

The Sexual Life of Savages

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In the early 1900s, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski did his field work in the Trobriand Islands of the Western Pacific. After getting himself ashore, he dropped himself into their culture and begun having to learn their language and understand their customs. The result were a series of groundbreaking books in the field of anthropology, much of which is still entertaining to read today.

In *The Sexual Life of Savages* (savages, Malinowski assures us, is a technical term and not meant to cause offense) he describes the customs of Trobriand's intimate life, which is fascinating both for how it is different and how it is the same.

To a certain degree, it seems like the culture of the islanders presages our own. Back when Malinowski was doing his field work, he was amazed that islanders could freely have premarital sex and yet still found it desirable to get married. The same question would prove no puzzle to any American today.

And, indeed, the islanders seem like a case study in the ultimate consequences of the sexual revolution: girls want sex just as much as guys, kids start having sex at a very young age — 6-8 for the girls and 10-12 for the guys — with no social stigma, there are few customs about dating to inhibit “hooking up”, and, of course, revealing clothing has been taken to its limit, with girls actually going topless.

Of course, much of the story of a Trobriand's intimate life is the same: initial attractions budding into lasting relationships, etc. And then, out of nowhere, Malinowski drops in something totally bizarre. The islanders don't kiss, he explains. Instead, they scratch. The girls scratch the guys so hard that they draw blood and, if the guys can withstand the pain, then they move forward to having sex. The ethnographer (as Malinowski calls himself) verified this by noting that just about everyone on the island had noticeable scratches. And while everybody is having sex whenever they want, premarital meal-sharing is a big no-no. You're not supposed to go out for dinner together until after you get married.

But the most fascinating and strange part about the islanders are their beliefs on the subject of pregnancy, also described in Malinowski's classic article “[Baloma: The Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands](#)”. When people die, you see, their spirit takes a canoe to the island of Tuma, which works very much like the normal island except everybody is a spirit of the dead. When the spirit gets old and wrinkled it shrugs off its skin and turns back into an embryo, which a spirit

then takes back to the island and inserts into a woman. This, you see, is how women get pregnant.

That's right. The islanders do not believe that sex causes pregnancy. They don't believe in physiological fatherhood. Malinowski was incredibly skeptical about this, so he tried all sorts of ways to see if this was simply a story they told, while they actually the real deal. But no, they assured him that it was really true, that all the white people who insisted otherwise were being silly, that the spirits caused pregnancy, not sex.

They argued the case quite logically. After all, they noted, one fellow went on an expedition for a year or two and when he came back, he had a new son. He obviously wasn't having sex with her while he was away, so where did the kid come from? (Cough.) And, they note, there are some really hideous people on the island who nobody would dare have sex with, yet they manage to become pregnant. (Malinowski spies some kids looking sheepish when this subject is raised.)

They also argue the other way: people on the island are having sex all the time from a very early age and yet they very rarely get pregnant. (Naturally, the islanders don't practice any form of contraception; the very idea doesn't make sense when sex doesn't cause pregnancy.) The white man's argument just doesn't make sense. Indeed, [recent visitors report](#), the islanders *still* believe that sex doesn't cause pregnancy, despite the best efforts of health workers.

It is speculated that the yams that form the basis of the island diet have a contraceptive agent in them (The Pill was originally made by looking at chemicals in wild yams), which conveniently explains quite a bit, including the low birthrate despite the high level of sexual activity. Indeed, the whole idea lends quite a bit of support to the idea that material factors shape culture — after all, our own sexual revolution didn't happen until we got the yam's chemicals in pill form in 1960.

The notion has some other interesting consequences. For example, the society is necessarily matrilineal, since fathers have no technical lineage. Yet sociological fathers (the mother's husband), Malinowski notes, show more love and care for their children than most he's seen in Europe.

Furthermore, they believe the same rules apply to the rest of the animal kingdom. This is what clinches it for Malinowski — despite all the effort they go to to raise pigs, they insist that pigs also reproduce asexually. They never attempt to breed pigs; indeed, they castrate all the male pigs they have. (To them this is further proof — we castrated all the pigs and yet they keep having children! Malinowski notes that the domestic pigs often sneak off to canoodle with those in the wild.)

When I told a friend of mine about this odd state of affairs, he wondered if the islanders were just stupid. After all, he noted, sex and childbirth aren't exactly two physically unconnected human activities. But as he reflected on it further,

he considered that this belief wasn't that much different from what passes for religion in our country. Smart people believe strange things.