

UCSC To Get Melanesian Research Assistant

By Alan Jones
Sentinel Staff Writer

A chief in the strange "Marching Rule" movement, a one-time political prisoner, and a self-taught anthropologist — this is Jonathan Fifi'i, who will be a research assistant at UCSC this fall working with anthropologist Roger Keesing.



Fifi'i is also a Melanesian who, in his mid-40s, has never been away from his native Solomon Islands; nor has he ever worn shoes, or long trousers. He will wear them in Santa Cruz during the 1966-67 academic year, when he and Keesing study and analyze field data gathered among the Kwaio people of Malaita Island in the Solomons.

The story starts in January, 1963, when Keesing and his wife Zina arrived in the Solomons for a year and a half of study of the Kwaio Keesing first met Fifi'i, he relates, when he was brushing his teeth in a brackish spring, as he completed a 30-mile walk across the unexplored middle of the mountainous island. Keesing hiked across the jungle terrain in order to approach the people from inland rather than from Sinalagu harbor. Missionaries and government officials always arrived by sea, and Keesing wanted to avoid misunderstanding of his aims.

Fifi'i was a local leader of the Kwaio, and having been educated in Seventh Day Adventist mission school, was attempting on his own to write down the customs and genealogies of his people, using the Old Testament as a guide — "and Jacob begat Isaac" fashion.

Keesing and Fifi'i quickly formed a partnership, with Jonathan interpreting and helping to explain Kwaio customs, and Keesing teaching him modern methods to record customs. When Keesing learned the Kwaio language, the two began to work separately on related projects.

The sort of things the pair recorded are the basic stuff of life among the Kwaio. The rituals of funerary feasts, the complex life among the Kwaio. The rituals of funerary feasts, the complex debt system, the equally complex ancestor cult and family system, day-to-day trading, and the like.

Since Keesing returned to this country and took up his post at UCSC, Fifi'i has continued the recording work, and has mailed along 19 fat notebooks full of information.



Malio J. Stagnaro, President
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This is Jonathan Fifi'i—Melanesian from the island of Malaita in the Solomons, and research assistant to Dr. Roger Keesing of UCSC. Fifi'i, a representative of his village on the island council, worked with Keesing for 18 months when Keesing did anthropological research among the Kwaio people on Malaita. Since Keesing returned to this country, Fifi'i has continued to gather information about his people and send it to Keesing. This September, after the two worked together on the island, Fifi'i will return to Santa Cruz with Keesing to act as his assistant in further research on the Malaitans.

Keesing is hopeful that through Fifi'i, some almost untapped aspects of anthropology can be explored. For perhaps the first time, an extremely primitive society can be studied anthropologically by a man who is a member of that society.

Fifi'i will not be yanked "cold" out of his environment. Keesing will return to Malaita in June for another three months among the Kwaio, and in September both men will fly back to San Francisco.

Fifi'i's trip to the United States, and a stipend to maintain his family on Malaita during the trip, will be financed by a Ford Foundation grant through the University of California. The Solomons government, a British protectorate, has granted permission for the visit. The government, like Keesing, hopes the experience will help Fifi'i play a part in bringing the islands toward eventual self-government. Fifi'i is his people's elected representative to the island-wide Malaita council, and the trip will undoubtedly boost his political stock.

Fifi'i's family on the island includes a wife and seven children, the oldest two in mission school.

The islander has been a leader since his early manhood. Before the war, the natives of Malaita historically had never formed tribes, but lived in tiny

settlements of family groups. After the war, impressed by American military organization, Malaitans developed a cult known as Marching Rule. The Kwaio grouped into large central villages, with quasi-military groups, subchiefs and chiefs, and communal organization of work and gardening.

Fifi'i was elected a head chief in Marching Rule at the age of 25. In time, the movement became militantly anti-British and Fifi'i quite naturally spent some time in Solomon Islands jails.

In his recording work now, Fifi'i recounts daily village life, traces family relationships, monetary transactions, and relates religious rituals. He writes in Kwaio, using a phonetic alphabet since there is no written Kwaio language. The English alphabet is used, plus two extra symbols to indicate the glottal stop and the "ng" sound of "song" in English.

One major project Fifi'i has in progress is tracing where everyone in the Kwaio community was living forty years ago — in 1927. A record of residence stretching over that span would be of considerable value as background to other information about the society.

The year 1927 was chosen because the Kwaio massacred a party of government officers and native police collecting taxes that year, and were overrun by a government punitive expedition. The events are well remembered, much as the 1955 floods are remembered here, and Kwaio families can recall many details about the time.

Jonathan is also writing Keesing about a more recent killing — last December, a Kwaio man killed a Seventh Day Adventist missionary at a spot only four miles from Keesing's Malaita home. The incident was the



Two Kwaio men of Malaita island count out shell money as they prepare for a mortuary feast. The shell money is strung in lengths for ease in counting. As is evident from

the headgear on the man at left, the Kwaio are as fond as Americans of personal adornment and individual attire. The "hat" consists mainly of a tropical leaf.

first killing of a white man since 1927, Keesing said.

Fifi'i reports that some old men among the Kwaio are disgruntled about the killing. Not because a white man was killed — the Kwaio were cannibals until the 1920s, and Jonathan's own father ate at least one slain victim — but because the killing was for the wrong reasons. The missionary was killed due to a grievance over rent; if it had been over an insult to an ancestral spirit, for instance, the killing would have been a different matter, the old men say.

The Kwaio people live in an area inland from Sinalagu harbor, on the northeast shore of Malaita. Malaita, northeast from Guadalcanal across Indispensa-

ble Strait, has long served as a manpower pool for the protectorate, the other islands being less populated. Several thousand Malaitans were taken to Queensland, Australia, during the 19th century to work the sugar fields there. The Kwaio rebelled at least once against the kidnappings and cruelty of the labor trade, attacking an Australian ship and killing five whites in 1886.

During World War II many Malaitans, including Fifi'i, went to Guadalcanal to work for the Allies building roads, trenches and airfields. Fifi'i learned English on Guadalcanal. But Malaita itself was little touched by the war—it had no flat land for airfields

—and the island has great potential in the eye of anthropologists. Most of Melanesia, the vast area from New Guinea to Fiji, has been drastically changed by the impact of western religion, material goods, diseases and civilization. On Malaita, many of the 46,000 people remain little changed, and their pagan religion and social customs can still be observed.

That's what Keesing and Fifi'i have been doing, and that's why Fifi'i's pagan background is a bonus. He can, for instance, watch a pagan ritual and take notes on it with prior knowledge of what each step means—why the priest tears a particular leaf off a tree, why he chews it and then spits it onto a man's back, what words the priest is saying and what they mean.

Fifi'i can also look at the ancestral spirit system without a preconceived, Western view. Ancestors are immensely important to the Kwaio—the source and cause of good fortune, sickness, death. Many men can trace powerful ancestors back 15 generations, and one wealthy islander can trace 27 generations. He is wealthy, in fact, largely because of his phenomenal memory.

The islanders have a complex economic system, and every bit

of the bookkeeping is carried around in their heads. A good memory is vital.

Shell money is the main medium of exchange, although Australian pounds are used to buy knives and axes. (Australian dollars now, since the conversion of currency a few days ago.) There is a standard rate of exchange between shells and currency, and the Kwaio have been smart enough to adjust the rate to compensate for inflation of the Australian money. A "span" of beads, usually 17 inches long,

is worth three shillings. In the 1920s, it was worth only one shilling, but the shells have held a constant value while world currencies inflated.

Before a ny enterprising capitalist embarks for Malaita to make his fortune with shell money, it should be explained that it isn't easy money. A particular type of shell is used, and it is found mostly outside the harbor — underwater at the foot of sheer

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PROPER SLEEP IS ALWAYS IMPORTANT

With few exceptions, it is not true that the older one gets the less sleep is needed. Older people usually need more sleep to help limit tension, fatigue, dizziness and headaches which senior citizens often get because they may sleep less than seven hours each night.

Once in a while a mild home remedy for sleeping can be helpful. But, if getting to sleep is a constantly recurring problem, you should consult your physician. We have many prescription medicines he may prescribe to better solve your problem.

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