

Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski

Malinowski was an anthropologist from Poland and is one of the most famous anthropologists of 20th century. Malinowski at times is also known as father of Ethnography due to his extensive fieldwork in Trobriand Islands.

Birth & Education:

Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski (1884-1942) was born to an aristocratic and cultured family in Krakow, Poland. This environment provided him with a multilingual background and taught him a sense of worldliness. He received a doctorate with honors from the University of Krakow in mathematics and physics in 1908. Shortly thereafter, Malinowski was stricken with tuberculosis, and it is during his recovery time that he became enthralled with the field of anthropology. During his recovery he read Frazer's *The Golden Bough* as his "first attempt to read an English masterpiece in the original", and this was his inspiration. In 1910, Malinowski began his anthropological graduate work at the London School of Economics where he later obtained a doctorate in 1916. In 1918, Malinowski married Elsie Masson, the daughter of a University of Melbourne professor.



Anthropological Fieldwork:

Being a doctoral student, he was introduced to the people of Mailu and the Trobriand Islands with whom he would later spend a great deal of time researching. Malinowski was in the field when World War I broke out, and being an Austro-Hungarian national, technically was considered to be an enemy-alien. With common sense and cool heads prevailing, Malinowski was permitted to remain in the field instead of being detained. It is during these years that he gathered the majority of his information on the Trobriand Islanders from which his many classics were based.

Professional Life:

In 1921, he began teaching at the London School of Economics, where he later became the school's first professor of anthropology. Malinowski's teaching abilities were exceptional, and like Boas, he too trained an entire generation including E. E. Evans Pritchard and Raymond

Firth. While in the U.S., he did work with the Zapotec Indians in Oaxaca, Mexico during summer vacations and was appointed as a professor at Yale shortly before his death.

Fieldwork Tradition:

Malinowski changed the way fieldwork was conducted in anthropological investigation. His published works based on his experiences with the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea enlightened the anthropological fraternity and others on how culture, society and its people were to be researched coherently. He mainly stressed on the following while doing fieldwork: Intensive ethnographic fieldwork; Participant observation; and Communicating in the local language. The first two are similar to what Boas had proposed, with slight variance in them. Malinowski pointed out the importance of building rapport, staying for a long period of time (for about a year or two) and getting to know the society being studied as convincingly as possible. To guide in this, participant observation denoting the involvement of the investigator in day to day events and dealings is a must. Both staying with the respondents and taking part in everyday happenings would require the investigator to build a certain level of comfort and trust among the respondents, the hosts. This can be created by communicating in the local language which Malinowski believed to be of immense assistance. Malinowski's elaborate description of the practice of Kula ring in his celebrated, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) with the use of his prescribed fieldwork methods still remains the hallmark of ethnographic investigation.

Publications:

- ❖ The family among the Australian Aborigines: a sociological study (1913)
- ❖ Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An account of native enterprise and adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea (1922)
- ❖ Myth in primitive psychology (1926)
- ❖ Crime and custom in savage society (1926)
- ❖ Sex and Repression in Savage Society (1927)
- ❖ The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia. An Ethnographic Account of Courtship, Marriage, and Family Life Among the Natives of the Trobriand Islands, British New Guinea (1929)
- ❖ Coral gardens and their magic (1935)
- ❖ A Scientific Theory of Culture and Others Essays (1944)
- ❖ Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays (1948)

❖ Sex, Culture, and Myth (1962)

Contribution: Functionalism

He was strongly functionalist. This can be understood in following two ways:

- He believed that all customs and institutions in a society are integrated and interrelated so that, if one changes the other would change as well. Each then is a function of the other.
For example: Ethnography could begin from anywhere in a society but eventually get at the rest of the culture. A study of Trobriand fishing could lead to the ethnographer to study the entire economic system say role of magic, religion, myths, trade and kinship etc. as all these institutions are interconnected. A change in any of the part of society would ultimate affect the other. So in order to do a holistic study the ethnographer might have to consider other parts of the whole also.
- The second strand of Malinowski's Functionalism is known as 'needs' functionalism. Malinowski (1944) believed that human beings have a set of universal biological needs and various customs and institutions are developed to fulfil those needs. The function of any practice was the role it played in satisfying these biological needs such as need of food, shelter etc.

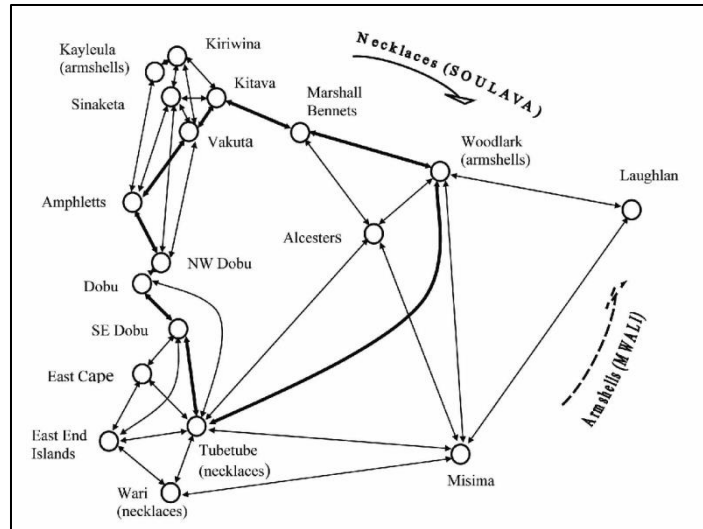
Due to the emphasis on biological needs in Malinowski's approach, his functionalism is also known as Bio-cultural Functionalism.

Kula Exchange:

First set out in detail in Malinowski's classic *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), the 'kula ring' – a translocal, long distance exchange network connecting islands off the southeast coast of Papua New Guinea (Figure 1) – remains a classic ethnographic reference point for the study of non-Western exchange practices and the development of exchange theory.

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.

Culture- a functional approach:

Malinowski said, '*culture is a need surveying system*'. Culture is a system which satisfies needs such as food, reproduction, security, health, protection etc. As Malinowski gave importance to individual needs so his functionalism is also known as '*Psychological Functionalism*'. The most basic needs are the biological, but this does not imply any kind of reductionism, because each level constitutes its distinct properties and needs, and from the interrelationship of different levels that culture emerges as an integrated whole. Culture comprising all those things – material and non-material – that human beings have created right from the time they separated from their simian ancestors, culture has been the instrument that satisfies the biological needs of human beings. It is a need-serving and need-fulfilling system.

Because of this role of culture in satisfying biological needs that Malinowski's functionalism is also known as '*bio-cultural functionalism*'.

Theory of Need:

In detail, his theory of need in his book *A Scientific Theory of Culture* (1944), this was published later. According to Malinowski, '*need is the system of conditions in the human organisms, in the cultural setting, and in the relation of both to the natural environment, which are sufficient and necessary for the survival of group and organism*'. In this definition of need, he was emphasized on the '*system of conditions in the human organism*', which involves the satisfaction of certain biologically determined impulses in a series of '*vital sequences*'. These sequences number eleven, each composed of an '*impulse*', an associated physiological '*act*', and a '*satisfaction*' which results from that act (see Table 1).

Table1: Vital Sequences Incorporated in all Cultures

Impulse	Act	Satisfaction
1. Drive to breathe	Intake of oxygen	Elimination of CO ₂ in tissues
2. Hunger	Ingestion of food	Satiation
3. Thirst	Absorption of liquid	Quenching
4. Sex appetite	Conjugation	Detumescence
5. Fatigue	Rest	Restoration of muscular & nervous energy
6. Restlessness	Activity	Satisfaction of fatigue
7. Somnolence	Sleep	Awakening with restored energy
8. Bladder pressure	Micturition	Removal of tension
9. Colon pressure	Defecation	Abdominal relaxation
10. Fright	Escape from danger	Relaxation
11. Pain	Avoidance by effective act	Return to normal state

Permanent vital sequences incorporated in all culture for instance, the impulse of somnolence accompanies the act of sleep, resulting in satisfaction by 'awakening with restored energy' (Malinowski 1944). Malinowski follows this eleven-fold paradigm with a set of seven biological needs and their respective cultural responses to satisfy needs of people. Malinowski identified seven biological needs of individuals (see Table 2).

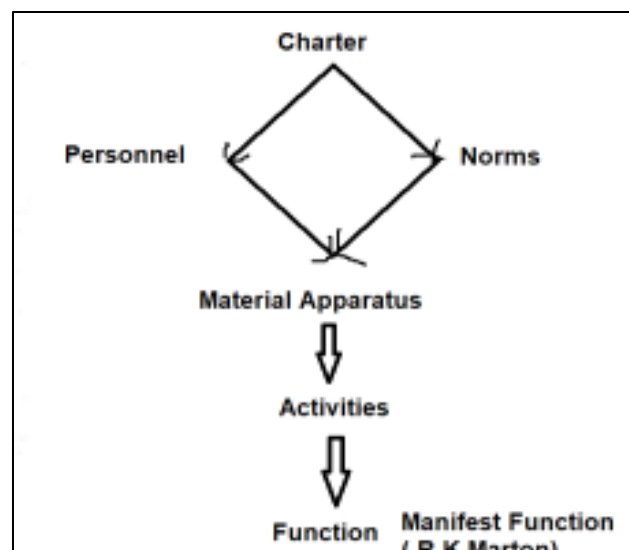
Table 2: Seven Basic Needs

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

For example, the first need is of food, and the cultural mechanisms are centered on the processes of food getting, for which Malinowski uses the term ‘commissariat’, which means the convoy that transports food. Similarly, the second need is of reproduction (biological continuity of society) and the cultural response to which is kinship concerned with regulating sex and marriage. From this, Malinowski goes on to four-fold sequences, which he calls the ‘instrumental imperatives’, and associates each one of them with their respective cultural responses. The four-fold sequence is of economy, social control, education, and political organization. From here, he shifts to the symbolic system – of religion, magic, beliefs and values – examining its role in culture.

Theory of Function:

He developed his theory of function to make his explanation more scientific and that’s why he demonstrated his scheme of function through a *charter* i.e. the aim or purpose of the society. The first aim of every society is its survival. Thus, according to charter, in every society, there are *personnels*, who have *norms* or a set of *values*. Thus, according to Malinowski these norms or values inspire the personnel for material *apparatus* which creates activities. And activities lead to *function*. This may also be shown in this diagram.



Criticism:

Malinowski's field research was thought by many to be a wonderful example of completely unbiased work by an extraordinary anthropologist. While it very well may be a wonderful collection of detailed data, it was hardly unbiased. While he was doing fieldwork in the South Pacific, he battled periods of depression and anger pointed towards the indigenous peoples. His diary (1967) repeatedly shows slanderous and racial remarks towards informants and his constant reliance upon the needle to battle his depression and lonesomeness. These discoveries came as a great shock to many within the anthropological community upon the release of his diaries. The amazing thing about Malinowski's biases is that he was completely aware of them and took the appropriate measures to ensure they did not interfere with his fieldwork. Not only did he do this, but he was also his own hardest critic.

Raymond Firth said that-

Malinowski considered it the duty of the anthropologist to render a careful and sincere account of his credentials and his mistakes in the field; and in Appendix II to Coral Gardens, he recorded his 'Confessions of Ignorance and Failure'. He admitted that a general source of inadequacies in all his material, whether photographic or linguistic or descriptive, consisted in the fact that, like every ethnographer, he was lured by the dramatic, exceptional, and sensational; and he castigated himself for not treating the 'drab, everyday, minor events with the same love and interest as sensational, large-scale happenings' (1957:79)..

Biased or not, Malinowski's works remain classics within the field.
