture. These charmed leaves will turn over in her stomach and so will the blood in the uterus turn over. The last five lines refer to the spirit child floating among the sea *débris*.

There is also a somewhat similar charm for procuring abortion. This is called *kai kaliga kwega*. I was unable to find anyone who would give me the words of the incantation, but I was told that the whole process was more or less akin to that of the *kai katuvilela kwega*, though of course the song breathed over the *kwega* leaf was different.

One other matter remains to be stated, and has reference to the help which the father gives in the formation of the child when the lovers or the husband and wife sleep together night after night. Said one old man : " It makes hot our breasts man woman we two have lain down together. If simply hot breasts woman man our child." This translated into English means : " When we two lie down together our breasts become hot. Because of the hot breasts of the man and the woman it is our child." The man apparently feels that he has some participation in helping to bring about the arrival of the child because his body has kept warm the body of the woman while the foetus has been developing.

This fact came to light when listening to an argument over the ownership of a betel palm, the father claiming a tree said to belong to his daughter, whose mother he had divorced. The people who were close by considered that the father " had no shame " in disputing the ownership of a tree which his daughter, whom he had helped to develop in the womb, was, rightly or wrongly, claiming as her own.

There was no doubt that the father was *not* thought to be a contributor towards the formation of the foetus, but that he had helped to develop the already formed foetus by the warmth of his body, in much the same way as a bird, sitting on an egg, is thought to develop the embryo in the shell by keeping it warm. One might have thought that a study of European fowls would have taught the Trobrianders something about procreation, but as a hen may lay sterile eggs when not in contact with a rooster, this fact would rather help them in their traditional beliefs. The Trobriander has, furthermore, still to learn a lesson from the European not to castrate European boars. They realize how much superior the European pigs are to their own village ones, and I have not the slightest doubt that missionaries and traders in the past have tried to make them understand why their pigs are better than those of the Trobrianders, yet even to-day they will castrate the better boars, so that the progeny of a well-bred sow is fathered by some bush boar. On the other hand, they like the traders' boars to wander about the village, for then the progeny of village sows will become physically more like the boar, since it is a well-known fact (to the Kiriwinan) that a

child takes after its father in features, because the father has been in such close contact with the mother, and the father's physical features have become impressed upon the child.

These are the facts concerning procreation among the Trobrianders, but even to-day one will find boys who believe solely in the *baloma* theory, without knowing anything about the cause of the stoppage of the menses. I did not find a single married man, however, who did not know, but with the men the *baloma* theory looms more important, while in the thoughts of the women the stoppage of the menstrual periods naturally plays a more important part than it does in those of the opposite sex.

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