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Review

Under the Mosquito Net

By Clifford Geertz

A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term

by Bronislaw Malinowski

Harcourt, Brace & World, 315 pp., \$6.95

Coral Gardens and their Magic: I: Soil Tilling and Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands***Coral Gardens and their Magic II: The Language of Magic and Gardening***

by Bronislaw Malinowski

Indiana University Press,

Vol. 1 + Vol. 2, 350 pp., \$7.50

Ten years ago several eminent anthropologists, linguists, and sociologists who had, in one way or another, been students of Malinowski decided that he had been unjustly neglected since his death in 1942 and put together a collection of essays, each of which was devoted to a particular aspect of his work. But, as the writers were frank and competent, the result did rather more to justify the neglect than to end it. Meyer Fortes of Cambridge decided that although Malinowski wrote about Kinship incessantly, he really didn't understand it. S. F. Nadel indicted his religious studies as a simplistic "theology of optimism." J. R. Firth, though sympathetic to his aims, regarded his technical linguistic contribution as consisting of "sporadic comments immersed and perhaps lost in what is properly called his ethnographic analysis." Edmund Leach thought his theoretical writings "not merely dated [but] dead"; Talcott Parsons that he misinterpreted both Durkheim and Freud and had hardly heard of anyone else; Raymond Firth that he failed to grasp economic reasoning; Isaac Schapera that he was unwilling or unable to distinguish law from custom. Only on one point was there unanimous and quite unqualified praise: Malinowski was an incomparable fieldworker. Possessed, in Audrey Richard's words, of "unusual linguistic gifts, lively powers of personal contact and terrific energy," he "achieved a great measure of personal identification with the people he lived with." Pretentious, platitudinous, unsystematic, simple-minded, long-winded, intellectually provincial, and perhaps even somewhat dishonest, he had, somehow, a way with the natives.

Well now we have more direct evidence of just what sort of man this consummate fieldworker was. It takes the form of a very curious document, which its editors have decided to call *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, apparently in an effort to communicate that it is a diary in a queer sense of the term. Written, in Polish, during 1914-1915, when he was in New Guinea for his first expedition, and in 1917-1918, when he was finishing up his famous Trobriand research, the diary consists, for the most part, neither of a description of his daily activities nor a record of the personal impact those activities had upon him. Rather it depicts a sort of mental tableau whose stereotyped figures—his mother, a boyhood friend with whom he has quarreled, a woman he has loved and wishes to discard, another he is now in love with and wishes to marry—are all thousands of miles away, frozen in timeless attitudes which, in anxious self-contempt, he obsessively contemplates. For this man of "lively powers of personal contact," everything local and immediate in the South Seas seems to have been emotionally offstage, a profitable object of observation or a petty source of irritation. For more than three years, this "diary" suggests, Malinowski worked, with enormous industry, in one world, and lived, with intense passion, in another.

The significance of this fact for anthropology's image of itself is shattering, especially since that image has been so self-congratulatory. Indeed, for a discipline which regards itself as nothing if not broad-minded, it is most unpleasant to discover that its archetypal fieldworker, rather than being a man of catholic sympathies and deep generosity, a man who his Oceanist contemporary R. R. Marett thought could find his way into the heart of the shiest savage, was instead a crabbed, self-preoccupied, hypochondriacal narcissist, whose fellow-feeling for the people he lived with was limited in the extreme. (He refers to them continually in this diary as—lapsing into English—the bloody, insolent, or disgusting niggers, and virtually never mentions them except to express his contempt for them: "At bottom I am living outside of Kiriwina [the main district of the Trobriands, in which, physically, he was living] although strongly hating the niggers.") For the truth is that Malinowski was a great ethnographer, and, when one considers his place in time, one of the most accomplished that has yet appeared. That he was also apparently a disagreeable man thus poses something of a problem.

AN ICONOCLAST all his life, Malinowski has, in this gross, tiresome, posthumous work, destroyed one final idol, and one he himself did much to create: that of the fieldworker with extraordinary empathy for the natives. While intensive field research of the sort Malinowski perfected has grown, so has the notion that the success of such research depends upon the establishment of a peculiar bond of sympathy between the anthropologist and the informant, a bond usually referred to as "rapport." Unlike the missionary, the colonial official, the trader (all of whom Malinowski seems to have regarded as fools or worse) or,

nowadays, the embassy aide, Coca-Cola representative, journalist, and junketing economist, the anthropologist "understands the people," and, appreciating this, the people in turn reveal to him their innermost thoughts and feelings.

This unsophisticated conception of rapport is, of course, self-serving and sentimental, thus false. Nevertheless, some bond of sympathy is at the heart of effective field research; and the ability to encourage an informant, who has no particular reason for doing so, to talk with some honesty and in some detail about what the anthropologist wants him to talk about is what separates the gifted from the miscast in ethnography. The value of Malinowski's embarrassing example is that, if one takes it seriously, it makes it difficult to defend the sentimental view of rapport as depending on the enfolding of anthropologist and informant into a single moral, emotional, and intellectual universe. In whatever way Malinowski obtained the material for the more than 2500 pages of the major descriptive monographs which he produced on the Trobriands, he didn't do it by becoming one with the natives:

At 10 I went to Teyava, where I took pictures of a house, a group of girls, and the [food exchanges] and studied the construction of a new house. On this occasion I made one or two coarse jokes, and one bloody nigger made a disapproving remark, whereupon I cursed them and was highly irritated. I managed to control myself on the spot, but was terribly irritated that the nigger had dared to speak to me in such a manner.

In fact, the relationship between an anthropologist and the people he studies is inevitably asymmetrical, and radically so. The two parties come to the encounter with different backgrounds, different expectations, and different purposes. They are not members of a single community, a fact which no amount of murmuring about human brotherhood or the society of all mankind can really obscure. Their interests, their resources, their needs, to say nothing of their positions in life, are all sharply contrasting. They do not see things in the same way nor feel about them in the same way, and so the relationship between them is characterized by moral tension, a fixed ethical ambiguity. Most anthropologists are not so ill-natured as Malinowski, and indeed he seems (though this may merely be a result of his having also been franker than most) something of a deviant, if not an extreme case. But the fact that most good ethnographers are decent and reasonably pleasant men who like and admire the people they work with doesn't really change the situation. The noblest of anthropologists face the problem Malinowski faced: how to penetrate a form of life not merely different from but incompatible with their own.

WHAT SAVED MALINOWSKI, what kept him from sinking entirely into the emotional swamp the diary describes, was not an enlarged capacity for empathy. There is very little evidence in any of his work that he ever found his way into any savage's heart, even the least shy. The psychology is all generalized, the ideas and emotions all standardized. "The Trobriander" (or, often enough, "The Savage") does this or that, feels this or that, thinks this or that. Individuals appear only momentarily as often suspiciously apt illustrations of some general feature of Trobriand mentality. What saved him was an almost unbelievable capacity for work. For a man who complains in his diary almost every day of lethargy, boredom, illness, despair, or just a general inability to get anything done, he collected a staggering quantity of data. Not universal compassion but an almost Calvinist belief in the cleansing power of work brought Malinowski out of his own dark world of oedipal obsessions and practiced self-pity into Trobriand daily life:

As for ethnology: I see the life of the natives as utterly devoid of interest or importance, something as remote from me as the life of a dog. During the walk, I made it a point of honor to think about what I am here to do. About the need to collect many documents. I have a general idea about their life and some acquaintance with their language, and if I can only somehow "document" all this, I'll have valuable material.—Must concentrate on my ambitions and work to some purpose. Must organize the linguistic material and collect documents, find better ways of studying the life of women [domestic implements], and system of "social representations." Strong spiritual impulse.

The diary is laced with moral self-exhortation to leave off onanism, pawing native girls, and reading trashy novels and buckle down to doing what he was there to do. When this is combined with the constant theme of self condemnation, the book takes on something of the tone of a Puritan tract:

Got up at 7. Yesterday, under the mosquito net, dirty thoughts: Mrs. [H.P.]; Mrs. C. and even Mrs. W....I even thought of seducing M. Shook all this off...Today got up at 7—sluggish; I lay under the mosquito net and wanted to read a book instead of working. I got up and made the rounds of the village. [Studied barter trade.] I resolved absolutely to avoid all lecherous thoughts, and in my work to finish off the census, if possible, today. At about 9 I went to Kaytabu where I took the census with a bearded old man. Monotonous, stupid work, but indispensable.

Woke up late; under the netting a tendency to let myself go, as usual, which I mastered. Planned details of excursion to Kitava and thought about documenting [native trade]. Wrote down conversations...Conversations with [the island chief].

Moral tenets: I must never let myself become aware of the fact that other women [than his fiancée] have bodies, that they copulate. I also resolve to shun the line of least resistance in the matter of novels. I am very content not to have fallen again into the habit of smoking. Now I must accomplish the same thing in respect to reading. I may read poems and serious things, but I must absolutely avoid trashy novels. And I *should* read ethnographic works.

The total lack of "moral personality" is disastrous. For instance, my behavior at George's, my pawing of Jab., dancing with her, etc. is caused mainly by a desire to impress other fellows...I must have a system of specific formal prohibitions: I must not smoke. I must not touch a woman with suberotic intentions. I must not betray E.R.M. [his fiancée] mentally, i.e., recall my previous relations with women, or think about future ones...Preserve the essential inner personality through all difficulties and vicissitudes: I must never sacrifice moral principles or essential work to "posing," to convivial *Stimmung*, etc. My main task now must be: work. *Ergo*: work!

On almost every page one finds something like this. He has erotic fantasies of one sort or another, remembers his mother or his fiancée, is overwhelmed with guilt, and resolves, in spite of severe lassitude, to get down to business, which he does with a vengeance. He then feels, especially if the work goes well, exhausted but euphoric, and discourses, often with real eloquence, on the beauties of the landscape "toward which I have a voluptuous feeling."

THE ETHNOGRAPHY this expiatory approach to work produced was, as one might expect, detailed, concrete, comprehensive to the point of indiscriminateness, and—the word is inadequate—voluminous. "Working at my present pace," he remarks in one of his more optimistic moods, "I should come back laden with materials as a camel." He did, and each of his major works is an enormous encyclopedia of data on every topic related to its general theme, and even on some topics that are not related at all. *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, first published in 1935 and just now reissued (and the work Malinowski personally regarded as his best) is a prime example. In its 800 pages, divided into two not very closely integrated volumes, one gets everything from diagrams of house types, layouts of garden plots, and lists of yam exchanges to extensive discussions of Trobriand clan organization, agricultural rituals, gift exchanges, and gardening practices, plus (inserted between a chapter on "The Cultivation of Taro, Palms and Bananas" and one on "Land Tenure") a disquisition on field methods, and (in the second volume) ninety-eight magical texts in the Trobriand language complete with literal and free translations and commentaries. There are sections called "An Ethnographic Theory of the Magical Word," "What Industrial Specialization Looks Like in Melanesia," "A Walk Through the Gardens," "*Kayaku*—The chief and Magician in Council," "Hunger, Love and Vanity as Driving Forces in the Trobriand Harvest Gift," and "Fruits of the Wood and of the Wild," after which there is a lengthy appendix lamenting the amount of facts he failed to gather (for example, how often the natives calculate the number of seed yams per garden plot).

Malinowski's ex-students were right: it is this great corpus of material, in *Coral Gardens*, in *The Argonauts*, in *Crime and Custom*, in *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, in *The Sexual Life of Savages*, that remains as his monument. The rest—the biologicistic theory of functionalism, the contextual theory of language, the confidence theory of magic, the non-economic interpretation of primitive trade, the extension of family ties approach to social organization now seem at best feeble first steps toward an adequate conceptualization of culture, at worst dogmatic oversimplifications that have done more harm than good. His achievement was to compile a faithful, lifelike, and indeed moving record of a primitive way of life, against psychological odds that would have crushed almost anyone else. For if the Trobrianders are "bloody niggers" in his private diary, in his ethnographic works they are, through a mysterious transformation wrought by science, among the most intelligent, dignified, and conscientious natives in the whole of anthropological literature: men, Malinowski is forever insisting, even as you and I.

Or as he. The insight into Trobriand life Malinowski apparently was unable to gain by human contact he gained by industry. Closed off, by the peculiarities of his own personality, from reaching directly what, in *The Argonauts*, he called the final goal of ethnography, "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world," he reached it indirectly. Isolated, even estranged, from his subjects emotionally, he struggled to understand them by patiently observing them, talking to them, reflecting about them. Such an approach can carry one only so far. But it carried Malinowski farther than most because, in spite of his personal torments or because of them, he carried on the struggle so relentlessly. "Truly," he says in the concluding sentence of the diary, "I lack real character." Perhaps; but it rather depends on what is meant by character.

Notes

[\[1\]](#) Raymond Firth (ed.), *Man and Culture*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957.

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