

Matthew Shaw

1. Description

1.1 Name of society, language, and language family

Trobriand Islanders (now officially known as Kiriwina Islands), language is ***Kilivila*** (aka Kiriwina); Classification: Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian, Central-Eastern Malayo-Polynesian, Oceanic, Western Oceanic, Papuan Tip-Peripheral¹

1.2 Location:

151.04⁰ E Longitude 8.38⁰ S Latitude, in Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea³

1.3 Brief history:

The islanders have no histories or myths concerning post-creation history until contact with Europeans in the late 1700s. American whalers, Queensland slavers and European explorers capitalizing on exotic artifacts made continual contact from the 1840s, but more consistent contact came with the 20th century and Methodist missions. During World War II, no combat action occurred in these islands, though they were used as bases for airstrip service by the Allies. Few ethnographic changes were noted by Harry Powell in the 1950s or Annette Weiner in the 1970-80s from Malinowski's documentation in the World War I years. Village life, inter-settlement relations, commerce, and subsistence remained much, as of the late 1990s, as traditional lore recounts.^{2,4}

1.4 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

Missionized heavily after 1905, all European civilians were withdrawn at onset of World War II. Christian presence has not displaced traditional religious practices. Many schools in central settlements promote literacy; Kilivila is written in Latin alphabet, and while the islands are 60% monolingual, English is also taught in grammar and high schools but with less than half of youths attending. Many young adults attend technical school or university in Papua New Guinea, as well as venture there briefly for wage labor, but most return to traditional village life. Tourism has decreased since the 1970s (though this may have recently changed with trends in eco-tourism) and farming out children for labor and sale of fishing catches by men are the main sources of currency with which to buy Western goods.⁴

1.5 Ecology:

Kitava Island is an elevated coral island which rises to about 30 meters at a central ridge. The other islands and islets are low-lying flat coral atolls. All islands are coral formations composed of coralline limestone, fringed by coral reefs. The islands Kitava, Kiriwina, Vakuta, Kaile'una, Muwa, Kuiawa, Munuwata, Tuma, and Simsim are populated. The islands are considered to be an important tropical rainforest eco-region.^{1,3,4}

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

Yams. Also taro, banana, cassava and sweet potato.^{2,4}

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

Fish. Also shellfish, pigs (rarely or ceremonially) and chickens.^{2,4}

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

Specialized fishing equipment, but weapons of war traditionally restricted to intricately carved wooden clubs and war shields. Modern steel weapons have been acquired in trade, but warfare is restricted.

2.4 Food storage:

Elaborate yam houses with open sides for display of yam wealth.^{2,4}

2.5 Sexual division of production:

Boat making and ocean-fishing is strictly men only. Lagoon and in-shore fishing is often pursued by women and children.

Horticulturally, men and women share the work and land-clearing, with men more often doing the yam planting and harvesting. Planting and harvesting of other crops is shared or woman-dominated. Daily food preparation is done by women, but preparation of pigs and taro for feasts is a collective men's arena.

Both men and women weave mats, but the banana-leaf bundles and skirts that are women's wealth are produced by the women.^{2,4}

2.6 Land tenure:

"Provisionally, hamlet, garden, bush, and beach lands are owned by a founding matrilineage and are under the control of the lineage's chief or hamlet leader. Rights to residence and the use of land are given by these men to others, such as their sons, who are not members of the matrilineage. Land disputes are frequent and, because the court cases are public, they are fraught with tensions that sometimes lead to fighting. Knowledge of the history of the land from the time of the first ancestors legitimates a person's claim, but competing stories make the arbitrating chiefs' decisions difficult."⁴

2.7 Ceramics:

Acquired in trade from the Amphlett Islands to the SW; indigenous crafts are with wood carving and weaving of banana leaves.^{2,4}

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

Prescribed within matrilineages for mutual welfare, but proscribed among in terms of competition. Intra-village sharing is encouraged for mutual cooperation.^{2,4}

2.9 Food taboos:

Taboo to eat in front of someone; food traditionally consumed quickly in nuclear family hut, with backs turned.^{2,4}

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

Several different forms of watercraft from one-man boats to elaborate, sea-going outrigger canoes. Specialized and male-oriented, especially ocean-going canoes.^{2,4}

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f):

Approximately 12.⁵

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

Mid-20s.^{2,5}

4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

Husband-wife, three or four children. So, up to 6 in nuclear families, with a more-or-less even split 3-3 m/f.^{2,5}

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

To judge by photographs, 1-2 years.²

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

Early 20s for each; it is customary to marry an age-mate.⁵

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

“Common,” so perhaps up to 50%. Remarriage of both common.^{2,4}

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

Zero; marriages monogamous⁵

4.8 Arranged marriage, bride purchase/service, dowry:

Infant betrothal unites a boy and girl through their families, but there is a low likelihood of the couple “marrying” again as adults.⁵

Gift exchanges go both ways. The husband and his family offer gifts to the bride’s family; Malinowski stresses, however, that these are not bride-price but a series of informal giftings. There is a significant gifting of material and service to the couple by the bride’s parents that Malinowski describes as significant dowry.^{2,5}

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

Inheritance patterns depend on the nature of the legacy. According to Weiner, personal property, “including magic spells, are given to those who have helped him or her by making yam gardens and assisting with other food. This is the way sons inherit from their fathers. Matrilineal property, such as land and decorations, is given to a man's sister's son, while a woman may inherit banana trees, coconut or areca palms, magic spells, and banana-leaf wealth from her mother. Among kula men, shells and partners are inherited either by a son or a sister's son. When a man dies, his house and yam house are destroyed and his wife usually returns to her natal hamlet.”² It bears noting that the Kula partnerships are most commonly father-son, as are the economic trade relationships that ensue, despite the matrilineal tendency for most other inheritance.

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:

Both parents equally tend to the children, and grandparents interact with them a great deal as well. Socialization is permissive, and physical punishment is considered unthinkable. Parents and children tend to treat each other as closer to equals than in Western society.^{2,4,5}

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

Seen as aberrant and foolish, worthy of derision; there are no legal sanctions nor *taboo*, but homosexuality, bestiality and masturbation are seen as objects of ridicule though not penalty.⁵

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

Marriage will occur typically outside of hamlets but within the larger village the hamlets comprise. Also, endogamous clan marriages (matrilineal) sometimes occur but they are regarded as incestuous.^{4,5}

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized?

Partible paternity not recognized. Monogamous parents care for children, although Weiner reports “The strength of matrilineal identity is embodied in the belief that conception occurs when an ancestral spirit child enters a woman's body.”⁴

4.14 What is the belief of the mother’s role in procreation exactly? (e.g., “receptacle in which fetus grows”)

See above.

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?

No.

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape

Man on woman: Rare.² Woman on man: not so rare.^{2,4,5} Women may attack a strange man in the vicinity of the yam fields in an “orgiastic assault”.^{2,5}

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)

A man is likely to choose a woman from another hamlet nearby, and in a separate matrilineage within his father's clan. Weiner comments on cross-cousins, but is confusing as there seem to be up to three generations of separation⁴, though Malinowski is more forceful in the prescription of cross-cousin marriage.^{2,5}

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?

Yes indeed; Malinowski reported that "Chastity is an unknown virtue among these natives...as they grow up, they live in promiscuous free-love (p.53)."²

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring

No.

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?

The father, with assistance of grandparents (especially matrilineal) and matrilineal kin.^{2,4}

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females

1:1, or very nearly.

4.22 Evidence for couvades

No.

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)

No.

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?

No avoidance. Respect due to elders and social "higher", especially chiefs.^{2,4}

4.24 Joking relationships?

Visitors and strangers are to be treated in a familiar, ribald mocking way as if they were well known.²

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations

Matrilineality for everything EXCEPT Kula partnerships, which are passed from either father-son OR occasionally man to sister's-son.^{2,4}

4.26 Incest avoidance rules

While "incest" describes sexual activity within the matriline and is avoided, Malinowski calls the brother-sister relationship "the supreme taboo" and significant sanctions ward against this.⁵

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?

No, unless Christian relations insist.^{2,4}

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?

Names usually from matriline; adults (especially men) may receive a sobriquet based upon honor or ridicule.^{2,4}

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)

Again, marriage is preferred beyond the "hamlet", or cluster of family houses, but within the "village", or extended network of hamlets in a restricted area.^{2,4,5}

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:

None; inter-district warfare was common before colonialism. During and since post-colonialism, conflict restricted to competitions (yam harvests) and a violent, indigenous variant of cricket.⁴

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:

Ingroup violence strictly controlled by negotiation and sanction. If violent death occurs, it is out-group.²

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:

Yam rustling or retribution.²

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

Kula Ring involved multiple contacts to islands or inland villages clockwise and counter-clockwise. Modern relations involve government, occupational and educational ties to Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.^{2,4}

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

200-500.⁴

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

No.^{1,2,4}

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):

Matrilineal clans are the intra-village connection, but there are matrilineal chiefs who hereditarily rule the districts. Status is more related to lineage than direct association to a chief.^{2,4}

5.4 Post marital residence:

Virilocal.³

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

Territoriality is distinct and defined by matrilineal lineages and chiefdoms.⁴

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):

Mostly by age, with small children, adolescents, young unmarried adults, married adults and elders constituting the interaction groups.^{2,5}

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

KULA relationships.²

5.8 Village and house organization:

Several nuclear family houses form a hamlet, which in turn is linked to several nearby hamlets into a village. Centrally located within this “village” are the yam houses, bachelor’s houses and ceremonial open area or plaza.²

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens’ houses):

Yes, older adolescents and unmarried young adults live in gender-specific “bachelor’s houses” of up to 6 residents. There yam-houses prominently in the village center. Also, the chief’s house is elaborate and decorated.^{1,2,3,4}

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

Beds⁵.

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:

Patrilineal “clans” recognized, but matrilineages shape the fabric of society.^{2,4,5}

5.12 Trade:

Specialized trade circuits aligned along ceremonial KULA exchanges. Fish, ceramics, pigs, crops and spouses are exchanged in the context of KULA exchanges, especially in times of *in extremis* for any single island or hamlet.²

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

Significant social hierarchies. Chief and chiefly class most visible above all, the rest is based upon wealth (yams, trade partners). Marriage is often influenced by perceived status inequality.^{2,4,5}

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6 Time allocation to RCR:

A very great deal.

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

A village will have a sorcerer with status second only to the chief, and then there is the “garden magician” whose purview is entirely related to the garden plots and the harvest. Garden magic is passed matrilineally and is usually a female role. There are also curers of both sexes who perform healing through knowledge of plants and magic.^{2,4}

6.2 Stimulants:

Likely, but unclear.

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

Birth, first pregnancy, planting, harvest, mortuary.

6.4 Other rituals:

Elaborate Garden rituals, elaborate magical practices and taboos associated with deep-sea fishing, and social hierarchy reinforcing rituals associated with chieftom. Also, the rituals of the Kula.^{2,4,5}

6.5 Myths (Creation):

As Weiner relates, “The origin stories for each matrilineage describe how different groups arrived in the Trobriands from under the ground or by canoe and claimed garden and hamlet lands as their own. These claims were often contested by others who arrived later, so that subdivisions of matrilineages occurred.”⁴

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

Weiner relates that “dances first brought by the original ancestors are still owned by the members of individual matrilineages. Drums are the only traditional musical instruments for these dances. Jew's harps or flutes made from bush materials are played for personal enjoyment. String bands are now common. Traditional songs are still sung when someone dies.” Additionally, sea-going canoes are elaborately carved and decorated, and woodworking has become a tourist market economy.^{2,4}

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

Garden rituals are most often conducted by women, while sea-going fishing related ritual is an entirely male sphere. Also, the Kula is male only.²

6.8 Missionary effect:

Minimal; veneration of Christianity did not impede traditional practices.⁴

6.9 RCR revival:

Weiner reports a fundamentalist movement in the mid-1990s in two hamlets that disavows the existence of magic.⁴

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

Spirits of the dead travel to a distant island, Tuma, and continue their existence. They return to the Trobriands annually, at harvest, to check up on their descendants’ well-being.⁴

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

Taboo, no; avoidance, yes.²

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

No.

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint:

Young females paint their faces when involved in episodes of “ceremonial license”, such as when arraying themselves for selection by young males for *katuyausi*, when welcoming visiting bereaved guests from a neighboring village for mortuary rites.²

7.2 Piercings:

Earrings of turtle shell and spondylus disks common among women.^{2,4}

7.3 Haircut:

Nothing standard or codified.

7.4 Scarification:

No.

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

Women and girls over the age of about 5 wear colorfully decorated skirts and often wear necklaces of spondylus shell as well as earrings. Men are also likely to wear necklaces, as well as armbands similar in form to the *mwali* of the Kula exchange.²

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

Elaborate feathered headdresses are worn by dancers during ritual, as do chiefs during affairs of state. The *mwali* (armshells) and *soulava* (extremely long necklaces) of the Kula exchange are only to be worn on ritual occasions.²

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

Yes.^{2,4}

7.8 Missionary effect:

Minimal.^{1,2,3,4}

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

No.

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

Matrilineal identity.^{2,4}

8.2 Sororate, levirate:

No.

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

They use a modified Crow type with a number of atypical features, such as the same term is used for ego's mother and mother's brother's wife and the terms for parallel siblings-in-law are merged with parallel siblings.⁴

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

THE KULA RING. 'nuff said.²

Numbered references

1. Kilivila. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. http://www.ethnologue.org/show_language.asp?code=kij
2. Malinowski, Bronislaw. (1961[1922]) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. E.P. Dutton Co.: New York.
3. Senft, Gunter. *Language and Cognition: Kilivila*. Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics; <http://www.mpi.nl/institute/research-groups/language-and-cognition-group/fieldsites/kilivila>.
4. Weiner, Annette. (1996) *Trobriand Islands*. Encyclopedia of World Cultures, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3458000408.html>.
5. Malinowski, Bronislaw. (1929) *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia*. Halcyon House: New York. Accessed via Google.Books.