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Bronislaw Malinowski [1884-1942] - the anthropologist who researched and documented the art of indigenous lives

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Abstract

The research issue that prompted this article was the lack of enthusiasm by the Sri Lankan university undergraduate and postgraduate students for anthropological research. Even if there are many opportunities for anthropological analysis concerning Sri Lankan society, the present generation prefers to engage mostly in quantitative research. Based on that point, the objective of this article was to introduce one of the leading anthropologists of the world and his remarkable stature to the contemporary reading public. During this article, the reader will be able to understand the exemplary characteristics of a role model in theory and practice. The use of contexts for research, the methods implemented, the theories developed, and the skills the emerging anthropologists should have can be identified when Malinowski's life and works are analyzed. It has been noted that anthropological and indigenous studies are dying in Sri Lanka. Even the limited number of qualitative research conducted wanting the sophistication of critical thinking, and the knowledge of theory and methods. It can be assumed that the present generation presumes that the primitive elements in societies are unimportant against globalization. So the reading of this article would initiate enthusiasm among early career researchers and undergraduates to set and follow the latest standards in social and cultural anthropology. Introducing one of the greatest anthropologists who researched and documented indigenous societies would be a timely move for at least those who are interested in this discipline.

Keywords: *Anthropology, Ethnography, Field Research, Functionalism, Indigenous Lives*

A Brief Introduction to His Early Life

Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski popularly known as Bronislaw Malinowski was born on April 7, 1884, and died on May 16, 1942. He was a Polish national and reputed in the discipline of Anthropology to be one of the most influential anthropologists of the twentieth century. He is considered the father of modern anthropology and the father of field research (Cassar, January 30, 2022). When he was born, Poland was a part of Austria. He was a descendant of a well-known Polish family. His father, Lucjan Malinowski, was a professor of Slavic[1] Philology[2], and his mother, Józefa, née Łącka, was a member of a moderate land-owning family. He received his undergraduate education at Jagiellonian University, Poland. Even though he commenced his studies in mathematics and physical sciences, continuous illnesses forced him into social sciences, mainly philosophy and education. In 1908 he secured a doctorate in philosophy for the thesis titled *'On the principle of the economy of thought'* (1906).

His illness has made him travel to suitable destinations like many other well-to-do individuals preferred in the West during that time and he had the opportunity to be familiar with diverse cultural environments in Italy, the Canary Islands [France], Finland, North Africa, and Western Asia. From 1909 to 1910 he was at the University of Leipzig, Germany where he had the opportunity to study under Karl Bucher (Economist) and Wilhelm Wundt (Psychologist). It was later revealed that the text, *The Golden Bough* written by James Frazer in 1890 prompted his interest in anthropology. Incidentally when he went to the London School of Economics [LSE] in 1910 as a postgraduate student one of his mentors was C. G. Seligman, the Head of the Department of Ethnology, who visited Sri Lanka to study the indigenous community of Veddas in Sri Lanka.

From London, he then travelled to Australia in 1914 to take part in a conference in Papua New Guinea. He was aided by the British Association for the Advancement of the Sciences [BAAS]. In this research team, he was the secretary to another famous British ethnologist, R. R. Marett who introduced the concept of 'mána'. Even though Malinowski did not plan to stay long, the outbreak of World War I forced him to stay for a longer period. His country was fighting against the allied forces, especially, Britain. Because of his Polish ethnicity, he feared negative consequences, so he abstained from returning to England. This visit marked his first experience with field research in anthropology. This has led to a better foundation for his later field research in Trobriand Islands. During this period in Trobriand Islands, he had the opportunity to investigate the *'kula ring'* – a form of gift exchange - using the data collection methods of participant observation and interview. Based on these experiences, he has published numerous scholarly works that would be discussed later in this article.

After World War I ended, he came back to England in 1920. He acknowledged the offer given to him by the LSE as a lecturer overlooking the position he was offered by the Jagiellonian University in Poland. During his stay at the LSE, he developed it to be the center of excellence in anthropology in Europe. After a series of promotions for his intellectual and academic contribution, in 1927 he was promoted to the post of full professor. Since then his contribution to the propagation of anthropology as an autonomous discipline was remarkable.

He started to join hands with many international organizations such as the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences [PAAS] and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences [RNAAS] and continue to conduct his field studies in anthropology in British East Africa and Southern Africa.

His first visit to the USA in 1926 later created numerous opportunities for him to teach, and conduct research in the USA. He studied the Hopi Indians during this period with the aid of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fellowship. As World War II broke out, he had to undergo the same experience as in World War I. He had to stay in the USA and while staying there he was criticizing the Nazi regime in Germany, as a result, his books were banned in Germany. He was fortunate enough to receive a position at Yale University as a visiting professor. He had many interests in different elements of society like religion, economy, and communication that he was constantly interested in. Till his death in 1942, he lived in the USA.

The Ethnographic Research Conducted

Malinowski was noted for his ethnographic research conducted during his lifetime. According to Robben and Sluka (2015), ethnography is *'the investigation and description of cultures and societies through fieldwork'* (p.178). Cassar (October 27, 2022) mentions ethnography as the *'research methodology that involves observing and studying people in their natural environment'*. As a branch of cultural anthropology, ethnography can be identified as a *'branch of anthropology that deals with the scientific description of specific human cultures'* (Okely, 2011). Based on these three basic definitions, the work of Malinowski can be evaluated. He used participant observation as the data collection technique to study the behaviour of indigenous people in their natural environments.



Bronisław Malinowski on the Trobriand Islands, 1918

Source: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsehistory/2017/06/13/bronislaw-malinowski-lse-pioneer-of-social-anthropology>

At a time when there was less fieldwork in many disciplines, he was instrumental in popularizing anthropology as an independent discipline with resounding theories and methods. One of the criticisms against the social sciences was that most of the early social and anthropological philosophers like Comte, Marx, Frazer, and Tylor have been armchair researchers. It was Malinowski who broke that tradition, took anthropology ‘*off the veranda*’ (Kuper, 1973), and paved the way for the new work environment in field research. There are records that the early European scholars got to know about the non-Western territories mainly through the information given by travelers, missionaries, and colonial officers (Kuper, 1973). Ethnography with participant observation and interviews provided the necessary background to understand the day-to-day lives of the respondents.

Ethnographic research had many advantages (Aktar, 2020). The researcher meets the respondents face-to-face in their familiar environment where the respondent is free to behave in that natural setting. The researcher has a first-hand understanding of the issues faced by the respondent. According to Kuper (1973)

‘A typical piece of intensive work is one in which the worker lives for a year or more among a community [...] and studies every detail of their life and culture; in which he comes to know every member of the community personally’ (p.7).

Since the respondent is present, any clarification regarding the [mis]understanding can be questioned in a friendly manner. The rapport developed over time will provide the intimacy the researcher yearns to get the difficult matters clarified. In ‘*the Argonauts of the Western Pacific*’ (1922) he mentioned that the main objective of the ethnographer is to ‘*grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world*’ (p. 25). His description of participant observation was

‘it is good for the Ethnographer sometimes to leave the camera, notebook, and pencil, and join what is going on. He can take part in the natives’ games. He can follow them on their visits, walks, sit, listen, and share in their conversations’ (Malinowski, 1922, p. 22).

The world of the indigenous people should be seen through their eyes only, not of the Westerner, any other outsider, or researcher. In the 1930s his research interests were directed toward Africa and started working with the International African Institute. During colonial times, many Westerners, including administrators and researchers, thought that they were superior and the colonized natives were inferior.

Malinowski shares the weaknesses he had as a novice in his early stages as an anthropologist and those are of immeasurable value to the newcomers to the field. Pre-preparation about the language of the community, and a thorough understanding of their behaviour and customs are crucial to anyone who ventures to begin fieldwork in an alien community. The absence of those aspects will never make the anthropological researcher a successful individual in collecting reliable and valid data. He vehemently criticized using secondhand information as a researcher. If one needs to have a proper understanding of a qualitative study, the researcher

has to present personally in that environment. But we have to be careful of the reliability of all his writings since his diary published after his death (1967) raises many concerns about the true nature of what he has written.

Textual Accomplishments

Any reader of anthropology gets surprised by the number of publications Malinowski produced during his career. He had been producing a textbook or a publication with each research he has conducted. From his first field visit to Toulon Island (Mailu Island), and Woodlark Island, till his death when he was planning to conduct another fieldwork, his research life has been gifted with his versatile skills as a prolific prose writer. Some of the prominent textbooks he has written and published are given below. Apart from these, he has written in Polish as well. A notable aspect is that he has written a lot about sex in these communities which very rarely scholars dared to investigate and write about during his time.

- The Family Among the Australian Aborigines, B. Malinowski, 1913
- The Natives of Mailu, B. Malinowski, 1915
- Baloma: The Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands, B. Malinowski, 1916
- Argonauts of the Western Pacific, B. Malinowski, 1922
- Ethnology and the Study of Society, B. Malinowski, 1922
- Crime and Custom in Savage Society, B. Malinowski, 1926
- Sex and Repression in Savage Society, B. Malinowski, 1927
- Culture: The Diffusion Controversy, Alexander Goldenweiser, B. Malinowski, Grafton Elliott Smith, and Herbert Spinden, 1927
- The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia, B. Malinowski, 1929
- Practical Anthropology, B. Malinowski, 1929
- Coral Gardens and their Magic, B. Malinowski, 1935
- Culture as a Determinant of Behavior, B. Malinowski, 1936
- The Group and the Individual in Functional Analysis, B. Malinowski, 1939
- The Pan-African Problem of Culture Contact, B. Malinowski, 1943

Published Posthumously

- A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays, B. Malinowski, 1944
- The Dynamics of Culture Change, B. Malinowski, 1945
- Freedom and Civilization, B. Malinowski, 1947

- Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays, B. Malinowski, 1948
- Sex, Culture, and Myth (1962),
- A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term, B. Malinowski, 1967
- The Early Writings of Bronislaw Malinowski (1993)

Out of all the books he has written, a special discussion will be developed on '*The Argonauts of the Western Pacific*' (1922). Presently, the location that became the focus of his field study is called the Kiriwana Island Chain in Papua New Guinea. The gift-giving system; *the kula ring*, of the Trobriand islanders was his main concern. The text is the first of the trilogy and the second and third were '*The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia*' (1929), and '*Coral Gardens and their Magic*' (1935). In these texts, he was interested in the trade, sex, magic, rituals, and religion of these indigenous peoples.

Even though he was a stranger to these communities, he found the intangible cultural heritage of these indigenous communities has been nourishing. Seemingly simple in superficial terms for an outsider, but a keen observer in anthropology could perceive the value of human relationships, status, customs, traditions, beliefs, rituals, values, attitudes, and practices to a greater extent. He felt that without immersing himself in these native cultures he would not have been able to comprehend them accurately. So these are vital lessons for the upcoming researchers of anthropology.

Theoretical and Conceptual Contributions

The common belief among academia is that evolutionary theory sets the precedence over all the subsequent sociological and anthropological theories. Colonization, especially, the maritime expansion of the Europeans, changed the simple, social structure of the natives in an unprecedented manner. The remarkable differences between the industrializing and modernizing West, especially Europe, and the traditional non-West met at a crucial juncture in human history. The explorers, traders, navigators, invaders, and missionaries got a glimpse of the Asian and African traditions and started studying these primitive societies and their different cultural elements.

Malinowski from the European West also had the same experience. The new societies he was exposed to in the non-Western territories had been different from his own. The reading of '*The Golden Bough*' (1890), even though later he had many differences with James Frazer, changed his understanding of human society. Malinowski has been accredited to be the pioneer of the prominent sociological school of thought, functionalism. His functional explanation of society highlights the specific function each social element performs and the institutional interdependence in society. Understanding the totality of all these functions and their interrelations provides the basis for the anthropologist to comprehend the culture of a community.

The differences in analyzing and describing the society, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, had been notable. Malinowski opined that culture and its numerous elements decided the life of an individual in society. The simplest understanding or explanation of his '*biocultural or psychological functionalism*' is that when individual needs are met, then, automatically society becomes a peaceful place to live. Malinowski was the one who promoted the concept of '*cultural relativism*'. The Westerners during colonial times professed that some societies have 'high cultures' while some are having 'low cultures'. But Malinowski expressed that each culture is unique. Each culture should be understood, studied, and based on its specific features inherent to it. Western culture should not be a benchmark for an evaluation of the colonized cultures.

He insisted that the basic biological needs, group affiliations, and cultural sentiments are the key, primary needs of an individual. In all his field studies he was interested in the totality of the indigenous culture - the behaviour of people, their feelings, opinions, beliefs, values, attitudes, and motives. Being a hunter he had many encounters with the local communities irrespective of time. All these contexts helped him to observe their actions of ceremonies and rites. Malinowski's main argument in his theory of needs was '*culture exists to meet the universal biological, psychological and social needs of an individual*' (Moberg, 2012, p.194).

Even during Malinowski's time, there were ongoing theoretical rivalries regarding the ideologies. The LSE was dominated by '*the social evolutionists*', while the Cambridge University contemporaries were '*ritualists*' and the University College, London '*the diffusionists*'. Against this turbulent context, Malinowski introduced his ideals of functionalism. Malinowski worked hard to purify the ethnographic research with his contemporary [and sometimes rival], A. R. Radcliffe Brown even though they had disagreements regarding the theoretical explanations. Malinowski did not agree with the notion of Sigmund Freud's Oedipus Complex[3]. He expressed that such psychological complexes are not universal but specific to each society. In '*Sex and repression in savage society (1927)*', he introduced a cross-cultural psychological view.

'Kinship' has been another concept that Malinowski studied in his field research. In every primitive society he studied, he observed and concluded that kinship plays an important role in their day-to-day social encounters. According to the Western idea, opposite-sex relations between the parent and child are repressed due to punishment or social stigma. But Malinowski did not reveal such features in the primitive societies he studied. Every activity in primitive communities has been contributing to the healthy functioning of that community. The myths, rituals, beliefs, and practices also had the logic for the ethnographer who delve too deep into their behaviour.

Those Western scholars expressed and etched into Euro-centric discourse that the non-Western, especially the colonized, societies are savage, simple, uncivilized, primitive, unsophisticated, and not developed at all. By this time the most prominent evolutionary theory was the unilinear evolutionary theory. This unilinear social evolutionary idea – the social Darwinist idea, has been challenged by Malinowski. He argued that with the diversity

of societies and the pace with which different societies change, there cannot be a universal evolutionary pattern among all primitive societies.

Based on the experiences he had with the natives, Malinowski explained that they are also similar to the Westerners in logical thinking and reasoning. The native societies and their structures are also complex but not seen superficially like in Western societies. Anyone who lives in those societies and has many encounters only can perceive this complexity. Because of this reason, Malinowski was more prone to the American anthropological school headed by Franz Boas rather than the British anthropological tradition.

‘Reciprocity’ is another concept perpetuated by Malinowski. The exchange of goods in traditional societies had been termed a ‘barter system’, but among the Trobriand Islanders, the exchange of gifts goes beyond a mere exchange. Malinowski identified that the ‘Kula ring’ system promoted, trade, social communication, social status, and many other concepts related to culture. While his study of traditional economic relations paved way for the subdiscipline ‘economic anthropology’, the text *‘Sex and repression in savage society’* (1927) was believed to initiate the subdiscipline ‘legal anthropology’.

Appraisals and Criticisms

Young (2004) when writing the biography of Malinowski highlighted the most remarkable qualities of an anthropologist; keen observation, writing skills, vernacular linguistic competencies, and lucid explanations of what he has seen and felt. Malinowski had all these qualities and he was well-received during his time and even now as a forerunner of the anthropologist who pioneered a revolutionary paradigm shift in conceptual, theoretical, and methodological dimensions. When he was introducing the knowledge of culture, it was E. B. Tylor (1871) who dominated this concept. One criticism was that Malinowski was unable to provide anything new other than what Tylor (1871) said. So, it was estimated that he was not as innovative as he was portrayed in subsequent appraisals. But Clifford Geertz (1973) counterargues saying that the symbolic dimension Malinowski had highlighted had been a novel phenomenon considering the time gap between him and Tylor (1871).

Another accusation against Malinowski was how he is going to generalize his findings of a small-scale, isolated community to all the other primitive/indigenous communities in the world. In anthropological studies, the researcher has to struggle with these limitations. Field research is time-consuming since it is longitudinal. The researcher has to develop all the technical skills to obtain the necessary data from the community in which he lives. So, these become case studies in anthropology where generalizations are impossible. Then the questions arise against the validity and reliability. There can be some similarities in many of these but the generalizations pose many questions to answer with.

The common theme that runs across all his field research is culture. It is a known fact that the culture of a society is constructed by the people who live in that specific society. When an anthropologist resides in a society for a longer period he or she experiences the changes that take place in that culture. The question unanswered has been how an anthropologist

concludes while being in a culture on the move. By the time he was living in Trobriand Islands, the society has been in transition even though the changes are invisible due to the slowness of the transition.

Another critical point was the difference between the true life he had lived on these islands and the life he had mentioned in his books. He has proved to the reader of his texts that he had been a highly successful anthropological research life. But the field diary (1967) published after his death proved otherwise. According to Barret (2009), his relationships with the natives had not been genuine. So doubts are looming about the accuracy of his writing. How he has maintained objectivity in field research where a lot of subjectivity comes into play has not been clear to the reader. These contradictions later belittle the popularity and the goodwill he has earned while he was living. Even though the accuracy of these facts can be challenged all these facts are extremely good examples for a newcomer to anthropology research to be aware of.

He may have his weaknesses and professional shortcomings but his efforts are worth reading. The concepts, theories, and methods he has introduced provide the later generations to continue in different directions. There have been many notable contributions later came from those who got influenced by Malinowski's works. Some of his students are Raymond Firth, Meyer Fortes, Jomo Kenyatta, Edmund Leach, Lucy Mair, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, and Margaret Mead.

Conclusion

Whatever was said and done, Malinowski has been credited for making British social anthropology '*an ahistorical study*' from the point of view of speculation and history (Young, 2004). Tylor (1871) and Frazer (1890) had been relying on historical facts about the societies they had been studying. Malinowski's macro-level analysis, functional analysis of society, assisted him in describing the social structure of the societies he had studied. According to his writings, the interrelated and interdependent nature of social institutions can be clearly understood. Different elements in those societies, social institutions, have specific functions to perform. Individual and collective behaviours have been the result of these functions.

The use of participant observation in anthropological field research has introduced a new dimension to subsequent researchers, not only in anthropology but in many other disciplines as well. His academic and professional stature extended outside Britain, especially, to the USA. As most disciplines have a speedier progression in the American academic and research circles, his getting introduced to the USA has been a vital sign for the advancement of the concepts, theories, and methods of anthropology. Malinowski's presence in Africa was funded by Rockefeller Foundation and his field research in Africa made the neglected cultural sentiments of African lives better recognized and researched (Forster, 1994).

Traditional sociological functionalism rarely discusses and promotes social change but stability. The harmony and equilibrium of the different institutions in society maintain the social order. But Malinowski's ideas about the natives are different. Society relies on the

actions of individuals. When individuals interact, and when they get their needs fulfilled the social order continues; thus social change. Stocking (1983) comments that the '*customary practices, and beliefs and how the psychology of those individuals might lead them to generate change*'. But many changes have taken place in every aspect of research since the times of Malinowski.

Today ethnographic research is not limited to far-off, primitive societies, there is urban ethnography. There are urban communities that display similar characteristics to rural societies. Those become the study places of urban ethnographers. Similarly, there are no attempts to rely only on qualitative methods like participant observation and interviews but mixed methods. The researchers are interested in collecting both qualitative and quantitative data and complementing each when and where necessary. Triangulation has been a notable phenomenon. According to Bryman (2015), triangulation is '*the use of different data collection techniques within one study to ensure that the data are telling you what you think they are telling you*' (p.146).

Anthropology has got integrated with many other disciplines to design and conduct interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and transdisciplinary research (Antonius and Sulka, 2006). Modern ethnographic fieldwork is done not only on the outside but inside places like museums, archives, collections in libraries, and any other place where ethnological research gets facilitated (Okley, 2011). Even though these become in-house studies, there are many opportunities to unravel the hidden anthropological knowledge to the outside world. Finally, modern anthropologists have to consider the ethical dilemmas the generation of Malinowski had not faced. There are so many institutionalized coverages relating to human rights issues and the researchers have to take all the necessary steps to preserve and adhere to those ethics when conducting anthropological studies.

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[1] *Slavic* - relating to or denoting the branch of the Indo-European language family that includes Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian (East Slavic), Polish, Czech, Slovak, and Sorbian (West Slavic), and Bulgarian, Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian, and Slovene (South Slavic).

[2] *Philology* - the branch of knowledge that deals with the structure, historical development, and relationships of a language or languages.

[3] *The attachment of the child to the parent of the opposite sex, accompanied by envious and aggressive feelings toward the parent of the same sex.*