

# Bronislaw Malinowski

## The Functions of Culture



Bronislaw Malinowski inspired strong reactions from people, and it is clear he wanted it that way. There are no tepid accounts of Malinowski; they are either hot or cold. Anthropologists tend to evaluate Malinowski on three grounds—as a fieldworker, as a theoretician, or as a personality. As a fieldworker there is near unanimity: Malinowski set new standards for ethnographic research, influencing an entire generation of anthropologists. As a theoretician, opinions of Malinowski diverge. On one hand, the British social anthropologist Audrey I. Richards wrote, “Malinowski’s concept of culture, as he first developed it, was one of his most stimulating contributions to the anthropological thought of his day,” concluding that this contribution has been “considerably undervalued” (Richards 1957:15). At the other extreme, Edmund Leach contrasted Malinowski’s valuable fieldwork with his theoretical contribution:

[B]esides altering the whole mode and purpose of ethnographic inquiry Malinowski made numerous theoretical pronouncements of a general, abstract, sociological kind, which were supposed to be valid for all cultural situations, regardless of time or space. Here, I consider, he was a failure. For me, Malinowski talking about the Trobrianders is a stimulating genius; but Malinowski discoursing on Culture in general is often a platitudinous bore. [1957:119]

Remarkably, such different opinions appear in the same collection of symposium papers edited by one of Malinowski’s first and most loyal former students, Raymond Firth. Writing ten years after his death, the contributors’ different assessments of Malinowski’s theoretical contributions

to anthropology are broadly representative. But if response to his theories was mixed, Malinowski the man was either loved or hated. One supporter said, “He had a really creative mind, an international outlook and the approach and the imagination of an artist” (Karberry cited in Firth 1988:37). In contrast, the anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn called him “a pretentious Messiah of the credulous”—and this in an obituary in the *Journal of American Folklore* (1943:208). Who was this man who inspired such different reactions?

## Background

His life began in Cracow, but it blossomed in the South Seas. Born in 1884, the son of a distinguished professor of Slavic languages, Malinowski was descended from the aristocracy and raised among the intellectuals of Poland (Kubica 1988:88–89; Thorton and Skalník 1993). His 1908 doctorate was in physics and mathematics; his thesis, titled “On the Principle of Economy of Thought,” received the highest honor in the Austrian Empire and his Ph.D. was awarded in an elaborate ceremony with a flourish of trumpets (Flis 1988). But sickness and circumstances diverted him from a career in the physical sciences to the study of sociology and anthropology.

In 1910 Malinowski began postgraduate studies at the London School of Economics where he studied with C.G. Seligman. Seligman had been a member of the 1898–1899 Cambridge University expedition to the Torres Straits region, the island-dotted channel between northern Australia and New Guinea. As Kuper describes (1983:5–6), this was a period in which British anthropologists avidly sought to collect empirical data—similar to the “salvage ethnography” of Boas and Kroeber (see pp. 65–67); the Torres Straits expedition introduced systematic field research methods to British anthropology. The ethnographic data on Australia from the Torres expedition and the earlier work on central Australian tribes by Spencer and Gillen (1899) became the fuel for various sociological writers such as Durkheim and Freud. Similarly, Malinowski’s first book, *The Family Among the Australian Aborigines*, was based on previously collected ethnographic data, as was his doctorate (awarded in 1913). Nearly 30, Bronislaw Malinowski had yet to do any fieldwork.

But by a fluke, an opportunity occurred: Malinowski was hired as secretary to the anthropologist R.G. Marett who, in his capacity as an officer of the British Association, was traveling to Australia. World War

I broke out while they were there and Malinowski, as an Austrian subject, was classified as an enemy alien. Marett and others intervened with the Australian authorities, and Malinowski was released and allowed to remain in Australian territories, including New Guinea, and carry out fieldwork. It was an opportunity that transformed his career.

Malinowski made three field trips to New Guinea: an initial six-month visit (September 1914 to March 1915) with the Mailu of Toulon Island, and two visits with the Trobriand Islanders, first from June 1915 to May 1916 and then from October 1917 to October 1918 (Kerby 1957:77). It was a period of emotional despondency, sexual frustration, hard work, and intellectual excitement, partly recorded in Malinowski's diaries published 25 years after his death (Malinowski 1967); the diaries and personal letters (Wayne 1995) show a complex, flawed, but brilliant man.

Malinowski's writings also show an ethnographer very interested in the systematic collection of ethnographic data, a subject he discusses in the opening pages of his classic study of the Trobriand Islanders, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Malinowski (1922:11) believed that the ethnographer had to consider:

the full extent of the phenomena in each aspect of tribal culture studied, making no difference between what is commonplace, or drab, or ordinary, and what strikes him as astonishing and out-of-the-way. At the same time, the whole area of tribal culture *in all its aspects* has to be gone over in research. The consistency, the law and order which obtain within each aspect make also for joining them into one coherent whole.

To achieve this, Malinowski advocated a three-part system. First, he took the idea of the kinship chart in which complex relations are shown schematically and devised "synoptic charts" to illustrate relationships in other dimensions of culture: economic transactions, exchanges, legal practices, magical ceremonies, rights to farming lands and fishing areas, and so on. Synoptic charts expressed relationships between ethnographic data, and supplemented with genealogies, maps, plans and diagrams, they served to outline the framework of cultural actions.

But this only covered the bare bones of cultural existence; Malinowski, if nothing else, was always interested in the pulsing complexity of social life. These nuances of behavior and action Malinowski called the *imponderabilia of actual life*. With that phrase, Malinowski wanted ethnographers to record the subjective dynamics of daily life as experienced by another group of human beings, not just the abstract

structure of a primordial society. Arguing that the ethnographer should record the particular actors and spectators in a specific ceremony, Malinowski suggested that he should forget that he understands the stated purpose and structure of the ceremony and

try to find himself only in the midst of an assembly of human beings, who behave seriously or jocularly, with earnest concentration or with bored frivolity, who are either in the same mood as he finds them every day, or else are screwed up to a high pitch of excitement, and so on and so on. [1922:21]

Although he realized that not every ethnographer could join into native life with equal ease—joking that "perhaps the Slavonic nature is more plastic and more naturally savage than that of Western Europeans"—Malinowski argued that the attempt was an important counterbalance to ethnographic abstractions about society, and to remind the ethnographer that his subjects are living humans and not museum specimens. Even a sharp critic like Adam Kuper (1983:35) acknowledges, ". . . Malinowski's greatness lay in his ability to penetrate the web of theories to the real man, boasting, hypocritical, earthy, reasonable. . . ."

Malinowski knew that not every motive could be reduced to synoptic charts or observed behaviors; one had to reconstruct the subjective mental states of another culture. This information could be derived from a body of "ethnographic statements, characteristic narratives, typical utterances, items of folk-lore and magical formulae . . . as documents of native mentality" (Malinowski 1922:24).

In this manner, Malinowski collected a body of data on the Trobriand Islanders which had deep effects on anthropology. His data on the social dimensions of long-distance exchange in the kula ring influenced Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* (pp. 122–125) and was a key text in the development of the formalist vs. substantive debate in economic anthropology. Malinowski's insights about the nature of magic and science led to greater interest in cognitive anthropology and also figured in the approaches of ecological anthropology that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Rappaport 1967). The Trobriand Islanders became one of the classic ethnographic case studies, and on the strength of that case study Malinowski returned to England to become a major figure in social anthropology.

Kuper (1983:10) contends that Malinowski turned his life story into a "messianic self-image" that served as a "mythical charter" for the new field of social anthropology: a brilliant Polish student,

diverted into anthropology, and imprisoned in the wilderness of Melanesia through a fluke, then returns to civilization to throw out the ignorant establishment, a battle waged with the assistance of his disciples (for more on Malinowski's self-myth see Firth 1988:31–32). But this caricature aside, Malinowski began publishing substantive ethnographic articles even before returning to England, and *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* was published in 1922. He began teaching at the University of London in the early 1920s and by 1927 held the chair in Social Anthropology, which allowed him to attract numerous students and increasing international recognition. By the 1930s Malinowski lectured widely in Europe and North America, and the outbreak of World War II found him in the United States where he remained until his death in 1942. He was 58 years old.

Malinowski's works remain ethnographic classics, but his contribution to anthropological theory was debated during his lifetime and is still controversial. His ethnographic concerns were with how culture met the needs of the individual, and they conflicted with another viewpoint outlined by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown that emphasized how culture met the needs of society. The two men were labeled "functionalists," a term emphasizing their perspectives on how culture "functioned" to meet specific needs. From the early-1920s until the late-1930s, Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski saw themselves as brothers in arms, advocating a new approach to cultures that emphasized them as functionally integrated wholes (Firth 1988:16–17). Yet each saw a different source of such needs—Malinowski emphasizing the individual, Radcliffe-Brown highlighting society—and a growing distance turned into mutual distaste heightened by a fundamental difference in personalities. But to understand this difference and to evaluate Malinowski's theoretical contribution, one must begin with his theory of needs.

## Theory of Needs

Malinowski's theory of needs is central to his functional approach to culture; it is the theoretical statement linking the individual and society. It is a simple notion: culture exists to meet the basic biological, psychological, and social needs of the individual. But the theory seems unduly simplistic if we do not understand Malinowski's notions of function, the hierarchy of needs, and the role of symbolism, and if we ignore the intellectual context of Malinowski's thinking.

First, Malinowski (1944:83) viewed function in a physiological sense: "Function, in this simplest and most basic aspect of human behavior, can be defined as the satisfaction of an organic impulse by the appropriate act. Form and function, obviously, are inextricably related to one another." Malinowski developed the physiological analogy further. For example, he argued that if we were to describe *how* a normal lung operates we would be describing the form of the process, but if we attempt to explain *why* the lung is operating in a certain manner then we are concerned with its function. "We could say that the formal approach corresponds to the method of observation and documentation in the statement of a vital sequence," Malinowski (1944:83) wrote, "while function is the restatement of what has happened in terms of scientific principles . . . a full analysis of organic and environmental happenings." This has several implications. First, it means that societies are integrated wholes, requiring an anthropologist to examine the interconnections of different cultural domains. Second, those domains are linked by their complementary functions, and the only anthropological explanations which can be considered to explain those causal links must be functional explanations. Thus any anthropologist unconcerned with the functions of culture is, by definition, not engaged in science.

Malinowski recognized that cultural forms do not have simple or single functions, writing that "no [cultural] institution can be functionally related to one basic need, nor yet as a rule to a simple, cultural need. . . . Culture is not and can not be a replica in terms of specific responses to specific biological needs" (Malinowski 1944:112). Instead, Malinowski wrote that cultural institutions are integrated responses to a variety of needs, and to outline those needs he used a variant of his synoptic charts (Malinowski 1944:91):

<i>Basic Needs</i>	<i>Cultural Responses</i>
1. Metabolism	1. Commissariat
2. Reproduction	2. Kinship
3. Bodily Comforts	3. Shelter
4. Safety	4. Protection
5. Movement	5. Activities
6. Growth	6. Training
7. Health	7. Hygiene

Malinowski described each of these needs and cultural responses in detail, but a few examples illustrate his argument. The first human need, *metabolism*, refers to "the processes of food intake, digestion, the

collateral secretions, the absorption of nutritive substances, and rejection of waste matter . . ." (Malinowski 1944:91). The cultural response, dubbed *commissariat* (literally a military officer charged with the distribution of food), included 1) how food was grown, prepared, and consumed, 2) where food was consumed and in what social units, 3) the economic and social organization of the distribution of foods (e.g., trade in canned salmon or reciprocal exchange of garden products), 4) the legal and customary rules that ensure the steady operation of food distribution, and 5) the authority that enforces those rules. The basic need, *safety*, simply "refers to the prevention of bodily injuries by mechanical accident, attack from animals or other human beings" (Malinowski 1944:92), but the cultural response, *protection*, may include such different behaviors as placing houses on pilings away from potential tidal waves, the organization of armed responses to aggression, or the magical recruitment of supernatural forces. And *growth*—which in humans is structured by the long dependency of infants—leads to the cultural response of *training* by which humans are taught language, other symbols, and appropriate behaviors for different stages and situations, and are instructed until they are socially and physiologically mature (Malinowski 1944:107).

Obviously Malinowski was not reducing complex cultural systems to simple biological needs: he did not argue that salmon canneries exist in Alaska because humans need to eat. Rather, cultural responses set new conditions—literally new environments—which elicit new cultural responses:

[I]t is clear that the satisfaction of the organic or basic needs of man and of the races is a minimum set of conditions imposed on each culture. The problems set by man's nutritive, reproductive, and hygienic needs must be solved. They are solved by the construction of a new, secondary, or artificial environment. This environment, *which is neither more nor less than culture itself*, has to be permanently reproduced, maintained, and managed. This creates what might be described in the most general sense of the term as a new standard of living, which depends on the cultural level of the community, on the environment, and on the efficiency of the group. A cultural standard of living, however, means that new needs appear and new imperatives or determinants are imposed on human behavior. [Malinowski 1944:37; emphasis added]

In contrast to the basic needs, these new derived needs or cultural imperatives are "imposed on man by his own tendency to extend his safety and his comforts" (Malinowski 1944:120), but it would be wrong

to think of derived needs as somehow dispensable. "Man does not," Malinowski (1944:121) writes, "by biological determinism need to hunt with spears or bow and arrow; use poison darts; nor defend himself by stockades, by shelters, or by armor. But the moment that such devices have become adopted, in order to enhance human adaptability to the environment, they also become necessary conditions for survival." Such items—and the systems of training, raw material exchange, cooperative labor, etc. they require—"are one and all as indispensable under the ultimate sanction of the biological imperative of self-preservation as are any purely physiologically determined elements" (Malinowski 1944:122). New cultural responses to primordial conditions create new situations, literally new environments, to which societies must respond.

Thus culture becomes an enormously complicated behavioral web responding to complex needs that can ultimately—but not always immediately—be traced to the individual. Malinowski (1944:171) summarized his theory of needs with two axioms: first "that every culture must satisfy the biological systems of needs" and second, "that every cultural achievement that implies the use of artifacts and symbolism is an instrumental enhancement of human anatomy, and refers directly or indirectly to the satisfaction of a bodily need." In sum, culture is utilitarian, adaptive, and functionally integrated, and the explanation of culture involves the delineation of function. A classic example of that type of explanation is Malinowski's approach to magic.

## The Function of Magic

Magic may seem an improbable case for functional explanation, but it was an integral element in Malinowski's theory because magic was central to Trobriand life. Magic was used to kill enemies and prevent being killed; it was used to ease the birth of a child, to enhance the beauty of dancers, to protect fishermen, or to ensure the harvest. Magic was never mere superstition or empty gesture. Rather, Malinowski argued that

Magic, as the belief that by spell and rite results can be obtained, . . . always appears in those phases of human action where knowledge fails man. Primitive man cannot manipulate the weather. Experience teaches him that rain and sunshine, wind, heat and cold, cannot be produced by his own hands, however much he might think about or observe such phenomena. He therefore deals with them magically. [Malinowski 1944:198]

Malinowski hypothesized that limited "scientific" knowledge of illness and disease led "primitive" man to conclude that illnesses are caused by sorcery and countered by magic. Malinowski—a man in ill health much of his life—wrote (1944:199):

The sick man, primitive or civilized, wants to feel that something can be done. He craves for miracles, and the conviction that what has been produced by a malicious sorcerer can be counteracted by a more powerful and friendly witch-doctor, may even assist the organism to resist illness through the belief that something effective is being done. Magic, including sorcery, has thus its practical as well as social characteristics, which allow us to explain its persistence.

Magic persists in societies because it appears to work; it functions. Beyond this apparent utility, Malinowski argued that magic has a profound function in exerting human control over those dimensions that are otherwise outside of our control.

[Magic] is always strongest there, where vital interests are concerned; where violent passions or emotions are awakened; when mysterious forces are opposed to man's endeavours; and when he has to recognise that there is something which eludes his most careful calculations, his most conscientious preparations and efforts. [Malinowski 1922:395–396]

A classic example is the way that fishing magic is organized: when fishing occurs inside the protected coral reef where "it is possible to make a catch in weather and under conditions in which no other kind of fishing is practicable . . . no magic whatever is practiced in connection with this industry" (1965:17). In contrast, the magic associated with ocean fishing, sailing, and canoes is complex and pervasive, because the dangers and risks are greater.

Similarly, magic surrounding gardening is extensive and considered an indispensable part of cultivation. In terms of economic activity, "agriculture always takes precedence. The districts rich in produce are on the whole politically dominant as well as economically the most wealthy," Malinowski observed (1965:12). "Garden produce is the foundation of wealth throughout the area." Garden magic is public, direct, and extensive; the village garden magician is either the headman, his heir or closest male relative, and therefore he is either the most important or next-most important person in a community. Garden magic and garden work are distinct but inseparable. Malinowski wrote:

Magic and practical work are, in native ideas, inseparable from each other, though they are not confused. Garden magic and garden work

run in one intertwined series of consecutive effort, form one continuous story, and must be the subject matter of one narrative.

To the natives, magic is as indispensable to the success of gardens as competent and effective husbandry. It is essential to the fertility of the soil: [saying] "The garden magic utters magic by mouth; the magical virtue enters the soil." Magic is to them an almost natural element in the growth of the gardens. I have often been asked: "What is the magic which is done in your country over gardens—is it like ours or is it different?" They did not seem at all to approve of our ways as I described them. . . . [Malinowski 1965:62–63]

We lack the space to describe garden rituals; Malinowski devotes over 150 pages to the horticultural and magical activities associated with gardens and the crop cycle. But the role of magic in cultivation, Malinowski believed, captured its essential function—an attempt to extend control over uncontrollable elements of nature. In this sense, Malinowski's analysis of magic reflects his functional approach to culture.

## Conclusion

Malinowski's work has been criticized on numerous grounds. First, there is the valid point that Malinowski extrapolated from the Trobriand case to traditional societies in general. It has been said that Malinowski's thought moved on two levels: the specific case of the Trobrianders, and the abstract, general case of Man and Society—which bore a striking resemblance to the Trobrianders (Nadel 1957). Second, Malinowski's approach has been criticized because it relied on the ability of the anthropologist to perceive some function of a cultural behavior that could rarely be disproved, and because it basically is a crude theory in which all sorts of behaviors are reduced to simplistic notions of utility (Kuper 1983:31). One could ask, "Don't societies do things which are counter-productive for the individual?" or "Aren't there cultural elements which are nonfunctional yet maintained because they are simply customary?" It is not certain that Malinowski developed a useful answer—as opposed to a scathing rebuke—to such questions (e.g., Malinowski 1944:117–119).

Yet Malinowski has been very influential, particularly on lines of anthropological theory emphasizing the adaptive significance of culture. The ecological anthropology of the 1960s and 1970s took Malinowski's basic insights, recast them as hypotheses, and tested them with quantitative data, producing such classics as Roy Rappoport's (1968)

study of the role of ritual in regulating subsistence activities. And sociobiology, although its roots are in Darwinian selection and ethology, shares with functionalism the notion that cultural behaviors either impart adaptive advantages, are neutral, or are eliminated.

Of course, not all approaches to culture share in Malinowski's intellectual heritage. But perhaps his most lasting theoretical observation is his most basic one: cultures are not collections of isolated traits, but are interconnected wholes. ♦

## Bibliography

Firth, Raymond

1988 Malinowski in the History of Social Anthropology. *In* Malinowski Between Two Worlds: The Polish Roots of an Anthropological Tradition. R. Ellen, E. Gellner, G. Kubica, and J. Mucha, eds. Pp. 12–42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Flis, Andrzej, ed.

1988 Bronislaw Malinowski's Cracow Doctorate. *In* Malinowski Between Two Worlds: The Polish Roots of an Anthropological Tradition. R. Ellen, E. Gellner, G. Kubica, and J. Mucha, eds. Pp. 195–200. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kluckhohn, C.

1943 Bronislaw Malinowski 1884–1942. *Journal of American Folklore* 56:208–219.

Kubica, Grazyna

1988 Malinowski's Years in Poland. *In* Malinowski Between Two Worlds: The Polish Roots of an Anthropological Tradition. R. Ellen, E. Gellner, G. Kubica, and J. Mucha, eds. Pp. 88–104. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kuper, Adam

1988 *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The Modern British School*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Leach, Edmund

1957 The Epistemological Background to Malinowski's Empiricism. *In* Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski. R. Firth, ed. Pp. 119–138. New York: Humanities Press.

Malinowski, Bronislaw

1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: George Routledge & Sons.

1944 *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

1965 *Coral Gardens and Their Magic: (Volume 1) Soil-Tilling and Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

1967 *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Nadel, S. F.

1957 Malinowski on Magic and Religion. *In* Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski. R. Firth, ed. Pp. 189–208. New York: Humanities Press.

Piddington, Ralph

1957 Malinowski's Theory of Needs. *In* Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski. R. Firth, ed. Pp. 33–51. New York: Humanities Press.

Rappaport, Roy

1968 *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Richards, Audrey

1957 The Concept of Culture in Malinowski's Work. *In* Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski. R. Firth, ed. Pp. 15–32. New York: Humanities Press.

Thorton, Robert and Peter Skalník, eds.

1993 *The Early Writings of Bronislaw Malinowski*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wayne, Helena, ed.

1995 *The Story of a Marriage: The Letters of Bronislaw Malinowski and Elsie Masson, Volume 1: 1916–20*. London: Routledge.