

# Malinowski, Bronisław (1884–1942)

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Bronisław Kaspar Malinowski was a founding figure in twentieth-century British social anthropology. Born in Kraków, Poland, then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, he was raised in an academic and literary family in a university town with strong currents of both Polish nationalism and European cosmopolitanism. His early interests were in the sciences and he took a PhD in mathematics and physics in 1908. Bedridden for a year with poor health, which was to plague him throughout his life, he read James Frazer's then widely popular *The Golden Bough* which ignited a passionate interest in studying human culture. The book not only brought him to anthropology but also to England. He arrived in 1910 on a Polish fellowship to begin studies with C. G. Seligman at the London School of Economics. In the years 1914–17, he completed two and a half years of field research in Melanesia, primarily in the Trobriand Islands, off the east coast of New Guinea, which formed the basis for many of his subsequent publications. He was appointed reader in social anthropology at the University of London in 1923 and professor in 1927. His teaching attracted students from around the world, his writing was prodigious, and he was an energetic and consummate institution builder. Through the 1920s and 1930s, he was the leading anthropologist in the United Kingdom, espousing a new functionalist analysis of institutions and social practices. In 1939 he accepted a visiting appointment at Yale University. He died suddenly in May 1942, at the age of fifty-eight, just before assuming a permanent position at Yale. He is buried in New Haven, Connecticut.

## Fieldwork and field notes

Early on, Malinowski himself announced that he was “effecting a revolution in anthropology” (1967, 289), principally through his method of doing field research. In fact, he did not invent this. By the second decade of the twentieth century, there were already precedents for direct, sustained field inquiries by Western scholars, but these were often as part of expeditionary forces and employed formal instruments of inquiry. What Malinowski did was to codify, personify, and proselytize a new form of immersive, extended fieldwork by the solitary trained professional. It is odd that someone with as weak a physical constitution as he had should have committed himself so completely to the rigors of such a field science, but his method became anthropology's norm.

The introduction to his first Trobriand monograph, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922, 1–25), was, in effect, a direct challenge to *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, the manual of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (Urry 1973), which was sent around the world as a comprehensive set of standardized questions, arranged



**Figure 1** Bronisław Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands.  
Source: Courtesy of the RAI.

by topic, with the aim of making data collection from single local informants more reliable and comparable. Malinowski championed open-ended observations of daily routines through extended copresence, working in the local language without reliance on interpreters or key informants.

A second principal innovation was Malinowski's field-note taking. Open-ended fieldwork required a capacious view of record keeping, including daily field notes, censuses, charts, maps, texts, photographs, among other records. Moreover, Malinowski insisted that the anthropologist use field notes not just to record but also to reflect upon these experiences—to induce tentative generalizations, to identify gaps, to formulate new lines of questions, and so on.

The 1967 publication of portions of Malinowski's private field diary suggested that in the actual course of his fieldwork, he fell short of his own ideal prescriptions. We now know from the *Diary* that he was something other than the paragon of diligence and empathy. Debate continues on whether the *Diary* directly reflects (and discredits) his fieldwork or whether it was an anguished outpouring of psychological anxieties that had more to do with his family, potential fiancées, and career than with anything going on outside his tent on the Trobriands.

## **Ethnographic writing and representation**

Among his prolific publications, Malinowski remains best known for his magnificent trilogy of Trobriand ethnographic monographs and his articulation of several versions

of functionalism. Some have alleged and criticized his monographs as static, holistic accounts of an entire society from a single-observer perspective. This is doubly misleading. The three monographs are in fact analytical narratives of the life cycle of institutions, not a society. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) traced the complex chains of material valuables and transacting persons around the interisland Kula district. *The Sexual Life of Savages in Northwestern Melanesia* (1929) presented Trobriand life patterns from birth through puberty, marriage, and death, set among family relations. *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935) connected descent, marriage, and magic to the annual agricultural cycle. In each case, Malinowski's notion of institution—the interplay of individuals, material infrastructure, norms and ideologies, and patterned activities that constituted a significant arena of a lifeway—was more analytically developed and more richly documented than the concept of total social fact proposed at the same time by Marcel Mauss, who was much influenced by Malinowski's early work.

The rhetoric of the monographs, too, featured a complex voicing, neither omniscient nor omnipresent but rather that of a dedicated, patient observer, assembler, and communicator between copresent Trobriand locals and Western readers. The vivid depictions and sensual evocations were framed by detailed sociological exegeses and by a temporality of a suspended present and a bracketed past.

## Theoretical orientation

For much of his career, Malinowski professed a theoretical commitment to functionalism as the synchronic analysis of the interrelationships of constituent elements of the social institutions and lifeways that were at the center of his ethnographies. His early “social” functionalism emphasized not only part–part relationships but also part–whole relationships—that is, how a feature contributes to the maintenance of the whole as well as how it relates to another feature. Malinowski later professed a more psychological functionalism, by which these elements and the system to which they contributed functionally were explained as responses to a set of universal basic human needs.

Even at the time, many did not find these formulations to be theoretically inspiring, certainly in comparison to the structural functionalism being developed by his contemporary A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. And Malinowski's own tendency to be oppositional and polemical could lead to rather crude expressions of his claims. However, in the 1920s Malinowski's synchronic functional analyses presented a radical challenge to the more dominant theoretical orientations of British anthropologists—in particular, evolutionism, diffusionism, and environmental determinism. By insisting that the importance of a social practice was not its place in a hypothetical chain of diffusion or its marking of a stage of societal development but rather its contribution to the here and now of social life, Malinowski fundamentally reoriented social analysis in the discipline. He applied this to language as well—words meant as words did—and his arguments that the meaningfulness of words was to be found in their efficacy in social action was influential among linguists and literary scholars.

Malinowski was more noted for contesting existing stereotypes and for offering incisive analyses of a wide range of contemporary debates than for abstract theorizing. He

destroyed conventional dismissals of “primitive economics” with detailed formulations of Kula and gardening as circuits of exchange and prestations, showing how economics was embedded in culture. He opposed “primitive superstition” with fresh distinctions between magic, science, and religion. And he countered images of “primitive sexuality” with a new analysis of the dynamics of matriliney and skepticism about the universality of Freudian psychodynamics.

## **Charismatic teacher, disciplinary entrepreneur, and strong personality**

From the accounts of those who met him, worked with him, and fought with him, Malinowski was a strong personality, both demanding and needy, and he engendered strong reactions of loyalty, respect, bitterness, and disdain. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, such personal memories are less relevant, but they colored his impact and his influence at the time.

The postgraduate research seminar he began in 1923 and ran for over a decade at the London School of Economics was intense and intimidating, but its constant focus on analyzing field materials, both his and his students’, produced an inspired body of scholarship. The seminar itself drew a very diverse cast of students and visitors from around the world, which Malinowski encouraged and which contrasted sharply with the tone of gentlemanly privilege that impeded the discipline at Cambridge and Oxford.

Malinowski was a prodigious worker, driving himself as hard as he drove others. With no hobbies or other interests, he was single-minded in his efforts to promulgate his vision of a new social anthropology. Vain but charming, he was deeply committed to finding a role for anthropology as an applied discipline in the social sciences and in public affairs. He successfully obtained extensive foundation funding and government sponsorship for himself and his students. He was especially supported by the Laura Spellman Rockefeller Foundation and worked closely with the International African Institute. Many of his students worked in Africa, not in Melanesia, and through them and through his own visits he began to call for an anthropology that confronted the divided societies and ethnic disparities of colonial rule. As fascism grew and war loomed over Europe in the 1930s, he was increasingly vocal on the dangers to freedom and the cultural legacies that were still important to him from his childhood in Kraków.

## **Conclusion**

Malinowski was only fifty-eight when he passed away in New Haven. In his fifties, he had already moved well beyond the work that had made his reputation and was engaged in studies of the colonial relations between Western powers and indigenous peoples, of world war and postwar reconstruction, and of Mexican regional marketing systems. It is intriguing to speculate on how different his place in anthropology might have been had he lived a longer life. Even so, his part in reshaping British social anthropology was monumental, through asserting the new role of the scholar-fieldworker, demonstrating

rigorous standards of field record keeping, exemplary interweaving of the literary and the analytical in ethnographic representation, and reorienting the discipline toward grounded, contemporary analysis of lifeworlds.

SEE ALSO: Participant Observation; *Kula*; Anthropology: Scope of the Discipline; Functionalism; Fieldwork; Ethnography; <DRAFT: United Kingdom, Anthropology in>

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## ABSTRACT

Bronisław Kaspar Malinowski was a founding figure in twentieth-century British social anthropology. Best known for his intensive research and prolific writings about the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia, his legacies are in defining a new role of the scholar-fieldworker, in demonstrating rigorous standards of field record keeping, in interweaving the literary and the analytical in his exemplary ethnographic representations, and in reorienting the discipline toward grounded, contemporary analysis of lifeworlds. As a teacher and colleague, he was charismatic but controversial, vain and charming. Through his invigorating research seminars and dedicated institution building, he reshaped the discipline in England in the 1920s and 1930s.

## KEYWORDS

fieldwork; history; research methods; social and cultural anthropology