The Anthropologist's Dilemma

Empathy and Analysis among the Solomon Islanders

Roger Keeling

Just over a century ago, white men in sailing ships began to carry off young Solomons Islanders from the coasts of the island of Malaita, to work in the sugar plantations of Australia and Fiji. Many never returned. For fifty years after that, no white man was safe ashore along the Malaitan coast without armed guard, though British government and missionaries found a few precarious footholds. The most feared Malaitans were the Kwaio of the central mountains; they had attacked two recruiting ships in the 1880s, massacring their crews to avenge relatives lost in Queensland; they had killed a missionary in 1911; and as late as 1937, when the government tried to impose the Pax Britannica and taxation, the Kwaio wiped out two British officers and their party.

When I first penetrated the jungle-clad mountains of Kwaio territory in 1962, I found that Kwaio life had remained surprisingly unchanged in the intervening decades, despite sixty years of mission and government efforts, and despite the impact of World War II on the Solomons. Pagan priests sacrificed pigs to their ancestors, girls and women were nude in customary fashion, the high points of social life were elaborate mortuary feasts using стрung shell beads as valuables, and subsistence still depended on shifting cultivation of taro and yams. Steel knives and axes, and the ubiquitous pipes, were the only striking signs of change. Kwaio remained committed, proudly and even defiantly, to the ways of their forefathers—though almost all Kwaio men had seen, during their terms as plantation laborers, glimpses of a modern world which they chose to reject. Even the British-imposed domestic peace has been somewhat tenuous: sporadic killings still take place, and in 1965 a Seventy Seven Adventist missionary was speared to death by an unknown Kwaio assailant.

My Kwaio research has been shaped by the anachronism of these tribesmen, surrounded by a world of airplanes, cars and transistor radios. I am still sacrificing pigs to their ancestors. Like the anthropologists of earlier decades, I faced in my isolated jungle base the staggeringly presumptuous task of learning and analyzing single-handedly the whole of a way of life radically different from my own—of studying with technical competence everything from art, botany, cosmology, demography and ecology on to zoology. But in the 1960's, with an increasingly specialized and sophisticated anthropology and with the technology of modern tape recorders, jet mail service and computers, I could try to record and analyze an old kind of anthropological scene in new and more systematic ways.

A year and a half of field work yielded detailed records of social life in this jungle setting, including voluminous genealogies, residential histories and documentation of the intricate patterns of investment in feasting and bridewealth payments; and it brought fluency in the Kwaio language. These made possible the usual kind of modern anthropological analysis, here of a social system of unusual interest. But how could I penetrate deeper into this way of life to see it from the “inside”—in terms of the categories and models of the Kwaio themselves—rather than from the outsider? And how could I see the processes and continuities and cycles of Kwaio social life from a narrow “time slice” of less than two years?

A rare stroke of fortune was a collaboration that developed with Jonathan Firth, a Christian Kwaio tribesman who had worked with American troops during the war and had led his people in a pro-American, anti-government political movement after the war. On his own initiative, during my absence for a break in Australia, Firth began in 1963 to record events and transactions among Kwaio pagans. Since then, for eight years, he has continued to compile a record of Kwaio social life almost unparalleled in anthropological richness: almost 3000 pages to date, documenting in his own language the feasts, quarrels, sacrifices, rituals and other events in the lives of his fellow tribesmen.

Our collaboration has now produced a continuous record of almost a decade of life among the Kwaio. The record of the continuities of social process extends further back as well: remembered details of hundreds of feasts over several decades and a reconstruction of a household-by-household census as of October 4, 1927—the day the District Officers were massacred. What usually appear in anthropological field work as isolated events and fragments now emerge as stages or episodes in unfolding cycles and processes: the transactions of a 1967 marriage recirculate contributions to the bride’s father’s marriage thirty years earlier; a dispute about sacrifice in 1970 is simply the latest round in a quarrel between two men that began with a pig that I recorded seven years earlier; a boy I first knew as a shiftless teenager has become a husband and father and has succeeded his father as a priest.

These continuities were further documented, and the mysteries of Kwaio symbolism and cosmology further explored, when my wife and I returned to Kwaio in 1969-70, this time accompanied by our own three young children. This, added to a short visit in 1966, brought the time spent with the Kwaio to three full years. The richness of this ethnographic record has turned out to be a mixed blessing. How to avoid being deluged with data? How to pull together related events from thousands of pages of notes? How to analyze the tens of thousands of transactions in the complex web of investment so as to find out how they are interwoven?

Here the electronic age—with the generous support of the National Science Foundation and the University of California—has enabled solutions anthropologists of the 1920’s and ’30’s could scarcely have dreamt of. Using a high-speed computer, genealogical relationships between any of 5000 individuals, living and dead, can be traced; marriage and feasting transactions can be analyzed and the strands of their interrelationships can be unravelled. A Kwaio dictionary of some 15,000 words has been computerized. In 1970, in search of rare and unrecorded words, my student colleague, Nathan Smith, printed out by computer and sent to me in the field some 8000 new sequences of sounds that might conceivably be Kwaio word bases but had not been recorded—the ultimate "non-book." About 400 of them turned out to be rare or archaic Kwaio words.
But the thousands of pages of field notes—describing ritual sequences, litigation, observations of daily life, and so on—could not be indexed and analyzed economically by computer. Much of this record is written in Kwai; and in dealing with running text, even in English, the crucial problem is one of indexing—that is, finding what you want so you can read and analyze it. Here our solution has been the Kodak Miracase System. Documents are coded by subject, then microfilmed; the identifying code for each document is electronically imprinted on the film. Using a keyboard console, one can almost instantly hunt out and visually examine the documents dealing with some desired combination of subjects.

It will take several years to dig out the evidence on tribal social life that can be gleaned from these rich Kwai data. But fascinating perspectives have emerged already. Though these points of view are not revolutionarily new, the nature of Kwai social organization and the depth of our data make them particularly compelling.

First, the variability and flux of Kwai social groupings, with tiny settlements constantly moving and changing in membership, make many social modes of anthropological description conspicuously inadequate. There is simply too much variation, and too much change, for us to describe an idealized or “typical” household or settlement or descent group. Nor are statistical summaries of who-marries-whom-with-whom adequate to the task. Rather, I have had to seek out the implicit ‘rules of the game’ whereby Kwai make decisions and pursue strategies of social life. However, Kwai social groupings are, they represent the cumulative outcomes of strategies and choices. Though Kwai do not have the “rules” for making appropriate choices, these emerge through long and careful probing and observation. One striking example will illustrate. Though most Kwai households include a married couple and their children, I recorded one settlement of 14 people, living in five households, that included not one married couple—only a cluster of adult bachelors and spinsters and the children of deceased close relatives they were fostering. Yet this odd residential pattern represented the cumulative result of appropriate decisions made in the face of adversity. Uncovering the unstated, implicit rules for playing the games of social life promises to give increased powers of anthropological understanding—though we are still pioneering and experimenting with ways of discovering and describing these rules.

Anthropologists often describe tribal societies as if they were, in effect, composed of a set of interlocking “pieces.” Each piece is a legal corporation, with membership determined by descent: a person belongs to the corporation of one of his parents. The corporations are then fitted together into a larger design by ties of marriage and webs of kinship. But such a mode of description, which seems superficially to fit Kwai social organization, fits
An elderly woman, still doing her share of the domestic labor, brings bamboo in water back to the village.

2. A priest of a betel before performing a sacramental rite for his descent group.

3. The Kwalis host at a ritual feast.

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