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Contradicting the Doctor: Billy Hancock and the Problem of Baloma

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Billy Hancock

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His career has included field work among the Eskimos of Alaska and Canada, appointments in both the Smithsonian's Department of Anthropology and the Bureau of American Ethnology, and service with the Institution's Ethnogeographic Board, and the Arctic Institute of North America. Currently available in the archives is Collins' collection of photographs and correspondence for the years 1920-30. The latter includes letters received from G. Herman Brandt, Moreau B. Chambers, Frederica de Laguna, James A. Ford, William Geist, Alex Hrdlicka, Diamond Jenness, Neil M. Judd, Viljalmar Stefanson, T. Dale Stewart, Mathew Stirling, William Duncan Strong, and William E. Taylor.

Other accessions include a small group of miscellaneous materials of Charles Rau, the nineteenth-century curator of archeology with the United States National Museum, including a series of approximately 40 items of correspondence with Carl Herman Berendt, dated between 1869 and 1874; professional correspondence of Marcus S. Goldstein from 1941 to 1972; miscellaneous papers of Jesse Walter Fewkes that cover the years before he turned his main interests to anthropology; records of David Armour as editor for the Society for Historical Archaeology; and a file of honors, citations, and other awards of John Wesley Powell. A few photographic items of special note have also been received, including one entitled "Anthropology at Oxford, June 10," that shows dons Henry Balfour, Arthur Thompson and R. R. Marett with students Wilson D. Wallis, Diamond Jenness, and Marius Barbeau; two photographs that show the visit to Ft. Ancient, Ohio, by those attending the 1902 meeting of the International Congress of Americanists; and two photographs showing attendees of the international Congress of Criminal Anthropology at Paris in 1889 and Buenos Aires in 1910. Edward Norberg has allowed us to copy photographs showing Robert Lowie, Alfred Kroeber, Samuel A. Barrett, David Mandelbaum, Leslie White, and others at Berkeley in April, 1957.

To assist researchers in ordering reproductions of material or planning visits, the Archives has begun a policy recently of loaning copies of inventories and registers of uncatalogued materials. Many of these are only rough drafts and some are students' efforts, but they would nevertheless be useful.

FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

I. CONTRADICTING THE DOCTOR: BILLY HANCOCK AND THE PROBLEM OF BALOMA

Because he regarded himself as the agent of an ethnographic revolution, Bronislaw Malinowski was little inclined to rely on evidence gained from white informants. So at least runs the mythic charter, and by and large it seems confirmed by the materials preserved in Malinowski's papers at the London School of Economics and Yale University. In contrast to Alfred Haddon's at Cambridge, which are filled with correspondence with

Europeans in New Guinea about ethnographic matters, Malinowski's papers contain little evidence of delegated ethnography. For several years after his departure from the Trobriands, however, Malinowski did correspond with Billy Hancock, the pearl trader at whose Gusaweta establishment he had enjoyed the "Capuan days" which sometimes troubled his ethnographic conscience and since have troubled many readers of his diary (1967:259). For the most part, Hancock's letters were gossipy accounts of the local news of Kiriwina: the arrival of a new resident magistrate ("a good churchman"); the birth of Hancock's daughter (by his native wife Marion); the fortunes of the pearl trade (from which Hancock and his partner netted £9,700 in one season); and the imprisonment of Malinowski's "old friend Tuolua" (for destroying the garden of a man he felt had violated his rights under native land law). Hancock, however, also took photographs for Malinowski, and seems to have sent him ethnographic notes on various topics. One set of these (which may conceivably still be preserved among Malinowski's ethnographic materials at the L.S.E.) dealt with one of the most controversial issues in Trobriand ethnography: the role of the Baloma or ancestral spirits in the conception of children.

According to the original account given to Malinowski, "When the baloma grows old [in Tuma, the island to which spirits retreat after the death of their specific Kiriwinian embodiment],... he goes to the beach and bathes in the salt water; then he throws off his skin just as a snake would do, and becomes a young child again; really an embryo, a waiwaia-- a term applied to the children in utero and immediately after birth. A baloma woman... carries this small being to Kiriwina, and places it in the womb of some woman, inserting it per vaginam. Then that woman becomes pregnant...." (1916:216ff). It was apparently this version that Hancock offered to his informants, as a briefing for further inquiry about details. Their response is recorded in the following letter, which is part of the series of twenty preserved in the Yale Library, and which is reprinted here with their kind permission.

Trobriands
Sept. 29, 1918

Dear Doctor.

I have been awfully awfull lonely, since your departure, have seen absolutely no one since you left untill yesterday, when I had a visit from (now who do you think?) the one and only Brudo of Kavataria, Greasy Emma, & the three master Brudos. I nearly fell flat on my back when I saw the tribe of them coming up the wharf, all booted & dressed to kill. [T]he purpose of their visit was to return me the case of tobacco that "I" ? so kindly lent to his brother, also to inquire if I could sell him a "he" turkey. They arrived about 2:30 pm and left at 8 o'clock. I bally near stared the face of the clock off between 5 & half past-five but it was no go, so I had to ask them all to stay to dinner and I tried the "poka" act with a couple of the A & R ration you left & they have all survived it.

The weather has been anything but "photographic weather" since you left. We had a couple of bright days and I used up a doz. plates which I will send you along with some prints later on. I found a book you had left behind, a book I don't think you intended to leave, "A Citizen of the East." In it are 22 films that I found between the leaves of an old phonograph-record catalogue in a corner among the old papers. There were 24 films but as some were duplicated I pinched two.

I have been gathering a lot of information since you went away about conception, birth etc. which I will send you later on. I got a rude shock when they upset the Baloma-Waiwaia business the other evening. I was taking notes about conception, & wanting to start them right at the beginning I said, "Now when the baloma become old etc etc. he goes to the salt water & bathes etc etc. & becomes young again a waiwaia & is taken up by a baloma woman etc etc." They stopped me then & said, no, the Baloma is not waiwaia. He becomes young again & goes back to the "village" & lives another life in Tuma, becomes old again washes etc & becomes young again & so on ad infinitum[.] A baloma's life in Tuma never ceases. But I said to them you told the Doctor that it was so. They say no the Doctor told us it was like that & we were afraid to contradict him. "Kaus" aint they? All babys come into existence in Tuma, but as it['s] a long story I'll tell you all about it in my notes later. The information I got from Togugua's wife and Kaikoba's wife [and] not being satisfied with them I got "Auntie" on the job & she tells practically the same story, then to make doubly sure I got a bush woman from Obweria & her yarn is the same.

The nigs have been bringing in a few flint Ligogos lately also a lot of rocks. I bought the Ligogos some 8 or 9 fairly good specimens, & with some 5 or 6 I stole when packing your stones they will make a fair collection. I am trying hard to get one of those hoes? [drawing] but have got none yet. You have three in your collection. They do not appear to have been universally used. I gave S. Brudo the films I developed for Raphael. None of them are too good, they are all very thin. Mrs. & kids are all well. Kindest regards & trusting you are A.I.

Yrs. Sincerely,
W. Hancock.

PS Excuse writing? I am painting this with one of the J nibs you kindly left me.

PPS You left behind in the store a canvas package containing three metal rods & two pieces of flat metal all marked off in meters. I take it to be a measurement rod for taking heights of people. What am I to do with it?

Although the significance of Hancock's letter for Trobriand ethnography is a matter best left to experts in that area, a few comments are perhaps in order. At the very least, it suggests that Malinowski's aggressive fieldwork style (which defended leading questions and did not hesitate to force native informants "to the metaphysical wall") under some circumstances may have inhibited rather than facilitated the free flow of information, and may have led to over-facile rationalization of data which by Malinowski's own account were often fragmentary and contradictory. On the one point italicized (the permanence of the baloma's residence in Tuma), there seems no doubt that Hancock's evidence directly contradicted Malinowski's original account-- although the substratum of popular belief which Malinowski suggested that "everybody in Kiriwina" would accept can perhaps still be rationalized with Hancock's letter. Without the "long story" sent along with Hancock's ethnographic notes, this is difficult to judge. Certainly, however, Hancock's "rude shock" suggests that he thought the new information "upset" Malinowski's views on a rather important issue.

The surviving Hancock correspondence (which includes only one letter by Malinowski) offers no evidence as to Malinowski's response. Later versions of the baloma doctrine do include slight modifications of language and argument which may reflect Hancock's new information (1927:31ff; 1929: 178ff). However, Malinowski did not waver on the fundamental point that "all children are incarnated spirits"; nor do his "Confessions of Ignorance and Failure" (1935: 452-482) refer to the matter at issue. It was, as Malinowski had made perfectly clear, one on which informants' accounts differed, and he may have had good reason to reject Hancock's evidence. One cannot help noting, however, that Hancock's informants were all women, whereas Malinowski's seem (with one exception) to have been all men. Although the related matter of "virgin birth" has been the subject of some controversy, the most recent ethnographic account in effect accepts Malinowski's version of the point at issue, and indeed makes the reincarnation of baloma central to the interpretation of Trobriand culture (Weiner 1976). (G.W.S.)

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