

UC Santa Barbara

CSISS Classics

Title

Bronislaw Malinowski, Identifying the Kula Ring of the Trobriand Islanders: The Role of Ethnographic Field Observation in Pattern Recognition. *CSISS Classics*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4rq9t7wv>

Author

White, Eric

Publication Date

2003



**Bronislaw Malinowski: Identifying the Kula Ring of the Trobriand Islanders:
The Role of Ethnographic Field Observation in Pattern Recognition
By Eric White**

Background Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski (1884–1942) was a student at the London School of Economics from 1910–1916. He joined the faculty from 1913–14 and later returned in 1921 as a lecturer. In 1927 he served as the first Chair in Social Anthropology at the School. He taught classes at Cornell University in 1933 and at Harvard University, where he received an honorary doctoral degree in 1936. In 1939 Malinowski became a visiting professor at Yale.

He was one of the founders of functionalism in the social sciences and he shaped the fundamental methodology of modern anthropology. His spatial contributions to anthropology and the social sciences are two-fold. First he trained a generation of British anthropologists in the methodology of fieldwork and stressed the importance of living with a population. Functionalism, often considered his most important theoretical contribution, developed based on his understanding of how the Trobriand Islanders coped with and maintained social relations across vast stretches of ocean.

Innovation Fieldwork is considered to be an important hallmark of modern anthropological research. However, when Malinowski began his career anthropologists rarely went into the field or even saw the people that they were studying. Instead, most often they relied on surveys and reports generated from missionaries, colonial officials, and travelers. The few anthropologists who went into the field stayed at colonial outposts and had natives brought into them for interviews via an interpreter. Malinowski recognized the obvious flaws in this approach. He felt that it was not only necessary to learn the native language, but also to live with the subject population in order to develop a scientific understanding of the population. This revolutionary approach became eventually known as "participant observation," where anthropologists live and work with their informants. It was during his expeditions to the Trobriand Islands in 1915–16 and again from 1917–18 when he created this new approach for ethnographic fieldwork that remains the standard for modern research.

His approach to anthropology was based on functionalism and culture. Functionalism ascribes meaning, function, and purpose to the elements within a whole. Culture defines that whole, and it constitutes the entity in which the various functional elements act and are interdependent.

He sought to understand the islanders' ways of life in functional terms of how they created and maintained their society. It marked a radical departure from previous methods of fieldwork and it enabled new insight into the culture under study. Cultural anthropology focuses on factors including ethnicity, ritual, functionalism, and kinship. It studies them via fieldwork, structural analysis, and language.

Malinowski's understanding of functionalism was in large part derived from a system of balanced reciprocity that he observed while conducting fieldwork. This system is known as the "Kula Ring" and involves annual inter-island visits between trading partners who exchange highly valued shell ornaments. The goods used in Kula exchanges consist of two types: necklaces (*soulava*) and armbands (*mwali*). Neither trade item is particularly well made or crafted of rare materials. He inferred that the principal motivation for the enormous expenditure of time and effort involved in Kula expeditions to be non-utilitarian.

In the system, each participant is linked to two partners. One partner trades a necklace in return for an armband of equivalent value. The other makes a reverse exchange of an armband for a necklace. While each Kula partner is tied to only two other partners, each contact has an additional connection on either end of the distribution chain. This eventually forms the Kula Ring and this links more than a dozen islands over hundreds of miles of ocean. Malinowski reasoned that the expense and preoccupation with Kula trade must be functional in nature and most likely served to solve fundamental spatial problems in the Islander's lives. He argued that Kula Ring served three functions in Trobriand society. First, it serves to establish friendly relations among the inhabitants of different islands and maintain a pattern of peaceful contact and communication over great distances with trading partners who might or might not speak the same language. It provides the occasion for the inter-island exchange of utilitarian items. These utilitarian items are shipped back and forth in the course of Kula expeditions. Finally, they reinforce status, since the hereditary chiefs own the most important shell valuables and it is their responsibility for directing ocean voyages.

Combining ethnographic field observation with theory (functionalism), Malinowski draws linkages and meaning from spatial patterns and social practices. He established an approach to research that endures in modern cultural anthropology.

Publications

Argonauts of the Western Pacific, 1922

Crime and Custom in Savage Society, 1926

Myth in Primitive Psychology, 1926

Related Works

Carol R. Ember and Melvin Ember. 2002. *Cultural Anthropology*. Prentice Hall. pp. 97–102, 221.

Mari Womack. 1997. *Being Human*. Prentice Hall. pp. 51, 96–97, 408.

Joseph B. Aceves. 1974. *Identity, Survival & Change*. General Learning Corporation. pp. 185–188.

Alan R. Beals. 1973. *Culture in Process*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Paul Bohannan and Mark Glazer, editors. 1988. *High Points in Anthropology*. Knopf. Chapter 17

Links

[Malinowski Bibliography](#)

Copyright © 2001-2011 by Regents of University of California, Santa Barbara,
Page Author: Eric White