



Notes on Natives of the Solomon Islands

Author(s): F. Elton

Source: *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 17 (1888), pp. 90-99

Published by: [Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2841588)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2841588>

Accessed: 15/06/2014 14:18

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

- Fig. 4. Teetotum or top. The body is formed of a section of cane 2·2 inches long, and 1·8 in. in diameter, having in the side an oblong opening cut through diagonally. The ends are closed with wooden plugs, and through the centre passes a stick 7·8 in. in length. From the Straits Settlements. Presented by the Commissioners for the Straits Settlements at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886.—*British Museum*.
- Fig. 5. Teetotum or top, of similar construction and material to the last, with the exception that at the side the opening is small and roughly circular. Round the upper part of the stick is wound a slightly twisted cord. Length of stick, 8 in.; length of body, 3 in.; diameter, 2·2 in. Stated to have come from the Stewart Islands (Sakayana), Western Pacific. From the Godeffroy Collection, Hamburg. Presented by A. W. Franks, Esq., F.R.S.—*British Museum (Christy Collection)*.
- Fig. 6. Malay top (*gasing*) made of iron-wood (?), oviform in shape; turned on the lathe and having a small iron point. At the top is a projecting piece, below which the string is wound. Height, 3·6 in. From Selangor, Straits Settlements. Presented by the Commissioners for the Straits Settlements at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886.—*British Museum*.

The following Notes were presented by Lieut. Elton :—

NOTES *on NATIVES of the SOLOMON ISLANDS.*

By Lieutenant F. ELTON, R.N.

Introductory Remarks.

WHILE serving as a Lieutenant in H.M.S. "Diamond," on the Australian station, the idea occurred to me to get a little anthropological information about the natives in those islands of the south-western Pacific which contain cannibal inhabitants, and amongst which the ships of the English fleet in those parts spend most of their time.

It is usual to find in these island groups some solitary white man who spends his life among the natives, living in some respects as they do; drawing the line at cannibal practices, but taking more kindly to native ideas of domestic economy as to the necessary members of a principal man's household. Some-

times these white men have no particular occupation or object in view, but more commonly they act as collectors of "copra" for some Queensland or other Australian firm, who send a schooner round at intervals of a few months to pick up the stuff for sale in Australia.

"Copra" is the name that has been given (I think by some of the natives) to the insides of cocoa-nuts. Vast forests of cocoa-nut trees fringe the coasts of the islands, and the natives, for a consideration, collect the nuts, break off the shell, and, cutting the inside into two or three pieces, pile up great quantities near the beach in the white man's grounds. Payment is made chiefly in tobacco and axes, for these natives understand so little of the value of gold or silver money that I have known a native, who received a sovereign from a trader in payment, shortly afterwards give the sovereign to another trader in exchange for an ordinary penny box of matches.

In the New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands I found one or two of these solitary copra collectors, and I propose this evening to lay before you the information I obtained from the one living among the Solomon natives. He was a German who had re-named himself "Howard," and he seemed an observant, thoughtful, and well-educated man. While very reticent as to his reasons for having left the Fatherland to take up his abode in this out-of-the-way spot, he was readily communicative about the manners and customs of natives around him.

Parenthetically, it may be said of these natives, as it has ere this been remarked about others, that "manners they have none, and their customs are beastly" in the matter of devouring each other.

During one of the periodical visits of H.M.S. "Diamond" to the Solomons, I wrote down a number of questions of an anthropological nature in a note book, and left the book with the German, asking him to fill in the answers to the best of his knowledge at his leisure.

Some months afterwards, the ship again called at this spot, and I received my book from "Mr. Howard" with most of my questions pretty fully answered. These questions and answers are now before the meeting, but as the exceedingly interesting exhibition of living specimens of the Australian aborigines has occupied most of the time at disposal, the matter must unavoidably be allowed to stand over till the printing of the Journal of Proceedings, in which the notes can be read in detail. I must say that the admirable little publication (too seldom used by travellers) named "The Admiralty Manual of Scientific Inquiry," was my guide in making these investigations.

Questions and Answers relating to the Solomon Islands.

Question 1. What is the average height and weight of the people? A note of any extreme cases, large or small, will be interesting.

Answer. The average height is between 5 and 6 feet. The largest man I have seen on Ugi measured 6 feet 8 inches, his weight was 184 lbs. The smallest full grown man was, if I remember rightly, 4 feet 2 inches in height and his weight was over 90 lbs.

Corpulence is not prevalent among the natives of the Solomon Islands. I have only seen one corpulent man at San Christoval, and I should think that his weight exceeded 200 lbs. The average weight is between 120 and 150 lbs.: the natives are, on the whole, well made, and there are not many cripples among them.

Question 2. Is there any prevailing peculiarity in the shape of the head, especially about the upper and lower parts?

Answer. None that I know of. I have found a difference between skulls from Malayta and San Christoval.

Question 3. What is the usual colour of the eyes and skin?

Answer. The eyes vary in colour from a light to a very dark brown, just as the colour of the skin does. On the islands of St. Anna, San Christoval, Ugi, Ulava, Malayta, Guadalcanar, and Florida the colours of the skin varies greatly from a light copper colour to a very dark brown almost approaching black. The beach people on the island of Isabel are the same, while the bush people at the north end of the same island are of a remarkably light colour. They are very timid, building their houses in trees and only coming down to the ground during the day. The natives of the neighbouring islands, in New Georgia, &c., are enemies to them, and kill them in great numbers: they likewise carry them off for the purpose of making them slaves. The natives of the islands west of the Guadalcanar (namely, Savo, Russel Island, New Georgia, Corrystone, Choiseul, Shortland and Treasury group, and Bougainville) are mostly of a black colour, there being very few light coloured natives among them. A skin disease is very prevalent among the whole race; it is a kind of ringworm, the natives call it *Bucva*.

Question 4. The colour of the hair, and whether fine or coarse, straight or curled or woolly?

Answer. The colour of the hair is dark brownish originally, but they powder their hair with lime and red ochre, which changes the colour to a light reddish brown. On the island of San Christoval this custom is not in general use. The hair is

soft and bushy, or curled in some instances, with a few exceptions of soft straight hair of a light brown colour.

Question 5. Is the head round or elongated in either direction? Is the face broad, oval, or of any other strange form?

Answer. There is no peculiarity in the shape of the head. The forehead is mostly low, in some instances high, and I find these the most intelligent, often the most villainous. The nose is flat and stubby in most natives, although I have seen some with a straight nose. There are some very pleasant features both amongst the males and females.

Question 6. Does infanticide occur, and for what special reasons?

Answer. On the island of Ugi and among the beach people of San Christoval it is a common thing to kill the children at their birth by digging a hole in the earth away from their habitations: the mother lets the child drop into the hole and covers it up immediately. They say that it is too much trouble to rear a child: they would rather buy a grown up child from the bush people for native money, who keep their children for the sole object of selling them to the beach people. On the other islands of the Solomon group infanticide does not occur, unless in an extreme case, such as the child being a bastard. On the island of Ugi the women often procure abortion. I have known several cases of three to seven months' pregnancy, where abortion was procured, but could never find out exactly what they used to procure the same. I am aware that there is a certain shrub growing in the islands, the leaves whereof they use for this purpose, by making a drink of them: likewise they wear tight bandages round their waist. There are only a few women who understand this, and they make rather a profitable trade by it. Of all the natives I have had intercourse with, I find the Ugi and San Christoval natives the most lazy and avaricious, likewise the most immoral. All young women, no matter whether a chief's daughter or a slave's, are prostitutes. In the western islands of this group this is not the case, there being prostitutes or *rambus* among them, but they are the slaves caught in warfare, any prostitution among the natives of the place being punished either by death or a heavy fine. On Ugi a native prefers in marriage a woman that is getting old in the trade.

Question 7. What is the practice as to dressing and cradling children? Are there any reasons connected with it tending to alter the shape of the head or feet or other parts?

Answer. There is very little to be said on this subject. The mother carries the child with her wherever she goes. The first

six months the child is not taken out of the house, neither will the mother leave the house, the father doing all the household duties, if the family is not rich enough to keep slaves. They do not alter the shape of any part, except the nose and ears, which they pierce and then put little blocks of wood in them. The mother carries the child on the left hip in a sling thrown across the right shoulder.

Question 8. Are the children easily reared ?

Answer. A native never strikes his own child and concedes to all its wishes. As soon as the children are able to run about they are left to themselves.

Question 9. At what age does puberty take place ?

Answer. That is hard to say to a certainty. Natives do not keep account of their age. I should say 15 years.

Question 10. Are more than one child at a birth frequent ? Are there more boys than girls at birth ; and in the tribes are there more men than women, or the reverse ?

Answer. I have seen twins, but I believe that it happens very seldom. Natives seem astonished when I tell them of white women having twins often. On some islands, especially on Ugi and San Christoval there are more men than women.

Question 11. At about what age do the women stop bearing children ? And for how long do they generally suckle them ?

Answer. I can hardly tell at what age, I should say at about 45 years. I have never seen a large family on San Christoval and Ugi. The most I saw was five children and they were born in the first 10 years of their marriage. The mother suckles the child until it weans itself at the age of about two years.

Question 12. What are the ceremonies and practices connected with marriage ?

Answer. In different islands there are different customs. On Ugi and San Christoval the practice is as follows :—If a man wants a wife, he cooks a dish full of yams and cocoa-nuts and carries it to the house of his bride elect, whence he returns without uttering a word. The next morning he returns to take the dish away. If the food has not been eaten, he is not accepted, and he takes this as an insult ; if, on the other hand the bowl is empty and a couple of fathoms of money left instead of it, he is not accepted either, but the family wishes to keep on friendly terms with the suitor. Finally, if the dish be *entirely empty* he is accepted. The girl has very little to say in regard to her marriage, it being all arranged by her parents and friends. There is no ceremony attached to the marriage. The bridegroom takes the girl either to his house or goes and stays for a time with her parents, partly to show his ability to keep a

wife, and partly to see what sort of housewife she will make. If he is not satisfied with the girl, he is allowed to return her to her parents, who have to pay the young man for keeping the girl. If, on the other hand, he intends to make her his wife, he pays to the girl's parents about 12 to 20 fathoms of Makua money and makes a large feast, at which great quantities of pork, opossum, fish, yams, taros, and cocoa-nuts, are consumed. The parents of the bride have to give a feast in return. If the husband at any time choose to send his wife back to her parents, they would have to return to him the money paid for her.

Question 13. Is more than one wife the usual thing ?

Answer. On the islands east of Guadalcanar the natives generally keep only one wife, although polygamy is in use. Only a few chiefs are married to two wives. On the island of Guadalcanar and on all the islands west of it, men marry as many wives as they can keep. I know a chief in Port Fowler, by name of Goray, who is married to 34 wives and has over 70 children by them. They all live in a village by themselves. His eldest son is married to 10 wives and has got over 15 children.

Question 14. Do divorces take place ; and are they frequent ?

Answer. Sometimes, but not very often. When a man chooses his wife he knows her well and has been living with her before marriage.

Question 15. What is the usual food of the people ; and what are their modes of cooking ?

Answer. They live chiefly on yams, fish, and cocoa-nuts, and prepare these in different ways, by making a sort of pudding of yams and cocoa-nuts or of a small oily nut not unlike an almond. They possess pigs, dogs, cats, fowls, all of which animals they use as food, but they mostly feed on vegetables. They have taros, both cultivated and wild. They eat the leaves of different trees as salad or make soups of them. Their original cooking utensils consist of deep wooden dishes of different sizes, sometimes neatly carved and inlaid with pearl shell. They cook their food, wrapped up in leaves, between hot stones. If they make soup they put the ingredients into a dish and keep putting hot stones into it, until the water boils. The bush-people do so at the present time, but the beach people buy saucepans and other cooking utensils to boil their food in.

Question 16. How many meals do they take in a day ? Can they go without food for any length of time ? And are they able to work hard, or for any long time ?

Answer. In a well regulated household they take two meals,

at 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. Natives can go without food for a long time. If a relative dies, they taboo themselves from eating everything that grows underneath the ground, also from all saltwater fish; then they live on cocoa-nuts alone, with a few bananas occasionally. They are able to work hard for a long time. The natives of the Solomon Islands are highly prized in Fiji and Queensland, to which places they emigrate in large numbers, for their willingness to work.

Question 17. What is the usual style of dress; and what made of? Do they tattoo or otherwise alter their bodies for the sake of ornament or distinction?

Answer. The men all through the Solomon Islands cover their private parts only with a narrow strip of calico, or with leaves when calico is not to be obtained. The women dress differently on different islands. On the islands east of Guadalcanar single girls go entirely naked, but married women wear a little fringe made of the bark of a tree, as a distinction of their marriage. On Guadalcanar, Florida, and the islands west of them they wear petticoats made of banana leaves. In places where white men have not been or very seldom go to, the men will go naked also. They do not tattoo their bodies as a general rule.

Question 18. Are the people long or short lived? State any well-known cases of extreme old age.

Answer. I should say that they are not long lived as a rule. I know of only a few old people among the beach tribes of San Christoval. The natives have no idea what their age is. The oldest man I know, seems to be about 70 years of age.

Question 19. How do they generally treat the sick; and is there any superstition connected with the treatment?

Answer. They use no medicine of any sort, and sick people have to do the best they can for themselves. They believe that the devil or Atvoa made them sick. Some people profess to have intercourse with this spirit, and they are called for in case of sickness. Lime plays a great part in regard to driving the devil out of a sick person. The medicine man will take a pinch of lime and murmur a few words over it, put it after that into a small leaf and fasten it on some part of the patient. He takes as payment for his services either some Makua money or some tobacco. The natives on Ugi know the value of the medicines of the whites, and often come to get some from me. Still they must have the lime also, and generally they ascribe their recovery to the lime and not to our medicines.

Question 20. Are the people troubled with internal worms?

Answer. Children are, but not fully grown persons, so far as I know.

Question 21. How are the dead disposed of?

Answer. In several ways. No matter what person or rank, as soon as any of the natives die, all the people of the village go to the house of the deceased and lament and howl there for two or three days: if a person of distinction, longer. After the second day the corpse, if of a slave, is wrapped in cocoa-nut leaves and taken in a canoe some distance off the beach, and there thrown overboard. If a person of distinction, he is taken into the bush, then laid on a platform and left until all the flesh has rotted off the bones, which are afterwards carefully gathered, put into baskets and hung up in their houses. If a chief dies, they keep the corpse near, or sometimes in the village, and two of his friends wash him every day until the bones are clean. They are then put into a basket, or sometimes placed in a coffin, made so as to resemble a shark, and put into the tamboo house. This is the devil of the natives. They offer to him the first fruits of the season, such as yams, taros, bread-fruit, cocoa-nuts, &c. If they kill a pig or have a feast the devil gets the first of everything that is cooked. They say they go at night and have intercourse with the devil, and all such nonsense.

Question 22. Is there any idea of a future state; and of what sort?

Answer. All they believe is that after death they are spirits, resembling the image, and can do what they like with the living persons.

Question 23. What is the usual kind of dwelling house?

Answer. The houses on the eastern islands of this group are about from 8 to 15 feet high; in the western islands they build them higher, up to about 40 feet. They all use the leaves of the vegetable ivory palm as thatch, and light wood or bamboo for sides. Some natives keep their houses tidy, but on the whole they are squalid and dirty. In every village they have at least one so-called tamboo house or *tohe*, generally the largest building in the settlement. This is only for the men, it being death for a female to enter there. It is used as a public place and belongs to the community. Any stranger coming to the village goes to the tamboo house and remains there until the person he is in quest of meets him there.

Question 24. Have they any monuments? What sort and what for?

Answer. They have no monuments of any sort.

Question 25. What are the domestic animals? Where did these animals first come from; and are they altered by the climate or food they live upon?

Answer. They possess pigs, dogs, cats, and fowls. The natives confess that the pigs were brought here by white men a long time ago. They are of an inferior breed, with very long heads. Dogs, I believe, are natives of the islands. They resemble a fox more than a dog. They do not bark but howl, and live mostly on vegetable food. The natives are very kind to them. Cats and fowls have not been long among the natives. The predominating colour of the animals is a reddish brown.

Question 26. What is the kind of government? Any odd details about their religion, &c., &c., will be most interesting.

Answer. They have no established government. If a man is married and got a little money and a few slaves, he calls himself a chief, but does not exercise any power over his slaves; they do pretty well as they like. They recognise one or two as the head chiefs or *mani pina* in a village, but do not listen to them unless in a fight, or in any of their tamboos. The white trader's tobacco has more power than a chief's word. But should a chief put a taboo on anything, say, against eating yams or cocoa-nuts, they will observe it most strictly. If anybody dies, his relations are tabooed from eating anything that grows underneath the ground, likewise from all saltwater fish for the space of about one year or less, according to the rank of the deceased. They carve images and put them into their tamboo houses or yam plantations, and believe them to have power over all evil spirits.

Question 27. How do they note and divide their time? How do they carry on war; and what are their usual weapons?

Answer. They divide their time into days, months, and years. The days they note by the sun, the months by the moon and the year by the growth of a yam. Their warfare consists in treachery and surprise. They never stand in open fair fight. If they are not able to kill their enemy with one blow, they do not stop to give him another, but take to their heels. Their usual weapons are tomahawks, clubs, spears, and bows and arrows. They possess many guns, but I have heard of very few cases where men died by getting shot. Although the natives are very fair marksmen when cool and collected, yet in a surprise they fire off their guns without taking aim. Some time ago a native had a shot at me not 10 paces off, with intent to kill, but missed.

Concluding Remarks by Lieutenant Elton.

You will observe that in Mr. Howard's answer to my eighth question, he refers to the domestic bringing-up of the child and

not to its progress in physical growth and strength, which was the sense of my question.

In reply to my fifteenth question as to the *usual* food of the people, he has confined himself strictly to naming the usual daily victuals and has not spoken of the human flesh they occasionally feast on; but he verbally informed me that the natives round him at Ugi now and then went over to the neighbouring island of Guadalcanar, and bought human victims for an approaching feast time; these victims being mostly women. These women were then taken away in canoes and regularly fattened in their purchasers' villages till the festive time. Then they were deliberately killed and eaten, just as fattened pigs would be.

When they happened to be fighting with neighbouring villages or tribes, they always feasted on any unlucky enemy they captured or killed; but these capturings and killings were not on a large scale, as these natives are exceedingly cowardly and timid fighters. Hence human flesh by purchase was more to their liking and more common.

MAY 10TH, 1887.

FRANCIS GALTON, Esq., F.R.S., *President, in the Chair.*

The Minutes of the last meeting were read and signed.

The following presents were announced, and thanks voted to the respective donors:—

FOR THE LIBRARY.

- From H.E. the BRAZILIAN MINISTER.—Archivos do Museu Nacional do Rio de Janeiro. Vol. VI. 1885.
- From ROBERT CUST, Esq.—The Origin of Primitive Money. By Horatio Hale.
- From the AUTHOR.—The Oceanic Languages Shemitic. By Rev. D. Macdonald.
- Canoes und Canoebau in den Marshall-Inseln. By Dr. O. Finsch.
- Hausbau, Häuser, und Siedelungen an der Südostküste von Neu-Guinea. By Dr. O. Finsch.
- L'Indice ilio-pelvico o un indice sessuale del bacino nelle razze umane. By Prof. G. Sergi.
- Sul terzo condilo occipitale e sulle apofisi paroccipitali. By Prof. G. Sergi.

H 2