Roger Keesing’s first encounter with the Malaita Kwai was filled with anxiety. After two years of participant-observation, he felt like an insider—only to realize there still existed an unbridgeable gulf between their world and his.

What two events illustrate the gulf between the Kwai’s world and Keesing’s? Why could Keesing not convince the Kwai not to eat the agonip? *argued they were just for ceremonies - Roger*

Not a Real Fish
The ethnographer as inside outsider

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It was to be my first night in a Solomon Island village. . . . At Bina, or the west Malaita coast, where I had been dropped by a government ship, I unpacked my two backpacks before the gaze of all the village children and many of the adults. Out tamed the mosquito netting, then the kibercorn and Fitch air mattress and its foot pump. I spread the mattress on the ground, screwed the pump into the valve, and pumped, but nothing happened, in front of the expectant crowd as the sweating white stranger pumped away. Finally, after endless fiddling with the valve and sotto voice cursing, Western technology at last unfolded its mysteries.

Awakening on the thatched verandah to find a steady rain, I watched where the locals were going off, along the beach and around the point, bent under pandanus leaf umbrellas, for morning pees. I followed the same path. I discovered only by later observation that it was the women’s latrine: the men’s latrine, separated (as I was to learn) even in such Christian villages by strict rules of gender segregation, was a structure built over the water. My hosts were too polite to comment on—or claim compensation for—what I later realized had been a massive breach of propriety.

There had been no way to learn any Pigdin in advance, and after less than a week in the Solomons I could scarcely communicate at all with the villagers (although a couple spoke a bit of English). By midafternoon, the carriers arranged by the district officer to guide me across the middle of the island had not arrived. Eventually, in late morning I succeeded in persuading two young men to carry my bags and lead the way; but after an hour and a half of walking into the toothhills they announced that they would take me no further. Not until I had spent another reluctant night in a Christian village could I persuade anyone to take me further.

The still pagan Kwai of the mountains above Sinaulagi on the east coast, who had perpetrated the 1927 massacre of a district officer and his entourage, were feared by the colonial government as wild and dangerous. Their hostility to outsiders, especially missionaries and government, was legendary in the Solomons. Yet the lure of the mist-shrouded Kwai mountains had been reinforced a few days earlier as I had traveled down the coast on a small ship with a Malaitan government clerk. “You wouldn’t want to go up there!” he advised me. “The people live in houses on the bare ground, like pigs, and they don’t wear any clothes!”

After conferring with the district officer, who claimed to know the Kwai and their mountain fastness well, it seemed that their potential hostility might best be defused if I approached their heartland from a different direction than Europeans usually did: by land.


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rather than by sea. But with no maps, little information, and no way of communicating effectively, I was relatively helpless in seeking to enlist cooperation and explain my intentions. All I knew was that I was supposed to get to a place called "Aenasafu, which district officer had told me was the key midpoint on the path to "Snerango."

My guides the next morning set off, but not toward "Aenasafu. "You can't get there from here," an English-speaking Christian man had explained, translating for me. "The river is up." I had been in no position to argue, and at least I was moving inland—and upward. For the next nine hours, I struggled and sweated up and down precipitous paths: an hour and a half of climbing straight upward to a long-deserted mountaintop settlement site, then a plunge down the other side, on slippery red clay, into the gorge below. Looking back at the maps (which in 1962 did not exist), the maze of elevation lines shows this to be the steepest, most broken terrain in the Solomons, almost vertical in many places. Rather than following the contours, the path zigzagged from peak top to waduk top a thousand or more feet below.

We did not pass a settlement all day. But exciting as it was, was not least of all because our tour guides were two cheerful and pretty teenage girls, smoking pipes and stark naked. They bounded up and down the path like mountain goats; my fifty-pound packs were a trifle. At the end of the afternoon, exhausted, I was led into a mountain-top clearing with several thatch buildings. It was clear from the response of the men gathered there, surly-looking and carrying long machetes, bows and arrows, and clubs, that I was neither expected nor particularly welcome. Trying to explain my presence through linguistic filters, I learned that this was a marriage feast. I was told I would have to stay inside one of the houses, from which I could only peek through narrow gaps in the thatch. Having been warned by the government that I might well be killed by Kwaio warriors, who had dispatched a dozen Europeans throughout the years (and were to dispatch another, a New Zealand missionary, three years later), I was less than relaxed.

What followed through most of the night was uninterpretable and often terrifying. Perhaps two hundred people, the women and many of the men naked except for shell ornaments and woven pouches, streamed into the clearing as dusk fell. Several times, a warrior clutching a machete or club ran, screaming around the house from which I was peering, shouting with what seemed hostility; one chopped down a banana tree beside the house with fierce whacks. Shouts and speeches, then fusillade screams echoing out on all sides, naked bodies back and forth in the flickering firelight. Eventually, persuaded by the sheer lapse of time that I was not to be the main course and numbed by physical exhaustion, I strung my mosquito net in a corner of the house and collapsed into sleep, only to be awakened in terror when someone stumbled into my net and he and it collapsed on top of me.

In late 1964, after almost two years of fieldwork, I could look back and smile at my early anxieties and innocence. I had been to a dozen wedding feasts, had helped to finance some with my own strung shell valuables, and knew now about the conventionalized mock threats and food distributions that had terrified me that first time. I spoke Kwaio fluently and had been received by those fiercely conservative mountainers with a warmth and enthusiasm that had been amazing. (Only later did I more clearly understand the extent to which I had, through accidents of history, been incorporated into their historic project of anticolonial struggle; when I arrived they were trying to write down their customs in emulation of colonial legal statutes, and I was to be their scribe.) Taking part in feasting presentations, incorporated into kinship and neighborhood networks, allowed into sirines to take part in rituals, I felt like a comfortable "insider."

But of course, I wasn't. I could never leave my own cultural world despite my partial successes in entering theirs. In fact, the lonely isolation, after ten months with scarcely a word of English (and mail service only once a month), was taking me near the edge of psychological balance. I choose two small episodes late in my fieldwork to illustrate both my precarious state and the unbridged and unbridgeable gulf between their world and mine. Both began while I was sitting in my thatch house typing field notes (I was very good about that in those days and have been degenerating ever since).

As I sat typing one day, a wizened little man I hadn't seen before—he turned out to be from the mountains ten miles down the coast—slipped rather furtively beside me and whispered, "Come outside; I want to tell you something important." I put him off several times while I finished my journal entry, but eventually I followed as he led us secretly into a dark corner of an empty adjoining house. He leaned over to me and asked me postentiously, in a hoarse voice scarcely loud enough to be heard, "Do you know where we are going from?" "What do you mean?" I asked. "Do you know where we Malaita people come from?" "Not exactly," I said, "but we're finding out something about that." "We all come from the same place, you Americans and we Malaita people. Do you know that?" "Aha, I thought. A visionary glimpse of the human past... . . I shifted into lecturing
mode, and for five minutes or so I gave him a condensed explanation of the evolution of humankind and the prehistory of the Pacific. He heard me out politely. "I didn't think you knew," he said. "I'll tell you. You know that mountain at Iolana, beyond 'Urbani—that's where we all came from. We Malaita people and you Americans." And then he gave his five-minute lecture about the snake ancestor *O'otof'ona* from whose eight human children the Malaitans—and Americans, by way of a migration to and beyond Tuliagi—are descended. He was right. I didn't know.

A few weeks later, I was again at my typewriter. I heard a commotion in the harbor a thousand feet below and went out to look. Louf voices, splashing of human—and other—bodies in the water. "They're driving kirio [dolphins] onto the beach and killing them," explained a local lad. A couple of minutes later, some young men from a settlement just up the hill came bounding down. "We're going down to kill a dolphin" they announced. I was horrified: I had just been reading Lilly's early accounts of dolphin intelligence and had spent hours with my former teacher Gregory Bateson before I left California, discussing his plans for dolphin research. "Don't kill a dolphin! They're intelligent! They're like people!" I called out. But they paid no heed and went bounding down the precipitous path to the harbor.

Two hours later, they were back, carrying a huge loot package. "We got one!" they called cheerfully. I was still horrified. Although Malaitans eat dolphins, that is a family benefit; they kill them for the teeth, which are used as exchange valuables and ornamentation. The young men unwrapped their package, to display a big butchered dolph in. I confessed to a moment of ambivalence at the sight of red mammalian steaks—I had had no

meat but an occasional strip of pork fat for months. But my outrage on behalf of a fellow sentient being far outweighed my urge for steak, and I abandoned my typewriter in favor of rhetoric.

"Don't eat that thing! You shouldn't eat kirio. They're not fish [i'a in Kwantj]; they're like people, not fish! Look at its blood—it's red, and warm, like ours!" My friends went on cataloging logs and building up a fire to heat the stones for a leaf oven, oblivious to my rhetoric (but giving me odd glances). My rhetoric was impeded somewhat by language problems. Dolphins may not be fish, but they are i'a. "But they're not i'a lo'ang a, 'rall i'a," I insisted (they are). The category includes dolphins and whales as well as fish). The locals were unimpressed, so I reiterated the argument about warm, red blood. "And look," I said, "they can talk. Kirio can talk, the way we do.

This was too much, and they stopped building the fire. "What do you mean, they can talk?" I remembered that in the Life magazine in my house, there was an article with a Loch Seaad ad showing a scuba diver taping a dolphin's squawks; and I bounded into the house to look for it. A few minutes later, I returned in triumph to the firebuilders, who had returned to the tank and were beating stones. The ad was perfect Fortuitously, the microphone the scuba diver was holding looked exactly like my tape-recorder microphone. "Look at this," I said. "The Kirio is talking onto the tape recorder. They talk just the way humans do. That's why you shouldn't eat them.

At least, I had their interest. "We didn't know they could talk! How do you talk to them? What language do they speak? How can they talk under water?" I explained as best I could about dolphin bleeps and the efforts to decode them. But they went on with their stone-heating and then put the tasty-looking meat into a leaf oven. "You shouldn't eat them," I pressed again. "They're not like fish, they're like us. They're intelligent. They talk." But after the possibility of humans talking with dolphins had faded, so had their interest. Eventually I went back to my typewriter, wondering why my logic and rhetorical force hadn't persuaded them to bury the poor kindred spirit rather than eating it.

The only way it might be said is that my notes for another fifteen minutes were dashed down on me that until 1927, when the government imposed the Pact Britannica after the massacre, the Kwakiut people... .

Last year, a quarter of a century later, on my eighth fieldwork trip into Kwakiut country, chewing kelp and squatting around a fire reflecting with Maena's ad about the outcome of the divination he had just performed and the ritual about to be staged, I was still all I will ever be: an outsider who knows something of what it is to be an insider.

Notes
2. The government had been getting all the place names wrong for fifty years.
4. In the category of small-boy-who-doesn't-know-any better, a status into which I was inducted after my wife's return to the United States at the end of 1963.
5. This episode was brought back to mind in 1989 during a session taping stories of ancient ancestors and human origins with the brilliant young pagan priest Maena's adi and my longtime Kwaki collaborator, the late Jonathan Firth. During a pause, Firth turned to me and said, "When I was in California with you [in 1966-67], I met some people who said they were descended from apes and monkeys. I thought that was really interesting, I'm descended from a snake.

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