

A Glimpse of Malinowski in Retrospect

After a seminar on Malinowski which I gave sometime ago at the Oxford Institute, the then editor of JASO asked me to give the gist of my talk in a short article and include some of the extracts which I had quoted from Malinowski's letters to me. The letters which I had received from Malinowski were all too few: mostly notes written when I was at the LSE just before the outbreak of war. What I include here are extracts from those written in connection with my book Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane. They are the only ones I possess and this must excuse what might pass for my egotism and vanity of which, of course, I have my due share. They give a glimpse of the man himself, his warmth, his sense of humour, and his capacity to take criticism. His detractors have frequently said that he would not accept criticism, and it is true that on occasion he did indulge in abuse and vituperation, particularly when as much as anything it was a matter of clash of temperament and personality. But there are all too few anthropologists of eminence who have accepted criticism with grace, however justified it may have been. Fundamentally, he was deeply diffident, as those who have read his Diary with detachment and his monographs with care will appreciate. However, my talk about him was not yet another evaluation of his work, though there is need for continual reappraisal. My essay in Man and Culture (ed. Raymond Firth, 1957) gave some assessment of his enduring contribution to fieldwork methods, to the wealth of the material he collected, the exacting standard it set for others, and the stimulus of his generalisations and theories at the time and indeed now. He was a great anthropologist, and if one adds "but", let us remember that that adjective is almost invariably followed by "but". So, butt me no butts!

This short piece endeavours to give some impression of what it was like to be one of his postgraduates at the LSE from 1936 to 1938, the climate of time and place, and the intoxication of it all. It was not undiluted euphoria by any means; that would have been monotonous and unproductive in terms of human interaction. And here, in true Malinowskian tradition, I must put myself into the context of situation. My first degree in anthropology was taken at Sydney University when Raymond Firth had taken over from Radcliffe-Brown, and Ian Hogbin had just returned from the field. Both had been students of Malinowski; both were friends of Radcliffe-Brown and versed in his methods and doctrines. We had Australian subsection systems (to my consternation and confusion), and also Tikopia and Ontong Java, and much besides. When, later, under Professor Elkin, I completed a library thesis on "Culture Change in Melanesia", Camilla Wedgwood who was my external examiner said: "Professor, she must do fieldwork and she must have an island." This was precisely what I wanted; but Elkin, who was an authority on Australian Aborigines, replied: "We know nothing about the secret life of Aboriginal women: I want her to study that." As the main thing was to get off the ground and to any field, albeit a subsection one, I agreed and went off to North-West Australia for eight months. The time was short, but money was scarce, I was an untried fledgling of 23, and one problem was whether I would sink or swim in the field. I swam! My next fieldwork was to have been an intensive study of a tribe in Western Australia, 80 miles by camel from the nearest town, Laverton. Unfortunately, when I arrived in Laverton I found that the missionary and his wife on whom I would have been dependent for supplies (by camel) had just arrived ill and would not be returning to their base for some time. The head of the mission in Laverton would have no truck with anthropologists whom he regarded as encouragers of devil worship (this included specifically Radcliffe-Brown and Elkin); so the only thing to be done at a moment's notice was to go back to the north-west.

In October 1936 I duly arrived to do my Ph.D. at the LSE - that Mecca then for all young anthropologists. Raymond Firth was my supervisor; and I was research assistant to Audrey Richards, who characteristically read and gave me advice about chapters of my thesis, and attended the seminar when, for Malinowski, I put some of her Bemba material on chieftainship into three columns for the analysis of social change. She commented, perhaps wryly, that she did not know there was so much in her material! The atmosphere of Malinowski's seminars was exhilarating, but to begin with overpowering for diffident postgraduates, and most of us were that. The first few weeks were agonising because, inexorably, would come the question: "What do you think of that Miss K.?" Paralysed, I would utter something barely audible and articulate, and then would be asked "to develop" what was, in many cases, a non-existent point. However, after the initial stages of 'arrested development', we did venture on criticism and the occasional frivolous remark. Like all students and indeed fieldworkers present, I kept a record of notes on papers and discussions at the seminars. One, dated October 1937 to March 1938, included comments and points made by Leach, Fei, Hsu, Kenyatta, Fadipe, Wilson, Stanner, Piddington and Margaret Read; in the previous session there were Nadel, Wagner, Stevenson and others. Not surprisingly all these students were considerably influenced by Malinowski's theories! Anthropologists, historians and writers passing through London and interested in anthropology and Malinowski dropped into seminars. There was a cross-fire of European languages, argument and laughter. In the first session, Malinowski was billed to give a series of lectures for postgraduates at 5 pm., one hour after the conclusion of his seminar. He gave only three lectures; thereafter and to our mutual enjoyment the hour was devoted to a continuation of the seminar after a break for tea at 4 pm. Along with anthropological seminars, some of us had the stimulus of attending lectures on sociology by Mannheim, and on history by Laski. All this was fed back into the 'seminar proper'. Nor was conviviality neglected. Raymond, Audrey and Bronio entertained frequently and lavishly at their homes; and there was one wealthy amateur who from time to time placed her car and chauffeur at Malinowski's disposal, and always had two or three bottles of vintage claret for him at her parties.

However, I fell from grace just before the beginning of my second session at the LSE, when Malinowski paid me the honour of inviting me to become his research assistant. Work with him would have been enormously stimulating and worthwhile, but time-consuming so I regretfully refused, since money was short and I had to finish my thesis and return to Australia by the end of 1938. For me the ice age set in, and giving papers at his seminar became once more an ordeal though my fellow Australians always came to my rescue, particularly on one occasion when I had to give a paper on subsections in north-west Australia. Malinowski glacially dismissed it as 'kinship algebra'. It was not: I am not at all mathematical; more importantly, the Aborigines had allocated me to a subsection and I had had to live the system in my relations with them.

When I returned to Sydney, my revised thesis was accepted early in 1939 by Routledge for publication as Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane. I wrote to Malinowski to ask him if I might dedicate the book to him; but, in view of the contretemps which had occurred in my last year at the LSE, and, more importantly, the fact that I disagreed with some of his theory, I thought he might not want the dedication. So I explained that I could not accept some of his generalisations in his armchair book, The Family among the Australian Aborigines (1913), and that I had reservations about his theory of culture: it did not explain how derived needs arose; it did not account for the diversity of institutions, and so on. I received the following letter, dated 7th April 1939 from Tuscon, Arizona, shortly before I was due to leave for New Guinea to do fieldwork (I had got 'my island' at last).

"My dear Phyllis,

Your letter of 5.iii.39 was a lovely birthday present on my sad 55th anniversary of the most calamitous event which befell in my life - except perhaps the one which preceded it by 9 months; or else my decision to become an anthropologist.

You know, my dear Child, that in dedicating your book to me you bestow a great honour on me. I can tell you that you are giving me real pleasure. I was really moved not only by the fact that you want to inscribe it to me but also by what you write in your letter. All about genius etc. is tripe no doubt, but then as you know tripe is our Polish national dish, and prepared and served as yours was (and is) it was very readily, greedily and gratefully assimilated. To push this metaphor as far as it can go (no ribald giggles please), I imbibed or ate or lapped it up, and the way to a man's heart is his stomach.

When a young, capable and attractive girl offers her First-born as to a God-Parent, it is a pleasant gift indeed (another metaphor). And seriously I know that the First-born, the Daughter (for surely the book is of feminine gender) will also be bright, attractive and withal solid of brawn and brain.

I am very much looking forward to see Her ('Aboriginal Woman') in evening dress or full dress (or isn't it negligee?) and shall look forward to getting an inscribed copy. Is She going to be more 'sacred' or 'profane' I wonder!

As you can see my second childhood (metaphor) is coming on rapidly. I am trying to work and if I produce anything you'll get a copy. I sincerely hope you'll get over to New Guinea and do some work on Papuans or Melanesians. The latter are more pleasant to work with, the former more dramatic and certainly fuller of mysterious elements. I have been amusing myself in doing a bit of work on a detribalised group from Sonora (Mexico) which may be quite profitable.

With parental affection,
Yours,
B.M."

I had then a brief note of July 20 1939 to say he had written to Routledge to say the dedication was "OK" by him. And then:

"I am very keen to see the book as soon as it is ready. I shall be equally keen to hear more about your fieldwork, so please write to me as soon as things begin to crystallise. You know my passion for yams and other vegetables, together with magic and ceremony mixed into an Irish stew."

The next letter was dated May 10 1940 from Yale:

"My dear Phyllis,

I have just received ABORIGINAL WOMAN and your accompanying letter of February 20th. Please let me thank you very affectionately for dedicating this excellent volume to me. Having books inscribed openly and publicly is perhaps the most pleasant type of distinction, and in many ways I appreciate your dedication more than some of the others...

"I am writing this straight away after having spent a couple of hours with ABORIGINAL WOMAN in chaste though affectionate converse, but I hope to read the book more carefully and with a mind balanced by criticism as well as enthusiasm. I shall then report to you my disagreements, as well as bring out more concretely the points where my enthusiasm becomes effervescent.

I shall not write more fully, since from your short note I gather that you are leaving Sydney where I am addressing this letter, but I am not certain whether it will reach you there. Please let me know.

With affectionate thoughts,
Yours always,
B.M.
B. Malinowski"

And then comes a postscript in his handwriting:

"P.S. This morning's news from Europe - just heard over the radio - invasion of Belgium and Holland is so shattering that nothing else seems to matter.

B.M."

And here is the last letter I have from him, written May 18th 1940:

"My dear Phyllis,

I wrote to you a few days ago, but now your letter (probably February 8) arrives and I must send you a few words. I say 'probably' because your handwriting is a fit matter for an Egyptologist or some other specialist in deciphering difficult and complex texts.

As regards 'for the moment'¹, I have in truth not noticed it in a way which would touch my sensibilities. Now, as you know, 'Malinowski is as touchy as he is conceited' to quote the majority of my colleagues, pupils and friends. So the phrase cannot be in any way offensive. At the time I probably reacted to it as an indication that you plan and propose to develop Malinowski's theory and to replace it by something bigger and better. Indeed, I hope you will remember the first two pages of your letter to me. I am keeping it in my files and on request shall return it to you. The reason is that what you say is very much to the point and I hope you will write it out in full as a constructive criticism of functionalism and get in printed in Oceania. I would then be able to reply to it if I found I disagreed with some points and it would certainly stimulate me as well as others to solve some unsolved problems of functionalism. You have stated them very well. There is no doubt that the weakest point in my theory was the insufficient analysis of how 'derived needs' arise. There is also no question that your second point, that is, the development of the concept of institutions or hypertrophied institutions is something which functionalism sooner or later will have to deal. I would be very glad if the criticism came from you in a free and courteous way rather than from some of my pet aversions in the anthropological world, a X, a Y, or some other Boasine peep-squeak. From your point of view, a theoretical contribution would be extremely useful to you for your reputation at the present state of your career. So sit down and write out this article. I am also sending you a reprint of my latest article in which one or two points are perhaps more adequately and fully dealt with, although it is too short to be satisfactory.

1. I had in the Foreward to the book said: "This book offers no new theory of culture; for the moment I am substantially in agreement with that formulated by Professor Malinowski and others of his school!"

"Lots of affectionate thoughts,
Yours always,
B.M."

In October 1941 I went to Yale where Malinowski was Visiting Professor. There were seminars attended by postgraduate anthropology students and many others, but the gatherings lacked the sparkle and thrust of those at the LSE. Moreover, the War overshadowed everything, and he was working on what was to be published posthumously as Freedom and Civilisation. He was also increasingly interested in Mexico, and I was to go in mid-1942 to do fieldwork there and eventually collaborate with him on a book on culture change. He died in May 1942.

Malinowski could be inconsistent, maddeningly so; he had his prejudices - but that goes for most. He was a great teacher. As Firth has said of him: "his constant question was: 'Where does the real problem lie?' And he saw it always not in terms of fine-spun academic theories, but arising out of behaviour of ordinary human beings." And, as I myself said in the same volume,² "In passing from one dimension to another, from the technological to the structural or the ideological, Malinowski has his own criteria of relevance and these are determined by the scientific rigour which he considers necessary for the documentation of his more abstract generalisations... He is never guilty of concocting what Postan... has called 'a soufflé of whipped postulates'... He provides us with a wealth of information on native incentives, values and attitudes, on the tensions and conflicts which underlie the operation of structural principles, and on 'the amplitude of deviation' from the norm. In so doing he has drawn attention to a range of problems which increasingly are demanding the attention of anthropologists."

Phyllis M. Kaberry

2. Raymond Firth, ed., Man and Culture, 1957, p.8; pp.85 and 86