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Old Light on a New Controversy: Alex Rentoul's Account of the Trobriand Women's *Sagali*

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Of the many critical reactions to Bronislaw Malinowski's classic work on the Trobriand Islands, one of the most ethnographically productive has been Annette Weiner's critique that Malinowski neglected the role of women in exchange. In her celebrated restudy, *Women of Value, Men of Renown* (1976), Weiner tells of how, within a day of her arrival in a Trobriand village on the island of Kiriwina, she was brought to see a five hour long exchange ceremony that was conducted entirely by and for women. As several hundred people watched in a hamlet clearing, women came up singly and in groups to donate beautifully decorated leaf-fiber skirts along with bundles of the raw material used to fashion them, strips of dried banana leaves, piling them up in different sized heaps, which were soon carried off by their intended recipients. Hundreds of these women's wealth items might change hands in a single transaction. The ceremony ended the main mourning period observed for a deceased individual, and the atmosphere was festive, with raucous laughter, shouting, and spirited argument. Weiner would later show that, in addition to recognizing the work done by numerous people in connection with the mourning and burial, the presentations of skirts and leaf bundles reciprocated the social debts that the deceased owed to his father's people and affines, separating him from his former relationships in order to reclaim his name and body substance for the matrilineal group into which he was born.

But on that first day, when Weiner witnessed the ceremony (she was to witness nine more like it during her fieldwork), she was surprised to discover no account of anything like it in Malinowski's thick volumes, nor mention of the items transacted. The entire complex of women's exchange activity and forms of wealth "apparently had escaped Malinowski's observations" (1976, 8). Nor was the complex addressed substantially in the work of subsequent Trobriand ethnographers (e.g. Powell 1960). Why were women's roles and wealth items invisible to these male ethnographers who so ably described men's roles and *kula* shells? On her first day in the field, a novice female could see the importance of what the discipline's most acclaimed male observers, after extensive study, had treated as unworthy of mention. Surely this was a most dramatic instance of male bias, a tendency for male observers to treat women's business as "essentially uninteresting and irrelevant" (Rosaldo 1974, 17). Aiming to counter what she saw as an androcentric tendency deeply rooted in the history of anthropology, Weiner introduced her monograph with the ringing declaration that "unlike the earlier Trobriand ethnographers, this ethnographer is a woman. A critical difference between myself and my male predecessors is that I took seemingly insignificant bundles of banana leaves as seriously as any kind of male wealth" (op.cit., 11).

Weiner's primary argument was that because gender interactions, gender role complementarity, and gender symbolism are such a crucial and irreducible part of the social order, women's activities and perspectives should be given explicit and focused attention in ethnographic analysis. This argument remains important and valid. But in the historical period when Weiner's book was published, the gendering of scientific observation and theorizing was the focus of wide debate in anthropology and other

fields, and it was as a demonstration of the “thesis of women’s invisibility to male observers” that her work received the greatest attention (Jolly 1992, 43; Sykes 2005, Godelier 2004, Keller 1985, Strathern 1981). Indeed, it is no overstatement to claim that Malinowski’s non-mention of the banana leaf bundles in his Trobriand ethnography has now come to stand as anthropology’s most famous example of “male bias” in fieldwork—an emblem of the phenomenon as well as an engrossing case study that is widely discussed in anthropology textbooks and classrooms (see, e.g., Haviland, et al. 2011, 64; Ferraro and Andreatta 2010, 84; Miller 2010, 32; Murchison 2010, 10). How much of the predominance of male perspectives in published ethnography reflect men’s prominence in the societies studied, such that men are commonly the anthropologist’s main informants? How much of it is perceptual, a matter of selectivity in what male anthropologists notice, and how much is representational, realized in the focus or interpretive slant of their analyses and writings? (see, e.g., Moore 1988, Tiffany 1985). But Weiner’s claim that “a host of other male observers had failed to see women’s central place in Trobriand exchange” also raises the difficult question of how to disentangle the effects of observer’s bias from the effects of cultural change in the half century that intervened between Malinowski’s and Weiner’s observations (Jolly 1992, 38; Burawoy 2003; Lindenbaum 1977).

Many years ago, while doing research in the Papua New Guinea National Archives in Port Moresby, I chanced upon a document that sheds light on this case. The document, presented below, offers a vivid description of the same Trobriand women’s exchange ceremony that Weiner witnessed at the start of her fieldwork. But it was written shortly after Malinowski’s fieldwork, and it represents the perspective of a male observer. Its author was Alex Rentoul, an Australian career officer in the Papua colonial service who had begun working in Papua in 1913, serving in the Western, Gulf, Central, and Northern Divisions before being posted to the South-Eastern Division (in today’s Milne Bay Province) where, in 1928, he was appointed Assistant Resident Magistrate in Losuia, on the Trobriand Islands. Rentoul is known to anthropology for his dispute with Malinowski over Trobriand ideas of impregnation and paternity (Rentoul 1931, 1932; Bashkow 1996; see, e.g., Pulman 2004; Clifford 1988, 26). After Rentoul published a refutation of Malinowski’s account of these ideas in *Man*, Malinowski scornfully characterized him as “an amateur entirely inexperienced in methods of research” (Malinowski 1932a, 38).¹

But Rentoul had quite a different profile in Papua, where he was widely admired for his personal qualities of bravery, sound judgment, and leadership. In recognition of his steadfast friendship and mentorship, the explorer Jack Hides named a tributary of the Strickland “the Rentoul River” after him (Schieffelin and Crittenden 1991, 56; Ruhen 1963, 145, 148). Rentoul’s patrol reports and administrative correspondence reveal a character inclined to find the good in Papuan customs and able to take pleasure in new knowledge and experiences, and his relatively “relaxed” and even “hands-off” style of

¹Rentoul had received encouragement to publish his criticisms from the anthropologist Jack Driberg, with the knowledge of E.E. Evans-Pritchard, and this correspondence, which Malinowski complained was “behind my back,” became a sore point in his relationship with them (Malinowski/Driberg, July 12, 1931, in Malinowski Papers at London School of Economics, provided by Michael Young, personal communication, January 1, 2012; see also Goody 1995, 23; Abrahams 2010).

governance stands out in sharp contrast to the more untempered interventionism of many of his colleagues (Connelly 2007, 71). Rentoul particularly liked the Trobriand Islanders, regarding them with a "special fondness" (ibid., 74). The Papuan administration during this period encouraged officers to submit special reports on "native customs" and other anthropological matters, and in 1929 Rentoul filed "an account of a Trobriand Island 'LISALADABU SAGALI' – a ceremony conducted solely by women for the acknowledgment and award of all those who have assisted in mortuary ceremonies," adding that "I can find no record of it having been previously described" (FEWP: Rentoul/Govt. Secretary, Oct. 12, 1929). The account was forwarded to F.E. Williams, the Papua Government Anthropologist, and kept with his files (FEWP).

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DESCRIPTION OF A TROBRIAND ISLAND "LISALADABU SAGALI"

At OKOBOBO Village a crowd, estimated at over 800, women and girls had assembled. Barely a handful of men remained in the village, these including Village Councillors and ancient men. It is considered bad form for a male to remain in a village, where a congress of the other sex is about to be held. However on being invited, I sat at the ringside around which perhaps 300 girls and women were congregated.

The main idea of the ceremony (LISALADABU SAGALI) is, that all those women apart from actual blood relations, who have assisted in various ways at mortuary ceremonies during the past twelve months, will now receive the acknowledgments and awards of relatives.

A strange point is that a widow is not looked upon as a blood relative of a dead man, and for her mourning efforts &c will be rewarded by the blood relatives (usually mother or sister) of the dead man, just as any outsider would be.

The other recipients will comprise those who have assisted in death ceremonies in more indirect ways, such as by cooking, loaning pots and supplying food &c for the associated feasts.

In order to obviate any element of jealousy or undue favouritism from the ceremony it is arranged that the gifts shall consist of the perforated banana leaf bundles, all dried and ready for dying, which form the basis of the picturesque ramies (petticoats) worn by the women of the Trobriands. Such a present is always useful and appreciated, as they will keep for a long time, and may be used as required. The name of these small bundles is NUNUEGA.

The presentations were initiated by a woman stepping into the centre of the ring, placing a small mat on the ground, and on this depositing two of the NUNUEGA. Standing over these the woman announced the name of the person she wished to recommend for an award, the offering on the ground representing her own heading of the subscription list. At once a dozen or so girls from various points of the circle pushed forward and piled their offerings of NUNUEGA on top of the original subscription. The recipient then stepped forward and amid a buzz of congratulatory sounds picked up her presents and disappeared in the crowd.

[There] followed a similar ceremony, repeated again and again, the popularity or perhaps the varying services of the recipients being indicated by the amount of NUNUEGA given. In one instance a girl had to pay two visits to the ringside to collect all her possessions.

During all this time there was a buzz of excitement, and outside the ring the chatter and laughter of several hundreds of females made up a sum total of noise not easily to be forgotten. Further

away a line of some fifty women tended the cooking pots laden with taitu [yams] for the feast that was to follow.

There is an element of gambling about the whole thing. Almost every woman present will receive one or more rewards, but as each in her turn will have to contribute to subscriptions for which they have a personal sympathy, no woman can tell exactly how she will profit by the end of the day. Not to subscribe to a testimonial, when interested, would be in the worst form, and almost unthinkable.

A few minutes before my departure several elderly women, who appeared to have some authority, whispered together glancing in my direction, and presently a mat was placed before me, and with much laughter a number of girls and women came piling their small offerings of NUNUEGA at my feet. I gathered that as it was a day of general settlement for favours, they had considered it a fitting thing to settle with the Government for not interfering with their ceremony. Of course I also carried out my settlement in kind, or rather in tobacco, and took my leave.

Most pleasing was the entire good humour with which the proceedings were carried out. Absent apparently were those expressions of avarice and selfishness not always dissociated with Women's Congresses in supposedly more enlightened countries. Happiness seemed to be the order of the day. Later I was to learn that all those present, who were wearing the depressing pot black of mourning, would wash their bodies, bedeck themselves in their gayest ramies, and feast until sundown. Thus with the exception of those worn by close relatives, would all signs of mourning disappear from the Kiriwinan villages, until yet another soul received its summons to the Spirit Grottoes of TUMA.

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Rentoul's description bears in several important ways on Weiner's critique of Malinowski and the literature surrounding it. Most dramatically, the account contradicts Weiner's contention that Trobriand women's wealth had been completely unrecognized by outsiders until Weiner herself wrote about it: if outsiders "ever understood (or ever noticed) anything about women's wealth, they never recorded anything" (Weiner 1980, 277). The village of Okobobo where Rentoul witnessed the ceremony was geographically close to Omarakana and Kwaibwaga, the villages where Malinowski and Weiner based their respective researches (Young 2004, 395 [Malinowski's hand-drawn map]; Weiner 1976, 25 [map]); this implies that the gap between Rentoul and Weiner's descriptions is not an artifact of regional differences. Furthermore, the date of Rentoul's observation, some mere dozen years after Malinowski's fieldwork, rules out an explanation in terms of historical change. This latter possibility has been a much discussed one in the literature on Trobriand ethnography.

Margaret Jolly suspected that Weiner's "contrast between an andocentric male observer and a gynocentric female observer" may have been "amplified by the history between the periods of their observations." (1992, 39, 41; see also Burawoy 2003; Lindenbaum 1977) In the years since Malinowski's fieldwork, Jolly reasoned, the exchange of banana leaves may have taken on "expanded and novel salience." Features of Weiner's own account make this hypothesis plausible. Weiner was impressed by the apparent invisibility of Trobriand women's wealth to foreign traders, missionaries, and colonial administrators, which led her to believe that it served as a protected reservoir of stability for the traditional Trobriand exchange system, allowing the system to continue in the

face of external pressure. According to Weiner (1980, 276-277, 283), women's wealth was "a buffer, absorbing and adjusting changes in the economic activities of men" due to the intensification of cash use, wage work, and so on.² Trobriand culture could find special "stability in banana leaves" because, in Weiner's interpretation, Trobriand women control a temporal domain that encompasses and transcends the death of individuals. It is only women that have the ability to restore to a deceased person's matrilineal kinship group, called the *dala*, the pure substance (or *baloma*) which, according to Trobriand theories of procreation, is critical for the reproduction of new persons by mothers within the *dala*. This process thus secures the "ahistorical (i.e., cosmic) cycling of *dala* through unmarked time, 'as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be'" (1976, 39, 230-236). Women's cyclical time contrasts with the ordinary historical time that is the domain of men, whose influence is individually differentiated and limited by mortality. The key to women's regenerative power is precisely this exchange ceremony in which women distribute skirts (symbolizing female sexuality and reproductive capacity) and whitened leaf bundles ("the symbol of milk and nurturance") in order to pay back the contributions that people of other *dala* have made to the life of the deceased, freeing or "untying" the deceased from all relationships developed during his or her lifetime, and in so doing restoring at death what the *dala* had initially contributed at the person's conception (ibid., 20-22, 92, 119-120). By undoing and overcoming the vagaries of historical change in order to reclaim the substance of individuals, Weiner suggested, "the mortuary distribution of bundles of banana leaves and skirts, organized, produced, and controlled by women," allowed for the regeneration of *dala*, promoting the continuity of Trobriand culture's own traditional organizing forms (1980, 274, 276).

In the face of these ambitious claims that the women's exchange ceremony both symbolized and produced women's power to supersede history, Jolly questioned Weiner's interpretative edifice as hinging on an improbability: the historical stability of the ceremony. Rentoul's account swiftly undermines this line of critique. The ceremony (*sagali*) is identified by same name (*lisaladabu*) by both Rentoul and Weiner (Weiner 1976, 62, 109), who also recognize the same term for the banana leaf bundles (*nunuega*; Weiner, following Malinowski, transcribes it as *nununiga*). The gatherings depicted are both of similar scale, involve a similar sequence of events and atmosphere, and similarly discourage participation by men. By the time of Weiner's fieldwork in the 1970s the ritual may well have acquired "a novel significance, a new value" as an emblem of "tradition and the centrality of women to such tradition" (Jolly 1992, 42), but this is not necessarily inconsistent with the ritual's substantial cultural continuity. As Weiner makes clear, the ceremony was by no means elective at the time of her

²In terming the banana leaf bundles "women's wealth," Weiner makes much of the fact that were exchangeable for cash in the 1970s, but the notion of "wealth" in this context should not be conceived of as solely economic. The bundles also played a role in reciprocating the substantial *urigubu* gifts that Trobriand men made annually to or on behalf of their sisters, suggesting that they should be viewed not just as a form of currency but as a "total social phenomenon" in which the exchange of economically valuable items is bound up with kinship, sociality, ritual, and politics, just as Malinowski famously argued for men's kula transactions (Weiner 1976, 140; 1980; Malinowski 1984[1922]; 1935; Mosko 2000, 388; Mauss 1990[1925]).

fieldwork, but was being performed because the social work it accomplished was felt to be necessary.

We now also have compelling evidence from Malinowski's notebooks, correspondence, and photographs that the *lisaladabu* ceremony Weiner described was historically continuous with that documented by Rentoul. Malinowski noted that several deaths in his environs had provided him with "opportunities for the exhaustive investigation of mortuary matters"; he also recorded a visit to the mission sisters where native women's method of manufacturing banana leaf fiber skirts was demonstrated for him (Young 2004, pp. 399, 407, 513). In July 1915 alone, he took fieldnotes on four different distributions by women of "petticoats" or "ramis" (i.e., skirts) and the "small bundles presently to be worked into skirts," and he gives the name of this type of *sagali* as "*Lisala dabu*," which he glosses as "cleaning off the ceremonial dirt" of mourning. At one such feast, he drew a diagram of the village plaza showing where each women's group sat, and he quoted the formulaic phrases women called out when presenting their batches of skirts (or skirt materials) to other women (Malinowski field notebook pp. 805-809, 822, 825-826, 963-965, provided by Michael Young, personal communication, January 1, 2012).

These fieldnotes are enriched by Malinowski's published and unpublished photographs. Some of the latter have been brought to light by Michael Young and explicated with the help of Linus Digim'Rina. In his label for one unpublished photo, Malinowski observes that the "bundles (Nununiga)... in this form play an important part in the mortuary distributions (Sagali)" (1998, 173-184). Malinowski's *Argonauts* (1984 [1922], Plate IV) includes a photograph uninformatively captioned "Scene in Youratotu" that shows Trobriand women ceremonially presenting one another with skirts and bundles. In *The Sexual Life of Savages* (1987 [1932b]), Plate 9 depicts two women making skirts (caption: "A Stage in Skirt Making"); Plate 10 is "Drying Skirt Fibre"; and Plate 12 shows a "Distribution of Skirts in Mortuary Ritual" (cf. Weiner 1980, p. 275, referring apparently to Plate 4). Malinowski took additional photographs illustrating the steps women took to create the bundles (scraping, drying, and tying the banana leaves), the making and decorating of skirts, and the different types of skirts worn by women who were in mourning or pregnant, young or old (Young 1998, 175). Clearly, Malinowski attended to this important aspect of women's cultural lives.

In short, when taken together with Malinowski's notebooks and photographs, Rentoul's account suggests that Weiner was right in attributing to the women's wealth exchange complex a high degree of historical continuity. But we now know that in another sense Weiner was wrong: even in the colonial era, outsiders had been aware of the value Trobriand women placed on banana leaf wealth. Secrecy was evidently not necessary to fortify this women's sphere of exchange against colonial influence.³ Malinowski did not lack for opportunities to observe women's leaf-bundle making, skirt-making, or the exchange of these goods in mortuary ceremonies. Nor did he "ignore" these activities,

³ In some ways, colonial intrusion may have been a boon to women's wealth since a 1906 law regulating Papuan native dress made it illegal for Trobriand islanders to wear imported cloth (Connelly 2007, 70-71). This presumably would have supported the value of women's banana leaf bundles, ensuring that they had not only symbolic value but also use value as the raw material for making leaf fiber skirts.

as is often suggested (see, e.g., Weiner 1992, 12; Linnekin 1997, 110). He treated them as of sufficient importance to photograph, ask about, and take notes on, even if (as in the case of the photograph caption) they would not find a place in the main text of his books.

Which brings us back to the matter of male bias. Looking back upon this case with all the evidence we now have, Trobriand women's exchange seems to reveal not so much a general sex-linked interpretative tendency as it does the particularities of individual observers and their intellectual contexts: What kinds of observations did they think were important? Malinowski did pay attention to women's banana leaf bundles, but he classified them under the rubric of "technology of... skirt manufacture"; perhaps this is why he did not integrate them into his published analyses of gardening, kula, and kinship (Young 1998, 298 n.7). Weiner, intending to study Kiriwina men's wood carving at a time when the study of women was of growing interest in anthropology, seized upon the lack of attention to women's activities in the writings of her predecessors and made it her research focus (Reiter 1975; O'Brien and Tiffany 1984).

As for Rentoul, while he might well have been "an amateur" as Malinowski claimed, this gave him a certain freedom to treat ethnographic description as an end in its own right, at a time when this had become unfashionable in professional anthropology. When he attended Radcliffe-Brown's anthropological training course for colonial officers at Sydney in 1930, Rentoul was disappointed by the overriding functionalist orientation of the academic anthropologists he encountered there: "The description of a native ceremony such as a marriage or funeral, no matter how beautifully done, will fail to interest them unless one is also able to demonstrate to them the effect of such crises upon the social group" (Rentoul/[Murray] 11/28/1930, quoted in Bashkow 1995, 6). Like most other colonial observers, Rentoul was an evolutionist who was professionally committed to upholding the cultural, racial, and political lines that separated him from the natives he administered. But he also professed that "to know and understand these natives is to realise that they are, after all, just people like ourselves" (Rentoul 1938). His unpublished memoirs in the National Library of Australia, and his correspondence spread among various archives, deserve study for their potential to further complicate the relationship between colonial and professional anthropology, as well as for their additional ethnographic and historical insights (Rentoul n.d.).

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