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Why Does a Boy "Sign On"? Malinowski's First Statement on Practical Anthropology

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Bronisław Malinowski

FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Why Does a Boy "Sign On"?--

Malinowski's First Statement on Practical Anthropology

When Bronislaw Malinowski formulated "the deepest essence" of his ethnographic work in his diary entry for November 17, 1917, it was to discover the native's "main passions, . . . his essential deepest way of thinking." Contained within the elision was an apparently discordant parenthesis: "(Why does a boy 'sign on'? Is every boy, after some time, ready to 'sign off'?)". The reference, of course, was to "signing on" for plantation labor in Queensland, Australia, and other places in the South Pacific--an issue of active political concern during the period of Malinowski's stay in the South Pacific. When the Indian and Chinese governments decided to end the systems of indentured service which had helped to supply the needs of plantation owners in many areas of the British Empire since the abolition of slavery in the 1830s, Melanesian labor seemed likely to play an even more critical role than it had previously, and there was considerable concern in this period that native races were "dying out" and would be unable to fill the gap. Concerned also that Australia should capture the largest possible share of former German trade in the region, the Australian Government established a Commission on "British and Australian Trade in the South Pacific." When the Commission took testimony in Melbourne in the fall of 1916, Malinowski had already completed a stint of fieldwork on the southern coast of New Guinea and the first of two years he spent in the Trobriands. On October 27 he was called as a witness, along with a government agent, a plantation manager, and a missionary. The following version of his testimony was published two years later in the Report of the Commission.

I am a doctor of science of the Cracow University. I am a research student of the University of London. I came out here on behalf of the University of London to do scientific research work in New Guinea. I have been engaged on that work for two years and six months. I have been conducting ethnological researches. My researches may throw some light on the labour question, but I have not made a special study of it because I had not the facts before me. Speaking broadly, I think that the native Papuan is not very keen on working for a white man. It is quite evident he does his own work, and if he is left under his own conditions he has plenty of work on hand, work which is not exactly of a purely economical description, but which for him makes life worth living. I think the Papuan is induced to work for the white man not out of any deep-seated reasons or motives, but simply because of the personality and behaviour of the recruiter, and his putting before him very interesting matter. I think that after a few weeks any native would desire to leave if it were not for the penalty,

but after a year he gets to like the life on the plantation. I have been in two districts in Papua, one on the south coast and the other on the north-east. I conclude that very much depends on the manner in which the natives are managed on the plantation, as they certainly prefer some plantations to others. The natives like to have amusements, such as dancing, arranged for them. They are very sensitive on the matter of tobacco, and I think if tobacco were cheaper it would be a very great inducement to the natives to work. A helpful demeanour on the part of the manager, firmness, and making their lives pleasant, has an effect on the natives. I know that is so from the natives' point of view. I know that natives who have returned from plantations will tell stories about the manner in which they used to amuse themselves, of the "corroborees" they were allowed to hold, and of the occasions on which they were allowed to dance. I do not know exactly what the regulations are, but I do not think the natives usually take their women folk with them when they are recruiting; as a rule the men go by themselves. I know married men never took their wives. I expect that aspect of the matter would have a considerable influence on the men. The Papuan native is not very likely to expressly formulate an emotional state of mind or a defined feeling such as homesickness, but I know, nevertheless, that married men who have got into the habit of domesticity do not sign on very readily, and they always want to get back. I do not see any possibility of remedying that trouble, because I should think it would be impossible to keep men with their wives on the plantation, and it would allow of great scope for disorder with the other natives. I should say the sexual customs of the Indian coolies would be much less liable to give rise to serious conflict than the sexual customs of the Papua. I think a colony of married Papuan natives would very likely become objectionable. Possibly the "immorality" would not be a very serious objection to themselves, but you would have the outcry of the missionaries, and they would be quite justified. Any immorality amongst the natives would counteract the efforts of the missionaries. I do not think that women should be encouraged to go with the recruited labourers. It would be very difficult to require the planter to provide a house for each family, and that requirement would take up a great amount of room. I do not think the fact of 3,000 or 4,000 men being kept by themselves separated from their women folk would have a very negative effect on the population providing their wives were not separated from other men. I think that these men on the plantations, at any rate, or a considerable number of the plantations, have access to women in villages in the neighbourhood. However, I would not like to make any strong statement on that point, because it would depend on the tribe. The main recruiting grounds are the D'Entrecasteaux Islands and Bougainville, and the natives working at Milne Bay could always have intercourse without annoying anybody. I could not say whether it is common for boys on plantations to take up with other women. But it was pointed out as a fact that they had intrigues. It is an abnormal state of things, and the sexual problem is

important, because it is almost impossible to think that a young native would spend three years of his life without having sexual intercourse without degenerating into sexual abnormality. The old men are not such good workers, and do not like to sign on. In the case of married men going away, the leaving of their wives behind them does not lead to trouble. As to fidelity in married life there are great distinctions between the tribes. In the east end of New Guinea the sexual question is very easily treated. In a village there may be mutual accusations of adultery about once a week, which usually ends in a slight quarrel without any serious consequence. If a man goes away, and when he comes back he is told that his wife has had intercourse with another man he will not believe, it, and probably treat it as an unworthy calumny. I have known of a boy to return after two years, just as his wife had given birth to a baby. A white man suggested infidelity, but the boy was very indignant at the suggestion. The natives have no idea of the natural connexion between intercourse and birth. Sir Baldwin Spencer discovered the same thing among the Australian aboriginals, but it seems extraordinary that it should be so with the Melanesians, as they are relatively high types of men. The white man has told the natives of the natural facts, but they always have a certain amount of scepticism as to what the white man tells them.

I think the development of the country by the Papuan natives depends on the system under which development is proposed. I think coconut planting and copra making by natives could be very successfully developed in certain districts. I know that in Trobriand Island the Resident Magistrate was an exceedingly good official, and he compelled the natives to plant a number of coconut trees each year. A considerable number of coconuts has been planted, and will be in bearing in about six years. From what I know of the natives I believe they will be able to make copra. I do not think it would be possible to induce the natives to engage in any other form of industry. No native will plant coconuts voluntarily, but this experiment on Trobriand Island shows that they are extremely glad for having done so. The official there endeavoured for a considerable number of years to get the natives to plant coconuts, but they did not do so until penalties were imposed for not planting coconuts. Then the natives planted them, and they are now very proud of the fact, although they have not yet reaped a crop; they will be very well off when they reap these crops if they have a fair return. The native Papuan cannot really see even seven or eight days ahead, though he may be very intelligent in many matters; he has no mental grasp of a further perspective. I think that many natives have been making copra, and if they were given payment in tobacco, or otherwise, for every bag of copra they brought in, they would probably make it to a larger extent. However, if they wanted tobacco they would bring in the copra, but if they did not, they would not. There is no incentive to the native except some present desire. I have published a preliminary record of my researches in the

transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia, 1915. I have never been in German colonies, but from what I have read, the Germans never consider the welfare of the races they govern. For instance, in South-West Africa they transplanted numerous tribes from one place to another, and decimated them; they did not discuss at all whether that was a fair way to treat the natives. There is not much likelihood of the native Papuans and of the natives of the other Pacific Islands dying out if left alone, and if they do not come in contact with the white man's civilization. Once the natives come into contact with the white civilization it is always better to take some measures to prevent their dying out. Broadly speaking, I think it would be best to leave them to their own conditions. Some of the natives are not very easily contaminated, that is, they do not take up certain evils of the white man's civilization. In Papua the natives are protected from drink.

The arhythmic and elliptical character of the printed testimony reminds us of the distortions that may have intervened between what Malinowski actually said and what we now read. But however accurate the text, it is clear that its context was very different. The evolutionism underlying Malinowski's later functionalism is still strongly manifest: the rationality of Trobrianders, like the savages of nineteenth century evolutionary anthropology, was limited by their inability to plan for a distant future; although "relatively high types," they shared also the putative Australian ignorance of physiological paternity (Stocking 1987: 219-28). One notes also the lurking, in rather frankly manipulative practical anthropological terms, of the two themes central to Malinowski's ethnographic and theoretical concern: economy and sexuality. But although Malinowski's concern with "the native's point of view" is here manifest in starkly pragmatic terms, the romantic identificational impulse that runs so strongly in his work (as it does in anthropology generally) is also evident in his feeling that "broadly speaking," it would be better to leave them alone, uncontaminated [G.W.S.--for further commentary on this text, in the context of the diary passage, see Stocking 1986:26-27]

Interstate Commission of Australia. 1917-19. British and Australian Trade in the South Pacific. Report. (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, #66 F.134489)

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