

Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski

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1. Biographical sketch

"...he had an artists power to create with great integrative capacity a world of his own ... and he had the true scientist's intuitive discrimination between relevant and adventitious fundamental and secondary issues", this kind epitaph, which Malinowski formulated in his obituary for Sir James George Frazer a year before he himself died, could equally apply to Malinowski, as Raymond Firth (1981: 137) so rightly emphasized in one of his articles on his teacher and colleague. Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the most important anthropologists of the 20th century, is generally recognized as one of the founders of social anthropology, transforming 19th century speculative anthropology into a field-oriented science that is based on empirical research. Malinowski is principally associated with his field research of the Mailu and especially of the Trobriand Islanders in what is now Papua New Guinea, and his masterpieces on Trobriand ethnography continue "to enthrall each generation of anthropologists through its intensity, rich detail, and penetrating revelations" (Weiner 1987: xiv).

Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski (nicknamed Bronek & Bronio) was born in Cracow (then Austrian Galicia, now Poland) on 7 April 1884 as the only child of Jozefa (nee Lacka) and Lucjan Malinowski. His father (1839-1898) was professor of Slavonic philology at the Jagiellonian University of Cracow and was well known not only as a philologist but also as an ethnographer specialized in Polish dialects and Silesian folklore and ethnology. He died of a heart attack at the age of 58 when his son (who was to die in the same way at the same age) was only 14. However, his mother Jozefa ('Josephine', 1848-1918), who came from a wealthy land-owning family and was a highly cultured woman and a good linguist, was much more important for Bronislaw's development and education (see Wayne 1985, 1995), and the mother-son bond was extremely strong. Both parents belonged to a social class that Malinowski's youngest daughter Helena Wayne (1985: 529) characterized as being something "between landed gentry and nobility, but certainly not aristocracy".

Bronislaw was a delicate child and had constant problems with his health: he nearly died of peritonitis and he had severe trouble with his eyes — he was even threatened with blindness. Therefore, after a year as an internal student he became an external student of the Jan Sobieski Gimnazjum, one of Cracow's best secondary schools. He worked at home and with the loving and caring help of his mother he managed to

brilliantly complete his schooling. Because of his health Malinowski and his mother — at the behest of his doctors — made various journeys south. They were already well travelled in central European countries, but in the time between 1899 and 1906 they went to Northern Italy, the Mediterranean, especially to the Dalmatian coast, Malta, Sicily, to North African countries, and to Madeira and the Canary Islands (Wayne 1985: 531). Nevertheless, his poor health continued to plague him throughout his life.

In 1902 Malinowski went to Cracow University and studied first physics, mathematics and chemistry, and then philosophy and also psychology. In 1908 he was awarded his doctorate with the highest honours in the Austrian Empire (*summa cum laude — sub auspiciis imperatoris*) and was presented with a large gold and diamond ring from Kaiser Franz Josef (see Wayne 1985: 531). His Ph.D. thesis (*On the principle of the economy of thought*) examined the 'second positivism' of Richard Avenarius & Ernst Mach (see Paluch 1981:284; Young 1987:125); the doctorate was mainly a philosophical study with physics and mathematics as subsidiaries.

After his doctoral work, Malinowski developed his interest in anthropology and ethnology. His health problem forced him to postpone the studies he had planned to undertake after his graduation and he started to read Frazer's *The Golden Bow* (at this time only the first 3 of the 12 volumes had been published). Malinowski then went for three terms ('semester') to the University of Leipzig and studied 'Volkerpsychologie' with Wilhelm Wundt and historical economy and economics with Karl Bücher. He also worked in the chemistry laboratories of Wilhelm Ostwald.

In 1910 Malinowski went to London with the South African pianist Annie Brunton whom he met in Leipzig, and he became a postgraduate student at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Here anthropology had been recently established as a discipline. Malinowski studied anthropology with Charles Gabriel Seligman (1873-1940) and sociology with Edward A. Westermarck (1862-1939). The influence of these great scholars on Malinowski's thinking is excellently outlined in Weiner (1987). In 1913 Malinowski wrote his first book in English, *The Family among the Australian Aborigines*, as one part of his doctoral requirements. This monograph — like his second book, *Primitive Religion and Forms of Social Structure*, that was published in Polish (and in Poland) in 1915 — was written on the basis of published accounts, but he had already conceived plans to do anthropological field research.

In 1914 Seligman managed to raise funds from the LSE and from the industrialist Robert Mond for Malinowski to do field research in the Western Pacific. Malinowski "went out to Australia with the British Association for the Advancement of Science... as a guest, and at the expense, of the Commonwealth Government of Australia" (Malinowski 1922: xix). On his arrival in Australia, war had been declared in Europe. As a Pole, Malinowski was a subject of the Austrian Emperor and thus an enemy alien. He nevertheless managed to get permission from the Australian authorities to proceed with his research. In September 1914 Malinowski sailed from Brisbane to British New

Guinea, after his friend Stanislaw I. Witkiewicz, who had planned to become his field work photographer, had left him and returned to Europe to fight for the Russians. He stayed for six months and — following Seligmans advice — did about three months of field research with the Mailu on the south coast.

In March of 1915 Malinowski returned to Australia after a brief trip to Samarai and Woodlark Island. He now wrote the monograph *The Natives of Mailu: Preliminary Results of the Robert Mond Research Work in British New Guinea*, published as Volume 39 of the *Transactions and Proceedings of the Royal Society of South Australia* in Adelaide in 1920 (Malinowski 1988). Together with his research on the Australian Aboriginal family, published in 1913, it earned him a doctor of science degree from the University of London in 1916.

In May 1915 Malinowski left Australia for his second expedition to British New Guinea. Together with Seligman he had been discussing a possible fieldsite for this second field trip, and among the candidates were the Binandere people in the Mambare district, the Borowai, and especially the Rossel Islanders. Malinowski's letters to Seligman reveal that he had the intention to make for the Mambare, but that he wanted to visit the Trobriands and stay there for a month on his way to this projected field site. It was R.L. Bellamy, the Assistant Resident Magistrate and Medical Officer of the district, who attracted Malinowski to the Trobriands. On his arrival on the Trobriands in July, Malinowski stayed with Bellamy, who taught him some basics of Kilivila (also: Kiriwina, Boyowa), the Austronesian language of the islanders (Senft 1986). Bellamy left the Trobriands after a month for the War, but Malinowski decided to stay there and he chose Omarakana, the village of the paramount chief To'uluwa, as the place to set up his tent. Already in September 1915 he mastered the language so well that he did not need the help of an interpreter any more (besides his mother tongue Polish he could also speak Russian, German, French, English, Italian, and Spanish). Malinowski stayed on Kiriwina, the largest of the Trobriand Islands, for nine months, then returned to Melbourne at the end of March 1916 (see Young 1984: 20) and started to write his article *Baloma — the Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands* (Malinowski 1974:149-254). He managed to get a permit to continue his research on the Trobriands for another year, but he was not allowed to go anywhere else and thus had to give up his plans to briefly visit Rossel Island after his second field trip to the Trobriands. Seligman in England and Spencer in Australia managed to raise further funds for his research (from 1914 to 1920 Malinowski had a budget of 250 pounds a year), and Malinowski left Australia again in October 1917 for the Trobriands where he stayed until October 1918 (see Young 1984). It was during the second period of field research on the Trobriands, in January 1918, that Malinowski's mother died.

Back in Melbourne he continued working on his Trobriand material together with Elsie Rosaline Masson. Malinowski had met Elsie in 1916, and they married in March 1919. They had three daughters, Josefa Maria, Wanda, and Helen. A year after

their marriage the couple left Australia for good. They first spent some months in England, then they moved to the Canary Islands and lived for a year in a country villa in Tenerife. Here Malinowski finished his first monograph on the Trobriand Islands, *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, which was accepted by Routledge within three days and published in 1922. This book made Malinowski's reputation. In 1921 Malinowski started to give lectures at the LSE. In 1924 he was appointed to a readership in anthropology, and in 1927 he accepted the offer to become the first chair in anthropology at the LSE. Between 1921 and 1927 the Malinowski family travelled to the south of France, to Poland and to the south of Tyrol — where in 1923 they bought a beautiful Alpine house in Oberbozen (Soprabolzano) that was to become the home of the family for 6 years. During this time Malinowski continuously commuted between London and Oberbozen.

He was a brilliant teacher, attracted students from many disciplines and trained a generation of distinguished British anthropologists. Among his students were Raymond Firth, E.-E. Evans Pritchard, Isaac Schapera, Hortense Powdermaker, Edmund R. Leach, Meyer Fortes, Lucy Mair, and Ian Hogbin (see also Firth 1957b). The Director of the LSE, Sir William Beveridge, urged Malinowski to live in London — and in 1929 the family moved to a house in Primrose Hill. Moreover, following the advice of Beveridge, Malinowski also became a British subject. He remained in London for almost twenty years, but he continued to travel widely. In 1926 Malinowski was invited to the United States and spent 6 months there as a guest of the Rockefeller Foundation. He visited Ruth Benedict at Columbia and gave a summer course on anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. He also visited the Hopi Indians and travelled to Mexico for the first time.

The years between 1923 and 1938 were his most productive years as a writer and a teacher. Besides many essays and shorter theoretical works Malinowski published the other two of his three major monographs on the Trobriands, *The Sexual Life of Savages in Northwestern Melanesia* in 1929 and the two volumes of *Coral Gardens and their Magic* in 1935. Among his shorter essays on aspects of Trobriand ethnography *Magic, Science and Religion* (1925), *Crime and Custom in Primitive Society* (1926), and *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1926) deserve special mention. With respect to his interdisciplinary research in anthropology and psychology his publications titled *The Psychology of Sex* (1923), *Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (1924), and *The Father in Primitive Psychology* (1927) have to be mentioned as well. In her article on Malinowski, Rhoda Metraux (1968) lists 70 publications (see also Ellen et al. 1988: 210-227; Firth 1957b: 265-271).

In 1930 Malinowski developed an interest in Africa. He travelled for four months through South and East Africa, visiting his students (Audrey Richards, the Wilsons, and Hilda Beemer) who were working on the Bemba, the Swazi and on other tribes. Among his African students was Jomo Kenyatta, who prepared his

book *Facing Mount Kenya* (published with an introduction by Malinowski) as a diploma thesis under his supervision.

In 1933 Malinowski made his second visit to the USA, presenting the Messenger lectures at Cornell University. Two years later, in September 1935, his wife Elsie died. In 1936 Malinowski was awarded the honorary doctor of science degree from Harvard University, and in 1938 he spent his sabbatical leave in the USA. In September 1939 the director of the LSE, Sir A.M. Carr-Saunders, advised Malinowski to stay in the States because of the unclear wartime future of his university. Malinowski followed this advice and brought his daughters to America. In the same year he became a Bishop Museum Visiting Professor of Anthropology at Yale (where the brilliant teacher had difficulties with students who — according to Metraux (1968: 546) — "were far less mature than his students in London"). In 1939 he also married Valetta Swann (nee Hayman-Joyce), an English painter 20 years his junior. Together with his second wife and the Mexican anthropologist Julio de la Fuente he spent the summers of 1940 and 1941 in Mexico doing fieldwork studying the Zapotec Indians' peasant market in Oaxaca. Early in 1942 Malinowski was appointed professor of anthropology at Yale, but on the 16th of May 1942 he suffered a heart attack and died in New Haven, Connecticut.

2. The study of culture

As Metraux (1968:541) pointed out so pertinently, "Malinowski's primary scientific interest was in the study of culture as a universal phenomenon and in the development of a methodological framework that would permit the systematic study of specific cultures in all their peculiarities and open the way to systematic cross-cultural comparison". Central and recurrent themes in his research were the following topics: the family, kinship, culture change, anthropology and psychology, the integrity of culture; the complex interrelationship of the society, the culture and the individual, and the systematic nature of culture.

In his 1931 article on "Culture" in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* Malinowski states that for him "culture comprises inherited artefacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits, and values". Moreover, besides social organization the concept of culture also includes "the set of forces impinging on the individual born into each society" (Richards 1957: 21). For Malinowski this idea of the "... 'social heritage' is the key concept of cultural anthropology" (Malinowski 1931:621). He was convinced that human beings have biological needs that culture satisfies, that culture is an instrumental reality derived from human needs: "...rites, beliefs, and customs, however extraordinary they appear to an observer, actually fill 'needs', biological, psychological, and social" (Richards 1957: 18). Therefore anthropology is the science that has the task to "study the 'use' or 'function' of the customs, institutions, and beliefs which formed part of each culture" (Richards 1957:16). Each culture represents for him a closed system, and therefore all cultures are comparable.

On the basis of these ideas he developed his functional theory of needs "in which each basic human biological need triggers a cultural response" (Weiner 1987: xxx). Functionalism "aims at the explanation of anthropological facts at all levels of development by their function, by the part which they play within the integral system of culture, by the manner in which they are related to each other within the system, and by the manner in which this system is related to the physical surroundings. It aims at an understanding of the nature of culture, rather than at conjectural reconstructions of its evolution or of past historical events...". Moreover, functional theory "... insists... upon the principle that in every type of civilisation, every custom, material object, idea and belief fulfils some vital function, has some task to accomplish, represents an indispensable part within a working whole" (Malinowski 1926:132,133). Understanding a culture therefore presupposes the understanding of such functions (for a synthesis of his ideas on functional theory see Malinowski 1944; see also Young 1987: 132ff). However, as Metraux (1968: 541) points out, although "the idea of function is a key concept throughout his work ... his use of the term was open-ended, exploratory, and subject to continual modification".

His theoretical thinking was very much influenced by Westermarck and Seligman, of course, but also by Wilhelm Wundt, Karl Bücher, James Frazer, Alfred Haddon, William Rivers and R.R. Marrett, by the French sociological school, especially by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss (though he did not like their abstract notions of society), by Richard Thurnwald, by Richard Gregory, Havelock Ellis, A.H. Gardiner, Julian Huxley, C.K. Ogden, Cyril Burt, S.S. Myers, J.C. Flugel, W. Powys Mathers, G.H.L.F. Pitt-Rivers, and J.H. Oldham (see Firth 1957a). He reacted strongly against the speculations of evolutionists and diffusionists like Lewis Henry Morgan, Herbert Spencer, Edward Burnett Taylor, Fritz Graebner, Wilhelm Schmidt and other representatives of the *Kulturhistorische Schule* and their *Kulturkreislehre*, against Levy-Bruhl's theory of primitive mentality, and against Freud's theory of psychoanalysis.

On the basis of his theoretical ideas about culture he studied a broad range of cultural aspects and institutions — mainly, if not almost exclusively, with respect to the culture of the Trobriand Islanders — and he challenged in, and with, his work many theories on core-concepts of anthropology such as kinship, marriage, exchange, and ritual.

For Malinowski, functionalism was a research tool, "the prerequisite for field-work and for the comparative analysis of phenomena in various cultures" (Malinowski 1944: 175), and therefore his theory had to include a general theory of how to do fieldwork.

3. Fieldwork

Malinowski was not the first anthropologist who did intensive field research — Lewis H. Morgan studied the Iroquois, Franz Boas the Kwakiutl, Carl Strehlow as well as Spencer and Gillen Australian Aborigines in the field — but through "his example and teaching, fieldwork became the 'constitutive experience' of anthropology, the

'central rite of the tribe'" (Young 1987: 124). As Leach (1957: 120) points out so aptly, Malinowski, the 'fanatical theoretical empiricist', developed a field technique that was unique because of the "severely curtailed use of the professional informant" and because of "the theoretical assumption that the total field of data under the observation of the field worker must somehow fit together and make sense". He was convinced that observation without theory is impossible. However, he also insisted on the principle that theory can only be falsified or verified on the basis of the observed and that the observed will always lead to a refinement or to a reformulation of basic assumptions in the field researcher's theory. Already in his 1916 article *Baloma — the Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands* Malinowski (1974: 237f.) emphasized that the traditional gathering of 'pure facts' in the field is 'pure 'collectioneering' of data' if it is not accompanied by "the interpretation which sees in the endless diversity of facts general laws; which severs the essential from the irrelevant; which classifies and orders phenomena, and puts them into mutual relationship". Thus, "field work consists only and exclusively in the interpretation of the chaotic social reality, in subordinating it to general rules". In his introduction to the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* he clearly formulates the basic lines of his approach to field research and the final goal of an ethnographer:

.. the goal of ethnographic fieldwork must be approached through three avenues:

1. *The organisation of the tribe, and the anatomy of its culture* must be recorded in firm clear outline. The method of *concrete statistical documentation* is the means through which such an outline has to be given.
2. Within this frame, the *imponderabilia of actual life*, and *the type of behaviour* have to be filled in. They have to be collected through minute, detailed observations, in the form of some sort of ethnographic diary, made possible by close contact with native life.
3. A collection of ethnographic statements, characteristic narratives, typical utterances, items of folklore and magical formulae has to be given as a *corpus inscriptum*, as documents of native mentality.

These three lines of approach lead to the final goal, of which an Ethnographer should never lose sight. This goal is, briefly, to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world. We have to study man, and we must study what concerns him most intimately, that is, the hold which life has on him.... In each culture we find different institutions... To study the institutions, customs, and codes or to study the behaviour and mentality without the subjective desire of feeling by what these people live, of realising the substance of their happiness — is, in my opinion, to miss the greatest reward which we can hope to obtain from the study of man.... Perhaps as we read the account of these remote customs there may emerge a feeling of solidarity with the endeavours and ambitions of these natives. Perhaps man's mentality will be revealed to us, and brought near, along some lines which we never have

followed before. Perhaps through realising human nature in a shape very distant and foreign to us, we shall have some light shed on our own. (Malinowski 1922: 24f.)

Thus, Malinowski introduced the concept and the method of "participant observation" into anthropology, being convinced that "alien cultures had to be explored 'from the inside' to make most sense" (Young 1987: 131). That this ambitious concept necessarily puts field researchers in a position where they have to face the strains of field research is very explicitly and incredibly frankly documented in Malinowski's posthumously published *Diary* (Malinowski 1967), which Raymond Firth in his new introduction to the 1989 edition (re-)evaluates as follows: "It is not merely a record of the thinking and feeling of a brilliant, turbulent personality it is also a highly significant contribution to the understanding of the position and role of a fieldworker as a conscious participator in a dynamic social situation" (Firth 1989: xxxi).

Moreover, besides the anthropologist's role as a "participant observer", the ethnographer's linguistic competence in, and competent use of, the native language is for Malinowski another and an equally important basic requirement to fulfil the anthropologist's task "to give a full description of language as an aspect and ingredient of culture" and "to translate the native point of view to the European" (Malinowski 1935, vol. II: xxf.).

4. Theory of language

Malinowski became very much interested in linguistics when he found that he could not realize his project of writing a grammar of Kilivila because he had no linguistic training and because he was — rightly — convinced that the grammatical categories offered by the linguistic theories of his time did not fit for the description of a language like Kilivila (Malinowski 1920: 74, see also Senft 1994a). As early as 1920 he explicitly stated the following:

...there is an urgent need for an Ethno-linguistic theory, a theory for the guidance of linguistic research to be done among natives and in connexion with ethnographic study... A Theory which, moreover, aims not at hypothetical constructions — 'origins', 'historical developments', cultural transferences,' and similar speculations — but a theory concerned with the intrinsic relation of facts. A theory which in linguistics would show us what is essential in language and what therefore must remain the same throughout the whole range of linguistic varieties; how linguistic forms are influenced by physiological, mental, social, and other cultural elements; what is the real nature of Meaning and Form, and how they correspond; a theory which, in fine, would give us a set of well-founded plastic definitions of grammatical concepts. (Malinowski 1920:69)

Besides coining the term 'ethnolinguistics', Malinowski emphasizes in his first 'linguistic' paper that "grammar can be studied only in conjunction with meaning, and meaning only in the context of situation" (Nerlich & Clarke 1996: 320).

Malinowski's linguistic interests "centered on language as a mode of behavior and on problems of culturally determined meaning" (Metraux 1968: 524). The second volume of *Coral gardens and their magic* (Malinowski 1935) presents his "ethnographic theory of language". Before this he published two linguistic papers, one on *Classificatory particles in the language of Kiriwina* (Malinowski 1920; see Senft 1996:200f.) and one on *The problem of meaning in primitive languages* (Malinowski 1923; see Senft 1995b).

Malinowski developed his ethnographic theory of language mainly in connection with his attempts to translate the Trobriand Islanders' magical formulae. He realized that the Trobriand Islanders believed in the power of the words in the magical formulae: they used these magical formulae to reach certain aims with the firm conviction that they can thus influence and control nature and the course of, and events in, their lives. Thus, in the domain of magic language is doing something, it has certain effects, it has power and force. Malinowski (1922: 432) summarized this observation as follows: "Magic is ... an instrument serving special purposes, intended for the exercise of man's specific power over things, and *its meaning*, giving this word a wider sense, can be understood only in correlation to this aim". As Nerlich & Clarke (1996: 321) rightly infer, Malinowski explicitly equates here meaning with pragmatic function — and this is typical for his way of looking at language functionally and contextually with semantics as the starting point for linguistic analyses. He characterized his — pragmatic — theory of meaning as a theory that insists on the "linking up of ethnographic descriptions with linguistic analysis which provides language with its cultural context and culture with its linguistic interpretation. Within this latter ... [Malinowski has] ... continually striven to link up grammar with the context of situation and with the context of culture" (Malinowski 1935: 73). Malinowski was influenced by the work of the German linguist Philipp Wegener (Wegener 1885, see also Nerlich & Clarke 1996: 318) and familiar with the works of other linguists like Humboldt, Lazarus, Meinhof, Miiller, Jespersen, Paul, Steinthal, Tregear, Wundt, Oertl, Temple, and Tucker (see Malinowski 1920: 71f., 74f.). On the basis of this linguistic background speech is for Malinowski first and foremost part of the context of situation in which it is produced, language — in its primitive function — has an essentially pragmatic character (Malinowski used the term 'pragmatic' himself, see, e.g., Malinowski 1935: 45), and "meaning resides in the pragmatic function of an utterance" (Baumann 1992: 147). For Malinowski (as well as for Wittgenstein) the meaning of a word lies in its use. Thus, to study meaning one cannot examine isolated words but sentences *or* utterances in their situative context: "the real understanding of words is always ultimately derived from active experience of those aspects of reality to which the words belong" (Malinowski 1935: 58). Malinowski emphasizes that language — at least in its primitive function — has to be regarded as a mode of action (Malinowski 1923:296; see also Firth 1957: 94); and that to understand the use of a complex speech situation requires the understanding of the situation in which it occurred and the action it accomplished.

This position can certainly be described as a "radical functionalism and contextualism" (Nerlich & Clarke 1996: 323). Malinowski (1923: 296, 309ff) illustrates how the meaning of utterances can be determined in what he calls "the essential primitive uses of speech: speech in action, ritual handling of words, the narrative, 'phatic communion (speech in social intercourse)"; he emphasizes his main position as follows: "language in its primitive function and original form has an essentially pragmatic character; ... it is a mode of behaviour, an indispensable element of concerted human action ... to regard it as a means for the embodiment or expression of thought is to take a one-sided view of one of its most derivate and specialized functions" (Malinowski 1923: 316; see also Firth 1957: 94; Langendoen 1968: 21ff). Moreover, Malinowski is convinced that language "serves for definite purposes, that it functions as an instrument used for and adapted to a definite aim". Malinowski exemplifies the essentially pragmatic character of language by referring to two situations from his Trobriand experience — a fishing expedition (Malinowski 1923: 310-312) and the verbal guiding of a boat into a reef channel in complete darkness (Malinowski 1935: 58f.) — in which he noted that "words have to be uttered with impeccable correctness and understood in absolutely adequate manner in ... situations where speech is an indispensable adjunct to action" (Malinowski: 1935: 58). Malinowski sums up his analysis of the linguistic actions he observed during the fishing expedition as follows:

All the language used during such a pursuit is full of technical terms, short references to surroundings, rapid indications of change — all based on customary types of behaviour, well-known to the participants from personal experience. Each utterance is essentially bound up with the context of situation and with the aim of the pursuit, whether it be the short indications about the movements of the quarry, or references to statements about the surroundings, or the expression of feeling and passion inexorably bound up with behaviour, or words of command, or correlation of action. The structure of all this linguistic material is inextricably mixed up with, and dependent upon, the course of the activity in which the utterances are embedded. The vocabulary, the meaning of the particular words used in their characteristic technicality is no less subordinate to action. For technical language, in matters of practical pursuit, acquires its meaning only through personal participation in this type of pursuit. It has to be learned, not through reflection but through action. ... The study of any form of speech in connection with vital work would reveal the same grammatical and lexical peculiarities: the dependence of the meaning of each word upon practical experience, and of the structure of each utterance upon the momentary situation in which it is spoken. Thus the consideration of linguistic uses associated with any practical pursuit, leads us to the conclusion that language in its primitive forms ought to be regarded and studied against the background of human activities and as a mode of behaviour in practical matters. (Malinowski 1923: 311f.)

It is obvious that Malinowski here emphasizes and stresses "action at the expense of structure and system" (Nerlich & Clarke 1996: 333). He even argues further that this

"adaptation, this correlation between language and the uses to which it is put, has left its traces in linguistic structure" (Malinowski 1923: 327). Therefore, for Malinowski "the categories of universal grammar are reflections of universal human attitudes toward life and are brought out by the universally found conditions under which children grow up in the world" (Langendoen 1968: 27). Thus, these "categories of universal grammar must underlie categorizations implicit in nonlinguistic human behavior" (Langendoen 1968:36). In the second volume of *Coral gardens and their magic* Malinowski developed the central idea of his theory, namely "that the meaning of utterances is provided by the context of concurrent human activity" (Langendoen 1968: 30). He once more points out that "the real linguistic fact is the full utterance within its context of situation" (Malinowski 1935: 11). And he emphasizes "that the context of situation may enable one to 'disambiguate' sentences that are semantically ambiguous" (Langendoen 1968: 32; see Malinowski 1935: 32).

Langendoen presents a rather fair and competent criticism of Malinowski's linguistic views. However, he seems to underestimate the importance of what J.R. Firth (1957: 118) referred to as Malinowski's "outstanding contribution to linguistics", namely "his approach in terms of his general theory of speech functions in contexts of situation, to the problem of meaning in exotic languages and even in our own". Malinowski certainly had a major impact on English linguistics in the first half of our century. And within linguistics, anthropology and anthropological linguistics some of Malinowski's ideas about language continue to be thought-provoking, and — with explicit reference to Malinowski — social scientists have started 'rethinking context' (Duranti & Goodwin 1992).

5. An appraisal

Malinowski's work and his theory of language and culture has been amply criticized and discussed (Firth 1957b, Weiner 1987, Kohl 1987, Agar 1994, Nerlich, Clarke 1996:317-335). In what follows I will give an assessment and appraisal of the master of Trobriand ethnography on the basis of my own field research on the Trobriand Islands.

I cannot but completely agree with Michael Young (1987: 138) that Malinowski "was an incomparable fieldworker and master ethnographer". The only reliable linguistic data I found in the literature preparing for my first 17 months of field research on the Trobriands in 1982/83 came from Malinowski's linguistic publications and from his anthropological linguistic remarks in his ethnographic masterpieces on the Trobriand Islanders. Bits and pieces of Kilivila linguistics that I found in Capell, Lithgow, and Greenberg turned out to be either utterly wrong or extremely speculative (see Senft 1991: 27,46). Moreover, I had the quite romantic feeling when I first set foot on the Trobriands in 1982 that it was like stepping right into the picture so vividly

presented in Malinowski's Trobriand ethnography (Senft 1992: 68). I could easily verify major aspects of his exceptionally thorough ethnographic description of Trobriand culture in my own experience as a participant observer.

Although the Trobriand culture — as well as the Kilivila language, of course — have been affected by numerous changes since Malinowski worked and lived there (see Senft 1992, 1997a, b), I have always found it worth my while to check my observations and insights with Malinowski's publications. There are two excellent ethnographic restudies on the Trobriands. First of all Harry A. Powell's *An Analysis of Present Day Social Structure in the Trobriand Islands*, his 1957 Ph.D-thesis, "is envisaged as supplementary to Malinowski's published data" and presents "a theoretical interpretation of Trobriand kinship and marriage relations different from that developed by Malinowski" (Powell 1957: Abstract of thesis). Second, the results from the 1978 "Kula and Massim Exchange Conference" in Cambridge published by Leach & Leach (1983) present an excellent reassessment of Malinowski's classic study of 1922. One of the few ethnographic niches Malinowski left, the 'female world' on the Trobriands, was congenially filled by Annette Weiner (1976, 1988). It is extremely difficult to find other such niches (see e.g., Senft & Senft 1986; Senft 1994b: 65f) with respect to Trobriand ethnography (but not, of course, with respect to linguistic research on Kilivila). Moreover, I found it equally difficult to falsify major aspects of his ethnography. However, there is one — hotly debated — topic in Malinowski's description of Trobriand sexuality where I am convinced that Malinowski either made a gross mistake or played career politics' (or even took his peer group for a ride?) — I am referring to the controversy over Trobriand "virgin birth".

In 1983 my wife stayed with me for 11 months on the Trobriands. We then had no children, and after my wife had learnt to speak Kilivila, the women started to discuss contraception with her. The women of Tauwema told my wife that they had two means of contraception that are both based on a mixture of herbs that grow in the bush; to this mixture a little bit of water is added. Some women but also some men know how to prepare this fluid based on the herbal composition. Once the women had talked about this topic, I could easily verify this information with two of my male informants, namely with Weyei, the weather-magician of Tauwema (see Senft 1985a, 1997b), and Vapalaguyau, who both were very proud of the expertise which they had inherited from their ancestors; however, they did not want to show me how and with which herbs they produce this mixture (I respected their reservations and did not urge them for further information about something that is as personal and secret as magic). Anyhow, there are two modes of application for this contraceptive. Either, before the coitus the woman drips the fluid on a small sponge and then inserts it into her vagina placing it in front of her os uteri — the herbal composition is spermocidal and thus prevents conception. Or, the woman drinks the herbal composition in a more hydrous solution. The problem with this second mode of application

is that the ratio between the herbal mixture and the water is rather delicate: the contraceptive effect of the drink may either last for a few days only or for years — and if the herbal mixture is too highly concentrated it may even cause sterility. Such a long term effect of the contraceptive almost endangered the marriage of a loving couple — however, when we returned to the Trobriands in 1989 (with our then 2 and 4 year old children), the woman who six years ago poured out her troubles to me and especially to my wife proudly presented us her two children. (I would like to note here that the "yam or *Dioscorea*" — the most important part of the Trobriand diet — "was long known by certain Mexican Indians to have a contraceptive effect. In 1993 Dr. Russell Marker ... determined the molecular structure of diosgenin, a steroid substance with progesteronic effect derived from the yam root. Based on this information, Organon, a leading producer of contraceptive pills, uses the diosgenin from Mexican yam roots as the raw material for some of its products" (de Revai: 1992) — but this is just an aside). The fact that the Trobriand Islanders know about natural contraceptives and that this knowledge is traditional is — to my mind — a clear and convincing counter-argument against Malinowski's claim which he first made in his very first publication on the Trobriands in 1916, *Baloma; the Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands* (Malinowski 1974:220-237), which he used like a beat of a drum to introduce his "sex book" (as he himself and his first wife called it, see Weiner 1987: xxxii), and which he elaborates in Chapter 7 of *The Sexual life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia*, namely that the Trobriand Islanders are ignorant of the role of the 'pater' as 'genitor'.

Given Malinowski's excellent command of Kilivila and the incredible amount of magical formulae he managed to collect and to translate — texts that represent secret and inherited knowledge which was up till 1983 well guarded by the experts and almost exclusively bestowed on relatives (i.e., within the matrilineal line, see Senft 1997b) — it is very hard for me to understand why the master of Trobriand ethnography did not hit upon the fact of Trobriand natural contraceptives, but took the Trobriand "myth" of conception and "virgin birth" not as a kind of ideology with the function (!) to diminish discrimination of extramarital births and to allow obviously cuckolded men to keep their face (see Weiner 1976:122; Sprenger: 1997:61ff). Note also that the incident Weiner reports about a man who returns after his year-long absence to his village and to his wife and who reacts extremely jealous when his wife presents him with a new born child, is just another confirmation of the fact that this man obviously knew about physical paternity.

I can only explain this — for me rather open and blunt — mistake of Malinowski's in two ways. Either he became the victim of the Trobriand Islanders' love of making fun of people — with their metalinguistic vocabulary they also differentiate the so-called 'Biga Sopa', the lying or joking or indirect language (see Senft 1985b, 1986: 125) — and

they really took him for a ride, or — but this alternative is a somewhat nasty imputation — he used this "exotic" claim to promote his academic career even further. In her introduction to the latest edition of *The Sexual Life of Savages Werner* (1987: xxvii) discusses Malinowski's relation to psychoanalysis in detail and refers to Stocking (1986) with a footnote, in which she states: "According to Stocking (pp. 32-33) Malinowski's response to psychoanalysis may have been more than intellectual. Rivers, the most eminent figure in British anthropology, died suddenly in 1922, leaving a vacuum in leadership. Stocking suggests that because Rivers had a long interest in psychoanalysis, Malinowski in taking up psychoanalytic debates, strengthened his bid against the diffusionists William Perry and Elliot Smith, to become Rivers's successor" (Weiner 1987: xlii, fn. 19) — and the claim in 'the sex book' could then be interpreted as the final culmination of such a strategic move within academic politics (however, I want to emphasize that this assumption is nothing but a nasty imputation. An even nastier imputation would be to accuse Malinowski of having taken his peer group for a ride with this exotic fact' — I still find it extremely interesting and sometimes quite hilarious to note that — with the exception of Anna Weiner — all people engaged in this debate have never set foot on the Trobriand Islands).

However, this obvious mistake does not and cannot diminish Malinowski's incredible achievements within his Trobriand ethnography. With respect to the style in which he presents his insights and analyses of Trobriand culture I have to agree with Robert Redfield (1974: 9) who pointed out that no "writer of our times has done more than Bronislaw Malinowski to bring together in single comprehension the warm reality of human living and the cool abstractions of science. His pages have become an almost indispensable link between the knowing of exotic and remote people as we know our own neighbors and brothers, and conceptual and theoretical knowledge about mankind". According to Mrs. Seligman, Malinowski once said proudly "Rivers is the Rider Haggard of anthropology; I shall be the Conrad" (Firth 1957: 44), and I must confess that I read the books of the Polish ethnographer with the same suspense as the books of his fellow Polish novelist.

With respect to an overall assessment of Malinowski I would like to point out once more that he is one of the most important anthropologists of our century, that he is one of the founders of social anthropology who introduced the concept of "participant observation" into anthropology and who insisted on the ethnographer's linguistic competence in, and competent use of, the language spoken in the culture studied as another absolutely necessary prerequisite for doing sound anthropological research. It is extremely difficult to do justice to such a "protean character" (Firth 1989: xxi) like Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski in a rather short handbook article — the expected publication of Michael Young's biography on this great anthropologist and ethnographer will be more than welcome.

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