

MALINOWSKI COLLECTED WORKS

Volume V

The Father in Primitive Psychology

Bronislaw Malinowski



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THE FATHER IN PRIMITIVE
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THE FATHER
IN
PRIMITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

The dependence of social organization in a given society upon the ideas, beliefs, and sentiments current there is a fact of which we should never lose sight. This refers especially to savage races, where we find quite unexpected and far-fetched views about natural processes, and correspondingly extreme and one-sidedly developed forms of social organization in kinship, communal authority, and tribal constitution. In particular the views held about the function of sex and procreation, about the relative share of father and mother in the production of the child, play a considerable part in the formation of kinship ideas. The respective contributions of the male and of the female parent to the body of the offspring, as estimated in the traditional lore of a given society, form the nucleus of the system of reckoning kinship.

I

KINSHIP AND DESCENT IN A MATRILINEAL SOCIETY

The detailed study of a concrete example will show the social and psychological mechanism better than any speculations. In the Trobriand Islands¹ we find a matrilineal society, where descent, kinship, and all social relations are reckoned by the mother only, and where women

¹ The Trobriand Islands are a coral archipelago lying to the north-east of New Guinea. The natives belong to the Papuo-Melanesian race, and in their physical appearance, mental equipment, and social organization, they show a combination of the Oceanic characteristics mixed with some features of the more backward Papuan culture from the mainland of New Guinea.

For a full general account of the Northern Massim, of whom the Trobrianders form a section, see the classical treatise of Professor C. G. Seligman, *Melanesians of British New Guinea* (Cambridge, 1910). The book also shows the relation of the Trobrianders to the other races and cultures on and around New Guinea. A short account will also be found in *Argonauts of The Western Pacific*, by the present author (London, 1922).

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have a considerable share in tribal life, in which they take the leading part in certain economic, ceremonial, and magical activities. This influences very deeply the erotic life as well as the institution of marriage.

The idea that it is solely and exclusively the mother who builds up the child's body, while the man does not in any way contribute to its production, is the most important factor of the social organization of the Trobrianders. The views about the process of procreation entertained by these natives, coupled with certain mythological and animistic beliefs—a subject with the details of which we shall subsequently become acquainted—affirm, without doubt or limitation for the native mind, that the child is of the same substance as its mother, and that between the father and the child there is no bond of union whatever.

The mother's contribution to the new being to be born, a fact so open to observation, is clearly expressed by the natives :

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“The mother feeds the infant in her body. Then, when it comes out, she feeds it with her milk.” “The mother makes the child out of her flesh.” “Brothers and sisters are of the same flesh, because they come of the same mother.” These and similar expressions describe the attitude of the natives towards this, their fundamental principle of kinship. This attitude is also to be found embodied in a more telling manner in their rules of descent, inheritance, succession in rank, chieftainship, hereditary offices, and magic—in fact, in every rule of transmission according to kinship. In all these cases, the social position is handed on in the mother-line from a man to his sister’s children. This exclusively matrilineal conception of kinship is of paramount importance in the restrictions and regulations of marriage and in the taboos of sexual intercourse. The native ideas of kinship also come to light with a dramatic suddenness and extreme intensity at the death of an individual. For the social

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rules underlying burial, lamentation, mourning, and certain very elaborate ceremonies of food distribution are based on the principle that people united by the bond of maternal kinship form a closely knit unit bound by identity of feelings, interests, and flesh; while all the others, and even those united by marriage and the father-to-children relation, stand sharply outside and have no natural share in the bereavement or grief at death.

As these natives have a well-established institution of marriage, but are quite ignorant of the man's share in the begetting of children, the 'father' has for the Trobriander a purely social definition: he is the man married to the mother, who lives in the same house with her and forms part of the household. A father, in all discussions about relationship, was pointedly described to me by the natives as *Tomakava*, a 'stranger', or even more correctly, an 'outsider'. This expression would also be frequently used in conversation when the natives argued

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about some point of inheritance, or tried to justify some line of behaviour, or when in a quarrel the position of the father was to be belittled. I have used the word 'father' so far to indicate the relationship as found in the society of the Trobriand Islanders, but it must have been clear to the reader that this word must be taken, not with the various legal, moral, and biological implications that it has for us, but in a sense entirely specific to the society with which we are dealing. It would have been best, in order to avoid introducing a real misconception, not to have used our word 'father', but the native one *tama*, and to have spoken of the '*tama* relationship' instead of 'fatherhood'. But this would have proved too unwieldy to repay the gain in exactness, and so the reader, when he meets the word 'father' in these pages, should never forget that the word must take its definition, not from the English dictionary, but from the facts of native life described in these pages. And I may add that this

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applies to all terms which carry special sociological implications, that is, all terms of relationship, such words as 'marriage', 'divorce', 'betrothal', 'love', 'courtship', etc.

What does the word *tama* (father) express to the native? In the first place, it would be described by an intelligent informant as meaning for him the 'husband of my mother'. He would further proceed to say that his *tama* is the man in whose loving and protecting company he has grown up. For, since marriage is patrilocal in the Trobriands, that is to say, since the woman moves to her husband's village community and lives in his house, the father is a close companion of his children. He takes also an active part in the tender cares lavished on the infants, invariably feels and shows a deep affection for them, and later on shares in giving them instruction. The word *tama*, father, condenses, therefore, in its emotional meaning, a host of experiences of early childhood;

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expresses the typical sentiment between a young being and a mature man who loves him or her ; while socially it describes the male person who stands in an intimate relation to the mother and who is master of the household.

So far, *tama* does not differ essentially from ' father ' in our sense. But as soon as the child begins to grow up and take an interest in things outside his immediate needs and the household affairs, certain complications arise and change his outlook. The child comes to know that he is not of the same clan as his *tama*, that his own totemic appellation is different and is identical with that of his mother. With this he learns that all sorts of duties, restrictions, and matters for personal pride unite him with his mother and separate him from his father. Instead, another man appears on the horizon whom the child calls *kadagu* (my mother's brother). This man may live in the same locality, but just as often he resides in another village. The child also learns

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that the place where his *kada* (mother's brother) resides is also his, the child's, 'own village'; that there he has his property and his other rights of citizenship; that there are his future prospects, there reside his natural allies and associates. He may even be taunted in the village of his birth with being an 'outsider' (*tomakava*); while in the village he has to call 'his own', where his mother's brother lives, his father is a stranger and he the natural citizen. He also sees as he grows up that the mother's brother assumes a gradually increasing authority over him, requiring his services, helping him in some matters, granting or withholding his permission to certain actions, while the father's authority and counsel become less and less important.

Thus the life of a Trobriander runs under a twofold influence—a duality which must not be imagined only as a mere surface play of custom. It enters deeply into the existence of individual men, it produces strange complications

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of usage, it creates frequent tensions and difficulties, and not seldom it gives rise to violent breaks in the continuity of tribal life. For this dual influence of the paternal and matrilineal principle which enters so deeply into the framework of institutions and into the social ideas and sentiments of the natives is, in fact, not quite well adjusted in its working.

II

THE MALE AND FEMALE ORGANISM AND THE SEXUAL IMPULSE IN NATIVE BELIEF

Let us follow up the details of the natives' ideas about the nature of sexual functions. The natives have an actual practical acquaintance with the main features of human anatomy, and an extensive vocabulary for the various parts of the human body and for the internal organs. They often cut up pigs and other animals, while the custom of *post-mortem* dissection of corpses, and visits among their overseas cannibal neighbours supply them with exact knowledge of the homologies of the human and animal organism. Their physiological theories, on the other hand, are remarkably defective; there are many notable gaps in their knowledge

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about the functions of the most important organs, side by side with some fantastic and quaint ideas.

The Trobrianders' knowledge of sexual anatomy is, on the whole, very limited, in comparison with what they know about other parts of the human body. Considering the great interest which they take in these matters, the distinctions which they make are superficial and rough, and their terminology limited.

Their physiological views are extremely crude. The organs of sex serve for excretion and for pleasure. Their ideas about the excretive urinary processes are very inadequate. The kidneys are not associated with the production of urine. A narrow duct (*wotuna*) leads from the stomach directly to the bladder from which it passes through the male and female genitals. Through this canal the water which we drink passes slowly till it is expelled, and on its way it becomes discoloured and sullied in the stomach by contact with excrement.

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For food begins to be changed into excrement in the stomach.

Their ideas about the sexual functions of the genitals are more complex and systematic, and present a sort of psychophysiological theory. The eyes are the seat of desire and lust. They are the basis or cause (*u'ula*) of sexual passion. From the eyes, the stimulus is carried on to the brain by means of the *wotuna* (literally, tendril or creeper; in the anatomical context, vein, nerve, duct, or sinew). Thence, again, the desire is spread all over the body, travelling to the belly, the arms and legs, and then again concentrating in the kidneys. The kidneys are compared to the main or middle part or trunk (*tapwana*) of the system. From this, other *wotuna* (ducts) lead to the male organ. This is the tip or point (*matala*, literally, eye). Thus, when the eyes see an object of desire they 'wake up', after which they communicate the impulse to the kidneys which, again, transmit it further. Thus

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the eyes are the primary motive of all sexual excitement.

The processes of sexual excitement in the female organism are quite analogical. Thus, the eyes, the kidneys, and the sexual organs are united by the same system of *wotuna* (communicating ducts). The eyes give the alarm, which again passes through the body, takes its seat in the kidneys, and produces an excitation in due course. They call both the male and female discharge by the same name (*momona* or *momola*), and they ascribe to both of them the same origin in the kidneys and the same function, that of lubricating the membrane and of increasing pleasure.

This account represents the more developed knowledge of the matter. I first obtained it from Namwana Guya'u and Piribomatu, the former a dabbling sorcerer, the latter a real expert, both intelligent men and both, in virtue of their profession, interested in human anatomy and physiology. I obtained similar state-

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ments in other parts of the island, and in the main outline, such as the sexual functions of the kidneys or of the internal organs, the great importance of the eyes and the olfactory sense, and the strict parallel between the male and female sexuality, all my informants were in agreement.

Theirs is a fairly consistent, and not altogether nonsensical, view of the psychophysiology of sexual libido. The drawing of the parallel between the two sexes is consistent. The indication of the three cardinal points of the sexual system is very characteristic of the native canons of classification. They distinguish in many subjects the three elements: the *u'ula*, the *tapwana*, and the *matala*. The metaphor is taken from the vision of a tree or a pillar or a spear: the *u'ula*, in its literal sense the foot of the tree, the basis, the foundation, receives further the meaning of cause, origin, source of strength; the *tapwana*, the middle part of the trunk, then the trunk itself, the main body of