

Bronislaw Malinowski

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BRONISLAW KASPAR MALINOWSKI was born in Cracow, Poland, on April 7, 1884, the son of Lucyan and Jozefa (Lacka) Malinowski. Reared in an aristocratic and cultured family with scholarly interests – his father was a college professor and well-known Slavic philologist – he naturally prepared himself for an academic career. After specializing in mathematics and the physical sciences at the University of Cracow, where he received the degree of Ph.D. in 1908, he attended the University of Leipzig for two years of advanced study. There he came strongly under the influence of Wilhelm Wundt, who turned his interests toward folk psychology and thence to cultural anthropology. The preeminence of English anthropology attracted him next to London, where he engaged in research at the British Museum and pursued studies at the London School of Economics. The stimulation of Westermarck and Seligman, and also of Frazer, Rivers, and Haddon, confirmed him in his anthropological interests, and in 1916 he received the degree of D.Sc. in anthropology from the University of London.

In 1914 Malinowski left England for four years of field work in New Guinea and northwestern Melanesia with brief respites in Australia. A few weeks among the Motu of Papua gave him his first actual contact with a primitive people and provided him with a preliminary acquaintance with the Motuan language, which he used in a much more extensive period of field work among the Mailu. His first ethnographic report, *The Natives of Mailu* (1915), despite disclaimers by Malinowski of its importance, clearly foreshadows the contributions to theory and method which he was to make in his later and more famous volumes on the Trobriand Islanders, and stands out in favorable contrast to the work of his ethnographical predecessors in the New Guinea area. More than two years of intensive field work in the Trobriand Islands, in 1915-16 and 1917-18, enabled Malinowski to assemble the materials for those classic works of anthropological description and interpretation upon which his reputation largely rests: *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (1926), *The*

Sexual Life of Savages in Northwestern Melanesia (1929), and *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935).

Although most widely known for his publications on the Trobriands, Malinowski did not view human culture from a narrow regional perspective. His actual field work outside of the Trobriand Islands was extensive. In addition to the aforementioned trips to the Motu and Mailu of New Guinea, he spent from one to several months each among the Hopi of Arizona in 1926, the Bemba and Chagga of East Africa in 1934, and the modern Zapotec of Mexico in 1940 and 1941. Over and above this varied experience with primitive peoples, his life in Poland, Germany, England, Australia, and the United States and several years of residence in the Canary Islands aided in giving him an exceptionally wide first-hand acquaintance with different systems of living and a broadly comparative outlook toward cultural phenomena. This varied experience was reflected in an unusual linguistic virtuosity. In addition to a solid grounding in classical Greek and Latin, he had a thorough speaking knowledge of English, French, German, Italian, Polish, Russian, Spanish, and native Motuan and Trobriand.

On March 6, 1919, during a period of residence in Australia following his field work in Melanesia, Malinowski married Elsie Rosaline Masson. Their three daughters, Jozefa, Wanda, and Helena, survive him. On June 6, 1940, five years after the death of his first wife, he married Anna Valetta Swann. In 1924 he returned to the University of London as reader in social anthropology and, after 1927, as professor of anthropology. During this period of his life he trained and stimulated a generation of younger anthropologists – Evans-Pritchard, Firth, Fortes, Hogbin, Kaberry, Powdermaker, Richards, Schapera and many others – who were shortly to enrich the literature of ethnography with descriptive reports establishing a new level of excellence. In 1926 Malinowski visited the United States, teaching for a period at the University of California. He returned in 1933 when he delivered the Messenger lectures at Cornell University. In 1936 he came back to receive the honorary degree of D. Sc. from

Harvard University at its tercentenary celebration. The outbreak of the Second World War found him again in the United States. In 1939 he was appointed Bishop Museum Visiting Professor of Anthropology at Yale University, and was under appointment as Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the time of his death.

The key to an understanding of Malinowski's personality and at the same time of his scientific creativeness would seem to lie in his acutely sensitive nature. Essentially humble beneath a surface vanity, he craved warmth and appreciation, and was ever ready to respond in kind. He found it difficult, however, to brook unfriendly criticism – a trait which sometimes embroiled him in acrid controversies. In his scientific work, this sensitivity to the responses of others made him an extraordinary observer, as appreciative of nuances in behavior as of those in language. Aware of many of his own emotional depths, he persistently sought to discover in others the motives underlying even conventional behavior, and thus he could never rest content with depersonalized descriptions of human activities in terms of the interaction of culture patterns, the operation of social processes, or the like. To him the actors in the drama of mankind were never mere culture-bearing marionettes but always human animals using cultural forms as instruments in their striving for biological and derivative gratifications.

In the degree of influence he has exerted upon anthropological theory, Malinowski stands beside Morgan, Tylor, and Boas. With these men, and with such leaders in kindred fields as Adam Smith, Marx, Sumner, Freud, and Pavlov, he also ranks as one of the great innovators in the history of the behavioral sciences of man. Not only did he contribute prominently to the thoroughgoing reorientation of interests and perspective that have characterized the past two decades in anthropology, but his work has left a significant impress upon sociology, law, and linguistics as well. It will be appropriate here to summarize some of his principal contributions to the theory of culture.

The firm establishment of the concepts of society and social group in anthropological theory stands largely to Malinowski's credit. Sociologists have long recognized that cultures and sub-cultures are carried by societies and by organized groups within societies, but anthropologists, probably because of their preoccupation with evolutionistic and later with historical interpretations of cultural phenomena, have been slow to make adequate use of these

concepts. As late as 1937, for example, Lowie¹ could affirm: "a culture is invariably an artificial unit segregated for purposes of expediency. ...There is only one natural unit for the ethnologist—the culture of all humanity at all periods and in all places. ..." He even taunted Malinowski with the question whether, in the Trobriand Islands, one should consider as the bearers of culture "the chief's family in Omarakana, his village, the district of Kiriwina, the Island of Boyawa, the Trobriand archipelago," or some larger region. To most social scientists the answer is obvious: all of these units are social groups of varying size and type, and each of them bears its own culture or sub-culture. Since social groups are observationally distinguishable, as are the traditional patterns of behavior which they manifest, a culture is in no sense an arbitrary or artificial unit, and Malinowski's position is unassailable.

To a social group and the sub-culture it bears, Malinowski applied the term "institution." However unfortunate his choice of this word, in view of the many diverse definitions previously given it by sociologists, Malinowski subjected the concept to a highly fruitful analysis. The collective life of any society, he pointed out, is largely manifested in a series of organized systems of behavior, or institutions, which provide the most satisfactory units for investigation in field work. Upon analysis, he believed, any institution resolves itself into six interrelated elements: (1) personnel, a group of individuals cooperating in the performance of a common task; (2) material apparatus, the artifacts employed in their activities; (3) norms, the rules or ideal patterns to which behavior is expected to conform; (4) activities, the behavior, including deviation from norms, which actually takes place in the performance of the joint tasks; (5) charter, the express cultural definition of the common aims or purpose of the institution; and (6) function, the actual effect of the collective enterprise in satisfying human needs. Through institutional activities the relationships of individuals are interdigited, the performance of duties being rewarded and supported by the reciprocal performance of other persons. The persistence of cultural forms is sufficiently explained by this principle of reciprocity without need of invoking a psychologically dubious hypothesis of cultural autonomy or inertia.

¹ Robert H. Lowie, *The History of Ethnological Theory* (New York, 1937), pp. 235-236.

Malinowski's analysis also makes provision for cultural change – through the deviation of “activities” from “norms” – whereas change is difficult to reconcile with other functional theories which stress the integration of all aspects of a culture.

The average quality of anthropological field work and ethnographic reporting has risen appreciably as a consequence of Malinowski's influence. The institutional method of cultural analysis has produced integrated descriptions instead of loosely classified catalogues of traits, and has stimulated the fuller recording of case material from actual behavior as a supplement to the listing of ideal patterns. Field work, Malinowski insisted, is necessarily guided by theory. The “facts” which an observer may record are infinite in number, and the ethnographer cannot escape making a selection. The more consciously aware he is of theoretical issues, the more crucial or scientifically relevant his selection will be.

One of Malinowski's major achievements was a satisfactory integration of cultural theory with psychological science. Not only did he view culture as a system of collective habits but he repeatedly emphasized its instrumental character. Culture, he insisted, always subserves human needs. These are, in the first instance, biological imperatives, i.e., what the psychologist calls “basic drives.” Out of man's collective interaction in the pursuit of primary impulse satisfaction arise a number of secondary needs, also universal, such as those for economic cooperation, education, and social control. The special circumstances of particular societies and the problem of integrating the various elements of a culture give rise to needs of a still more derivative character, which differ from group to group. But diverse as are the acquired motives of human collective interaction, cultural forms never wholly free themselves from basic organic needs, which must always be served and whose gratification supports and reinforces the pursuit of secondary goals.

The crux of Malinowski's functionalism lies in this insistence upon the instrumental character of culture. Although sympathetic with the sociological concept of “function,” as the relation of a part of culture to the rest, he preferred to employ the term in a psychological sense for the effect of an institution or complex of customs in satisfying needs. He found strong support for his views in modern psychology, and in his last years was especially influenced by the

work of Clark Hull and the latter's students.² It seems probable that the future development of culture and personality studies in anthropology will follow in general the lines of Malinowski's thinking.

The term “functionalism,” however universally applied to Malinowski's theoretical position, nevertheless labels it rather too narrowly. His emphasis might more aptly be described as “scientific.” He did not deny the legitimacy of historical objectives in anthropology, when he advocated so urgently the application of the methods of science to the data of culture. The scientific and the historical approaches seemed to him complementary rather than antithetical. He gave primacy to the former, however, for he felt that historical interpretations, if they are to be more than inspired guesswork, must be constructed within a framework of a sound theory of culture, behavior, and social structure. Malinowski always fought hard and sometimes even ruthlessly for the development of a well integrated science of human behavior. His death on May 16, 1942, due to an unheralded heart attack, brought prematurely to a close the career of one of the foremost social scientists of our generation.

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² It was characteristic of Malinowski that he continued to develop and expand his views throughout his life. For the last definitive presentation of his theoretical position, the reader should consult his article, *Man's Culture and Man's Behavior* (Sigma Xi Quarterly, Vol. 29, Nos. 3-4, pp. 182-196, 1941; Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 66-78, 1942).

³ Compiled by Frances Wenrich Underwood. A few references are incomplete, the sources not being available for verification.

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