

BRONISLAW MALINOWSKI

(1884-1942)

Audrey Richards

Malinowski's famous monographs on the Trobriand Islands were certainly the most formative influence on the work of British social anthropologists from 1922, when he published his first field study, until his death in 1942. Most of the leading anthropologists now in England were partly or wholly trained by him and these include Evans-Pritchard, Firth, Fortes, Kabberry, Mair, Nadel, Read, Schapera as well as a number working out of England such as Hogbin, Kuper, Oberg, Powdermaker and Monica Wilson. Those who later reacted most strongly against him were as much influenced in the nature of their work as those who remained his supporters.

Bronislaw Malinowski was a Pole, born in Cracow in 1884, and the son of a Professor of Slavic philology. He was awarded a doctorate in physics and mathematics in 1908, but illness and bad eyesight interrupted his work. He claims that he first became interested in anthropology through the reading of Frazer's *Golden Bough*. He worked for two years at Leipzig University under William Wundt and Karl Buecher, and came to London in 1910, attracted to England by the presence of Westermarck, Hobhouse, Seligman, Haddon and Rivers. He spent four years at London University where he produced his first book *The Family Among the Australian Aborigines* in 1913.

Seligman became his friend and adviser and helped him to get funds for his first field expedition in 1914, when he visited the Motu in Papua, and the Mailu of New Guinea and spent from 1914-1915 and 1915-1918 in the Trobriand Islands. He joined the staff of the London School of Economics in 1910 and was appointed to its first Chair of Social Anthropology in 1927. He later became interested in applied anthropology, especially in relation to the then British colonies in Africa. He trained a group of young anthropologists who were to take part in an International African Institute scheme for comparative research on the effects of European contact on different African tribes. The scheme was the first attempt made in this country at large-scale comparative research of this kind, instituted largely on the initiative of J. H. Oldham of the International Missionary Council. The anthropologists included names famous today such as those of Fortes, Hofstra, Nadel, Oberg, Margaret Mead, Wagner and Godfrey and Monica Wilson.

This work attracted Malinowski's interests to the African field. He later visited a number of his students at work there and wrote articles on what was then known as 'culture contact'. Anthropological thinking was a considerable influence on the development of African administration at the time, more so probably than it is today.

Malinowski made several trips to America where he found stimulus and friendship. There he visited the Hopi of Arizona in 1926, and he was engaged

in a study of marketing among the Zapotec of Mexico in the last years of his life. He was appointed Visiting Professor of Yale University in 1939 and died there suddenly in 1942.

Malinowski's field monographs, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), *The Sexual Life of Savages* (1929), and *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935) produced a revolution in the aims and field techniques of the younger anthropologists. They are still quoted in text-books on the history of method in the social sciences. Anthropologists were then mainly interested in studies of the distribution of customs and artefacts which would show the contact of one people with another, and hence make it possible to reconstruct the movements of peoples from one region or continent to another. It was still generally taken for granted that the anthropologist was the theorist, who sat at home while other such as missionaries, travellers or administrators collected facts for him in the field.

Pioneer work had been done in the form of general surveys of the peoples in particular regions such as the Cambridge expedition to the Torres Straits (1899), Boas and Jessup's expedition to the North Pacific coast (1883), as well as Seligman's work on British New Guinea (1910), later to be followed by his survey of Nilotic tribes (1909-22) and the field studies of Rivers (1901, 1908, 1914), Thurnwald (1906-9) and Lindblom (1910). A few good outline monographs had been written by missionaries and administrators such as Codrington, Casalis, Junod, Roscoe and Rattray. Professional ethnographers could, however, be counted on the fingers of one hand.

In these circumstances, Malinowski's first monograph struck a new fresh note. It was an intensive study produced by an anthropologist who lived closely with a people for two or more years, spoke their language and acted as what is now known as a 'participant observer'. It is in fact the method now normally used by anthropologists in the field. Malinowski became absorbed in his tiny community. He was interested from the first in each custom, belief or artefact in relation to the working of the total society, which was for him a system. Each custom, he claimed, had a 'function' to play in this system. It was never a mere survival from the past. Hence his use, almost *ad nauseam*, of the term 'functional anthropology', to distinguish his work from that of the evolutionists and diffusionists of his day. Radcliffe-Brown originally used the term 'function' in much the same way and both these anthropologists protested loudly against the type of fanciful historical reconstruction then current.

The characteristics of Malinowski's field studies were, first of all, the very detailed first-hand observations he made of the major activities of the Trobriand Islanders -- such as their *kula* overseas trading expeditions or their agriculture. This work was on an entirely different scale to anything produced before. The chosen activity was viewed as part of a whole 'institution', a group of people organized under a leader to use their simple tools in a particular

environment. The chosen activity was shown to be coordinated with a set of other activities, ritual or instrumental, governed by a set of rules and facilitated by linguistic usages.

The nature of these basic activities was documented by charts, land tenure maps, seasonal calendars and the like and they were described in vivid eyewitness style. The people's attitudes and values stand revealed in the way they swaggered, boasted and displayed their food crop and dressed up in festal rig for the accompanying dances. Both the descriptive detail and his method of correlating activities, beliefs and norms of behaviour were then new.

Secondly, Malinowski was interested from the first in social grouping, which he called 'personnel' or, rather eccentrically, 'social organization'. This interest probably sprang from his activities approach, and the automatic linking of what was done with 'Who did it?' The ethnographic survey can say little more than that the Xs or the Ys are yam cultivators. Malinowski described the Trobriand yams as dug by one set of kinsmen, carried in presentation to their relatives-in-law or exchanged with other sets of kinsmen for baskets of cooked food. A funeral crowd was no longer a mass of people wailing their heads off, but a group of matrilineal kin of the dead sitting aloof and silent, while the widow, her kinsfolk and the dead man's sons, who are not his heirs in a matrilineal society, together wailed, handled the corpse, exhumed and reburied it. Malinowski also realized, on the basis of empirical evidence, that groups and social roles may be in conflict, as for instance in the case of the traditional rivalry between a man's son and his sister's son. He thus anticipated the work on social tensions and social conflicts which has dominated so much recent anthropological theory, particularly in the case of the work of Gluckman and his pupils.

It is often said that he was only interested in individuals and not in social groups. This position can possibly be maintained by those who read only his more superficial works on theoretical issues, but not by those who study his major field monographs. A recent rereading of these after many years confirms my views on this point. Certainly at the time it was the material on social relationships and social tensions which seemed to his students to be so striking. 'The Zulu do . . . or think' turned into 'Members of the sub-clan or the relatives-in-law' do this or that. Such work on social structure was in its infancy, but the interest is unmistakable and this combination of detailed observation of activities together with the recording of the personnel, the social groups involved, was new at the time.

The individual appears in the Trobriand field material, of course. The emotions of particular men and women are described and, particularly perhaps, emotions in the face of death. There was also a stress on the function of magico-religious rites and beliefs as a solace to the distressed and worried individual as well as to the group to which he belonged. This emphasis on individual needs was subsequently rejected by a number of British

anthropologists, notably Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Leach and Gluckman, all writers who consider ritual as an expression of the values underlying social structure and social roles. The individual and the group aspect are of course indissolubly connected and Malinowski, both by empirical evidence and the subjective analysis of his own emotions, showed it to be so.

Individuals also appeared in the Trobriand monographs as people involved in dramatic incidents which seemed to Malinowski to illustrate some special feature of social structure, a quarrel, a suicide or a case of adultery. This was an early form of what would now be called 'the case history method' although his cases were never subjected to statistical analysis. We do not know how many cross-cousins quarrelled, or how many young people really settled down to happy, stable unions after the period of casual love affairs which Malinowski described as a good preparation for marriage. Nor did he make any village surveys such as are now an almost invariable part of anthropological work. He counted the baskets of food exchanged at marriage and harvest but he did not collect quantitative data on the kinship and clan structure of particular villages, on marriage or property. H. Powell's subsequent work on the Trobriands shows how valuable this would have been in his case (1960).

Lastly, Malinowski's linguistic texts were superb, probably fuller than any collected at the time except those of Boas from the north-west Pacific area.

Malinowski wrote in a vivid personal style often describing his own adventures in field work. The crude comparisons he made between Trobriand, Polish and British society stimulated not only missionaries and administrators in the then colonial territories, but social scientists and social reformers. The Trobrianders, some 1,200 strong, living in their minute and inaccessible islands, became familiar figures in the literature of psycho-analysis and education. Social anthropology became a popular subject.

This is hardly the case today, for descriptive work is now rather despised, and anthropological observations are largely expressed in kinship diagrams and paradigms. This is a curious phase in the history of anthropology. Medieval or other historians seize avidly on any eyewitness account of a royal court, a battle or a village scene, but many young anthropologists, who have the most enviable opportunities to record such scenes in living societies, feel that it is somehow inferior to do so. The general public suffers, as will future historians.

Malinowski had a strong personality, and this no doubt attracted attention to his work. He was brilliant, witty, sensitive, touchy, egoistic, very dependent on the appreciation of his friends and students, and quite unfair to his opponents. He became a notable figure in academic circles in London in the 1930s. Wherever two or three anthropologists sat gossiping, Malinowski's latest theory, *bon mot*, swear word or eccentricity was certainly being discussed. It is difficult, in fact, to consider his fame apart from his personality, for he not

only raised strong emotions, positive and negative, at the time, but these attitudes survived after his death.

He was a brilliant, informal teacher using what he called the Socratic method. His seminars at the London school of Economics acquired an international reputation and Malinowski would often flash retorts in several languages. His directness forced the student to face the problem and express its essentials simply. Students were attracted or repelled according to their temperament, but they were always stimulated. His disciples tended in the first days of his teaching, in the early 1930s for example, to view themselves as a team attacking the forces of reaction, then seen in terms of evolutionism, diffusionism and the hunt for 'survivals' in present-day societies.

Malinowski asserted his claims in extravagant fashion. His students were enthusiastic, intolerant and no doubt aggressive, but it must be admitted that the violence of his attacks certainly hastened the birth of social anthropology as a science. It is also true, regrettable as it is, that such movements of intolerant attack have a great attraction for students and often coincide with periods of productive activity.

Did Malinowski manage to teach his field methods? The answer depends of course on what you consider a good field worker to be. Is he a man with a theory specially adapted to stimulate empirical observations, or a person with a flair for personal contacts and observation, and a gift for vivid and evocative description of the scenes he has witnessed? Is he a man with the physical strength required to talk all day in a foreign language and to copy notes all night, or one who is immune from malaria or, alternatively, able to work with malaria?

Malinowski certainly had a flair for this exciting work. His linguistic gifts were phenomenal. He made quick contacts. More important, he had an intuitive grasp of the relevant facts and saw the connexions between them. He was indefatigable in the collection and analysis of data once his theoretical interests had been aroused. He wrote three large volumes on the Trobriands. The books on kinship and on mortuary ritual which he planned, but did not publish, would probably have been as full. Critics say that he stayed so long in the Trobriands only because he was interned there in the war, as an enemy alien. I do not think this is true. Field work simply fascinated him although, as a recently published diary shows, he had violent moods of revulsion and irritation with his informants. He continued doing field work till he died, for he was engaged at the time on a study of Mexican markets. When he visited me in northern Zambia in 1934 he refused to be a mere spectator, but immediately started to work on a project. I published some of his observations on house building after his death (*Man* 1950, Vol. 1.).

These temperamental and intellectual gifts of course cannot be taught. What students learnt from him was his enthusiasm, his standards and the example of his persistence. He also helped them immensely to enlarge the

field of their observations by the use of a series of synoptic charts by which each institution was examined methodically from a number of aspects -- environmental, technological, structural, normative, from the point of view of the native theory of knowledge, his magico-religious beliefs and his values and his linguistic usages. The family, kinship groups, chieftainship, agriculture or marketing, or whatever the problem was, were all analysed according to this type of scheme, and the relationship between each column was systematically examined. I personally found such schemes invaluable, in stimulating both the collection and the analysis of data. The schemes were based, of course, on Malinowski's concept of culture and the essential aspects of culture, what he called the 'cultural imperatives'. The method produced material on a much wider front than is common nowadays. Ethnographers now seem to me to collect less data in a given time interval.

What will remain of the work of his unusual and creative personality? It is difficult to say. His polemics against evolution, diffusion and historical reconstructions date badly and seem tedious to students. Historical 'just-so stories', as he called them, are out of fashion, although serious historical reconstructions based on documentary evidence or the analysis of tribal devices for preserving history are definitely to the fore. Such work Malinowski would have supported. In fact his later charts had a column on the historical facts available on each particular institution.

Malinowski tackled many problems -- family organization, kinship terminology, conflicts in matrilineal society, primitive law, economic incentives, magic, religion, myth and linguistics -- and had something original to say on each. In fact the fertility of his imagination left his path littered with unfinished projects, and ideas not pursued to their conclusions. His pragmatic approach to the study of magic and religion is now a part of anthropological thinking. His book on law (1926) now seems slight but he analysed the sum total of sanctions, positive and negative, which induce conformity to rules even in societies without law courts, and this proved a seminal work at the time. His work on matrilineal kinship is still constantly quoted. I am inclined to think that his concept of myth as a charter for the legitimate exercise of group rights and magic acts will prove to be one of the most fruitful of his ideas since it leads to the whole question of the legitimacy of institutions in traditional societies, and methods of transferring rights.

Malinowski's general theory of culture and his use of the term 'institution' for a group, activity, norm, dogma, knowledge, language, tie-up seems to me unlikely to survive, though it produced so much fruitful analysis in field workers of his day. There was some confusion and much repetition in his last statements of his 'functional' theory, especially in his posthumously published book *The Scientific Theory of Culture* (1944). New schemes of culture and society are in the market.

Malinowski's work in fact fell into disrepute after the war. His exhaustive study of a particular community was useless for the development of political and kinship typologies which became the current interest. 'Culture' was out, and 'structure' became the only reputable subject of study. This rigid distinction between culture and structure is itself breaking down, as statements made at a recent Cambridge conference on anthropology showed. But whatever the contemporary fashion, I believe the corpus of Malinowski's field material will remain compulsory reading for students, and a treasure-house for sociologists, psychologists and linguists. The beautiful clarity and precision of some of Radcliffe-Brown's structural studies excites intellectual admiration, but there is a creative touch in Malinowski's finest descriptive passages which still sets the young field worker raring to go.

A. R. RADCLIFFE-BROWN

(1881-1995)

John Beattie

Modern social anthropologists frequently refer to Radcliffe-Brown, but as often as not they do so only to point out how wrong he was. For a scholar who spent a lifetime as a professional social anthropologist his written output was small, and many of his ideas were second hand. Such fieldwork as he did was mostly of the old-fashioned, 'questionnaire' type; he worked through interpreters and not through the vernacular languages, and his writings about the peoples he studied quite lack the detailed immediacy and vividness of his contemporary Malinowski's. Nevertheless, with Malinowski, he is rightly regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern social anthropology. Why?

Alfred Reginald Brown (the 'Radcliffe', his mother's maiden name, was added later) was born in Birmingham in 1881. He read mental and moral science at Cambridge, and also studied anthropology there under Rivers and Haddon. From 1906 to 1908 he engaged in anthropological fieldwork in the Andaman Islands, and in 1909-10 he lectured both in Cambridge and at the London School of Economics. In the latter years he went to Western Australia, where he carried out what would nowadays be called an ethnographic survey among some of the aboriginal peoples of the area. After the First