

# Malinowski

*Odyssey of an Anthropologist*  
1884-1920

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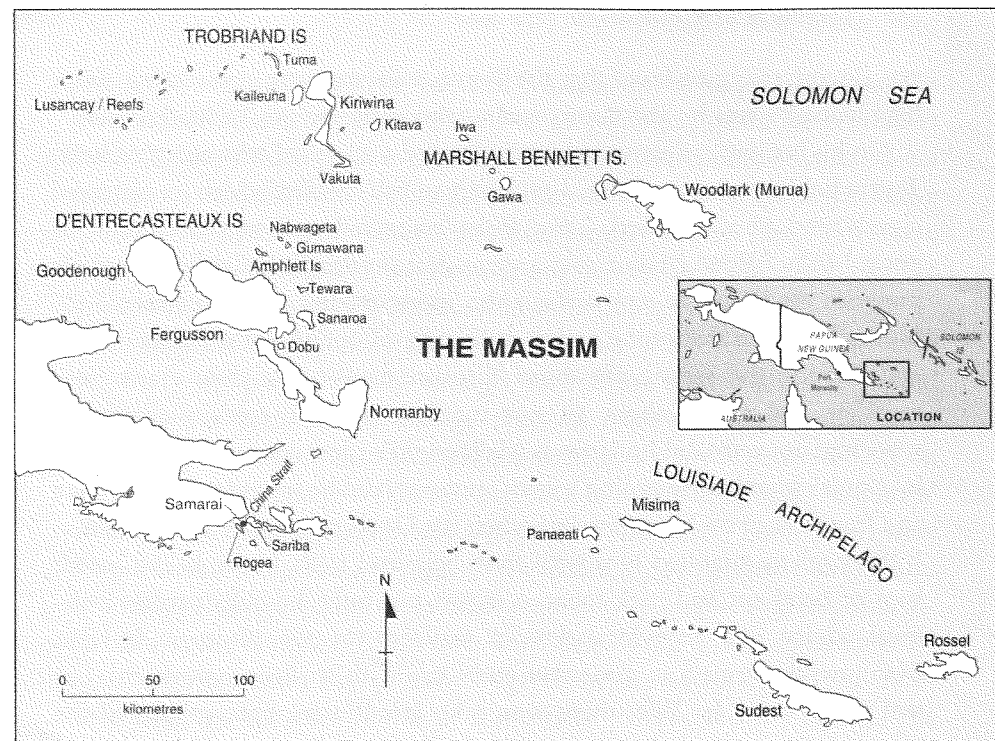
Yale University Press  
New Haven and London

Chapter 24  
*Return to the Islands*

*The traders' Trobriands*

At the Auerbachs' plantation, Gomaya greeted him and cadged tobacco. Observing that his dog-faced friend's feelings for him were – not unlike his own – 'utilitarian rather than sentimental,' Malinowski interrogated him for news. After an absence of twenty-one months he was keen to pick up the threads of recent events. Returning to the islands was like revisiting a dreamscape, for during his months of sickness he had despaired of resuming fieldwork. As he told Elsie later, 'I believed that I should never see Kiriwina again, nor did I want very much to go.'<sup>1</sup>

The *Ithaca* ferried him across the familiar green lagoon to Losuia, where he reported to Assistant Resident Magistrate Campbell. 'Old 30 percent' seemed less loathsome than before. Still, aware of his supreme authority in the islands, Malinowski was nervous. Billy Hancock's other nickname for Campbell was 'PC 49' – a Londoner's joke. It was a year since Billy had written to the Doctor in Melbourne, imploring him to make his headquarters at Gusaweta on his return, so it was to Billy's place that Malinowski sailed from Losuia.<sup>2</sup> He spent a week there, sorting out his gear and trying to readjust to the strangeness of Kiriwina. He became reacquainted with Billy and his nasal cockney voice. In Australia, Billy had worked on railways, in mines and stores; in Papua he had made and lost money on the Mambare goldfields before building up his pearling business at Gusaweta. He consolidated this by marrying the daughter by a village woman of another lagoon trader, Mick George. 'I always keep in mind Bill's basic problem,' Malinowski noted, 'his marriage with Marianna; his love for their children. He treats Marianna as a native, stressing her bronze complexion. . . . I thought that this was perhaps very clever on his part, that he expected the worst.'<sup>3</sup>



Map 4 The islands of the Massim.

Reluctant to begin work, Malinowski was overcome by 'emotional lethargy'. He dosed himself with quinine and calomel and sought distraction in trashy novels. 'During the first few days I was most disgustingly absorbed with myself,' he confessed to Elsie. On the fourth day he forced himself to visit the nearby village of Tukwaukwa, though he 'couldn't imagine' what he would do there. He struck up a conversation, however, and was soon surrounded by a chattering group. At his instigation an old woman began to recite a ribald folktale; others interjected with indecent jokes and 'the whole village roared with laughter'. Malinowski felt 'a bit vulgar', but at least it was a start.<sup>4</sup>

Next day he examined some fishnets and took notes on fishing techniques, dismayed to realize that his previous information had been inadequate, for it was now too late to supplement the short article he had already submitted to the Royal Anthropological Institute's journal *Man*. The 'feeling of absurdity' that had dogged him since his arrival began to fade, though it

was disconcerting to learn that the Teyava villagers were speculating about his identity – was he the same *dimdim* who came before, or his brother?

On his last day at Gusaweta he was granted a stroke of ethnographic luck. Teyava held a *wasi*, a ceremonial exchange of fish for taro, which he observed closely and photographed. Later Billy ‘corrected and supplemented’ his notes.<sup>5</sup> Billy helped Malinowski a great deal on this final field trip, and his presence on Kiriwina was perhaps the most striking good fortune of all. Not only did he shelter the native-surfeited ethnographer for weeks on end and provide the setting for those ‘Capuan days’ when they drank beer together and talked about (if not indulged in) the spicy pleasures of whoring; not only did he serve as Malinowski’s agent, storeman and packer – in acquiring and safeguarding ‘curios’; not only did he provide a mail service and free passage on his cutter; but when the Doctor was settled in Oburaku, Billy regularly supplied him with fresh eggs and milk, home-baked bread, bags of betel nut and stick tobacco. Again, not only did Billy proffer technical advice and provide darkroom facilities for the photography that Malinowski pursued so conscientiously yet with so little enjoyment, but had it not been for Billy there would be few if any photo-graphs of the ethnographer at work in the Trobriands. Those classic shots that ornament the monographs were Billy’s work: an imperiously posed Malinowski with the bewigged sorcerer Togugua; a squatting, pith-helmeted Malinowski observing children at play; a gaitered, white-attired Malinowski sitting with his aristocratic Tabalu friends, dangling a priceless *soulava* from his wrist.<sup>6</sup> Such images illustrated the methodological principle of participant observation and they were worth pages of text. For such services and ‘many acts of friendship’ Malinowski acknowledged Billy in *Argonauts* and again in *The Sexual Life of Savages* as ‘a trader of exceptional intelligence and one of the finest men I have known’.<sup>7</sup>

Not least, of course, Billy shared with Malinowski the ethnographic observations he had made over many years in Kiriwina. Yet it was another pearl trader, Raphael Brudo, who later put to paper an account of his own amateurish forays into Trobriand ethnography. Raphael and his Parisian wife, Simone, had been in the Trobriands for several years, Raphael having come to work the other side of the lagoon as Sam Brudo’s partner. ‘The trader is one who lives closest to the life of the native,’ wrote Raphael. ‘Obliged by his work to speak the language of the neighbouring villages . . . he would be without doubt in the best position to undertake their ethnography.’ It was an illusory expectation, however, for even the best-intentioned trader lacked the training to pursue ethnographic studies, and

in time he succumbed to the ‘habitual lassitude’ of the tropics. Nor was the government official any better placed to do ethnography, for he ‘represents the authority which inflicts fines and terms of imprisonment, and in his case, more than any other, it would be difficult for him to know the native because the latter must always humble himself before him’. For these reasons, Brudo concluded, ‘so many details had escaped observation in the Trobriand Islands until Dr. Malinowski came along’.<sup>8</sup>

Malinowski would loftily denigrate the other white residents who were ‘for the most part, naturally enough, full of the biased and pre-judged opinions inevitable in the average practical man, whether administrator, missionary, or trader, yet so strongly repulsive to a mind after the objective, scientific view of things’.<sup>9</sup> (He was prepared to make ‘delightful exceptions’ of Billy Hancock, Raphael Brudo and the Rev. Gilmour.) These views were for public consumption and presumed a readership sympathetic to the aims of anthropology; but there were other reasons why Malinowski felt uncomfortable in the company of his own kind, despite the ‘solidarity of identity’ based on a common European heritage. As he explained to Elsie, he oscillated between the two worlds of the ‘official’ whites and the natives. The government officers represented ‘red tape, lack of imagination, abuse of power, banalization of opportunities’, the missionaries ‘wowsersism, inherent falsehood about main aims in life’ and ‘nefarious influence over the natives’. White company was also a distraction and a drain on his precious energy. ‘Tropical non-sociability’ was a phrase he used to excuse his resentful response whenever whites appeared at the door of his tent: ‘purely and simply, it annoyed me to have other white men about, especially in “my” place.’<sup>10</sup> ‘I go to these people out of my purely brown company, with the impulse of something happening, of being moved out of my inertia. And I run away from them, because they have “rubbed me the wrong way”.’<sup>11</sup>

If the native was ‘not the natural companion of the white man’, neither was the government officer or the missionary the natural companion of the anthropologist. When Campbell dropped by, it irritated him ‘like a customs search on the border; a little afraid he might cause me some unpleasantness’.<sup>12</sup> Traders, too, tended to keep to themselves and generally resented the officials who regulated their activities. ‘I never go near him unless it’s on business,’ said Billy of Campbell, and the sentiment was probably reciprocated.

Concerning missionaries, Billy judged them according to their non-missionary behaviour. He wrote approvingly of the Rev. Davies: ‘a real good sort, absolutely none of the wowsers about him, like Johns he is more interested in his cows and calves than he is in the welfare of the nigg’s soul.’<sup>13</sup>

Malinowski captured something of the flavour of trader–missionary relations in a pithy vignette. Ted Auerbach developed pustules on his penis and approached the Rev. Gilmour for medication. ‘I have the clap.’ ‘What is clap?’ asked the innocent missionary. ‘Bloody pox!’ replied Ted impatiently.<sup>14</sup> As for anthropologist–missionary relations, a cynical Malinowski described for Elsie one of his rare visits to the mission station at Oiabia.

The three men [were] dressed in spotless white tunic coats. . . . I was in ragged trousers with white socks tucked over the trousers, pyjama coat, no tie, & a dirty coat over the pyjamas. . . . The conversation soon ebbed down & it was a kind of spiritual communion between the elder and the two adepts with a varnish of mystery & unction & something that remained unexpressed. A stifling atmosphere of a well organized secret society. . . . for the fostering of mutual welfare. They talked much about the war. . . . Then after the meal was over, came the prayers & Gilmour got off his chest a little improvised sermon, Methodist fashion, ‘blessing God’ because he makes things so comfy & secure & you always know that at the bottom of things there is a Jack in the Box specially favourable to Methodists. Then came a prayer for the Governor & all that make laws, that these laws might be good & a prayer for the good of the British Army (that it might behave decently) etc.<sup>15</sup>

Malinowski’s scornful criticisms of the whites in authority, including the missionaries, contrasted with his generally bemused tolerance of the traders. Although he knew himself to be a cut above them in the social order, his alien status brought him into sympathetic alignment with them in their mistrust of the government. They formed an alliance of snapping underdogs. His association with traders, however, exposed him to their irredeemably racist views and invective. Neither Murray nor Gilmour would have used the disparaging term ‘niggs’ in their letters home. It is telling that both Malinowski and Elsie seem to have adopted it without compunction.

For Elsie’s amusement, Malinowski was inclined to portray the local traders as Conradian characters eking out their sad, betrayed existences in tropical squalor. Norman Campbell, for instance, had been ‘a beautiful, fresh, energetic Scotch lad’ when he had come to the islands twenty years before. ‘Now he is gone half native, chewing betel nut, drinking whiskey whenever he can, absolutely cut off from civilization and – like the most loathsome niggers – covered with sores on his legs so that he moves about on the floor of his verandah in a sitting position.’ Campbell remained gentle, hospitable,

generous and honest, though married to ‘the most disgusting native hag, who has made of his trading house the brothel of the Trobriands’.<sup>16</sup> Elsie saw ‘pure Conradian romance’ in such relics of the colonial frontier.

Mick George, Billy’s father-in-law, was another such figure. Once the most successful trader in the islands, he was now almost incapacitated by asthma and sat crouched on his verandah ‘like Achilles in a drawing by Wyspianski’.<sup>17</sup> According to present-day Oburaku legend, Miki Gumagiriki (‘Mick the Greek’) had bought the land at Kiribi for one steel axe, a bag full of clothes and a box of twist tobacco.<sup>18</sup> In addition to pearling, Mick opened a trade store, planted coconuts and established a piggery. His fat European pigs, *Miki buluwka*, were soon in great demand – despite the displeasure of the Kiriwina chiefs. Mick exchanged piglets for pearls and agisted others with local villagers, allowing them to keep one or two from each litter. If government officer Raynor Bellamy undermined the chiefs’ power by abolishing their monopoly on coconuts, trader Mick George did likewise by breaking their monopoly on pigs. Hitherto, chiefs had also controlled access to betel nut, but white pearl traders soon supplied commoner villagers’ insatiable demand by importing betel nut from other islands. The chiefs naturally objected to these economic assaults on their prerogatives, but government officers overruled them.

Mick consolidated his relations with Oburaku by marrying a local woman, Ilumedova, thereby ensuring the pick of the pearls from local reefs. In time the villagers became dependent on his store goods and largesse, and Malinowski noted that he treated his wife’s village as ‘a kind of feudal dependency’. Mick evoked Malinowski’s youthful dreams of Greece:

I have got a latent yearning for the Mediterranean and his huge, lean, stooping figure and haggard, clumsily but characteristically cut face, make me think of some prehistoric Greek *Stimmungen* – of the followers and comrades of Odysseus. . . . Mick also has his yearnings and we feel a kind of freemasonic [sic] community of souls on the grounds of this Mediterranean Kultur-influence.<sup>19</sup>

Malinowski gave no such detailed description of any individual Kiriwinian. His thin caricatures of his Trobriand friends suggest that the cultural and colonial divide was too profound to allow of any ‘community of souls’.

Despite Mick George’s longing for the ‘fine days of yore’, when all the traders were ‘like brothers’ it is doubtful that there was ever any *esprit de*

corps among them.<sup>20</sup> Malinowski frequently noted their mutual backbiting. Mick spoke of Raphael Brudo as ‘that bloody Jew’, and Raphael reciprocated with ‘that bloody Greek’. Traders often poached on one another’s pearling sites. Thus Billy, in early 1919, writing of Kavataria: ‘I go and anchor on the patch & collect most of the pearls. [Sam] Brudo is some wild [sic], & tells the boys that he is going to “break” me next season, poor Sammy, he’s not a sport at all.’<sup>21</sup>

A sensible government regulation forbade traders to dive for pearl-oysters themselves. Malinowski noted that for the five village communities on the lagoon, pearl-diving provided a source of income that ‘produced a revolution in native economics’. Payment for pearls was in cash or a combination of European trade goods and native valuables.

For really good pearls the trader has to give native objects of wealth in exchange – armshell, large ceremonial blades, and ornaments made of spondylus shell-disks. . . . So nowadays each trader keeps a retinue of native workers who polish large axe-blades, rub spondylus shell into the shape of small disks, occasionally break up and clean an armshell – so that for savage ornaments civilized ‘valuables’ may be exchanged.<sup>22</sup>

It is clear from Billy’s letters to Malinowski that, like Kula, the pearling industry was driven by devious bargaining and double-dealing. First one had to compete for native labour, then for the best pearls, and finally for the best prices the metropolitan pearl-buyers could offer. It made good business sense to have a working knowledge of Kula. Pearl traders were in direct competition with one another, just as Kula traders of the same Trobriand village competed for shell valuables when they visited their exchange partners. An analogous system bound and divided them both – something that Malinowski did not seem to appreciate at the time. For their part, white traders inadvertently democratized Kula by giving ‘commoners’ access to the valuables they manufactured or imported, enabling them to ‘buy into’ Kula. Within a generation it ceased to be a pursuit exclusive to men of rank.

On Sunday 9 December, Malinowski sailed with Billy across the lagoon to Kiribi. Mick’s rambling house was surrounded by coconut palms and sat high on stilts facing the beach. Malinowski’s arrival was serendipitous, for Mick was about to hold a *sagali* food distribution in Oburaku. He intended to sponsor a *kayasa*, a pearling competition. Despite this novelty, during his few days at Kiribi Malinowski felt an ‘increasing aversion’ to the natives.

Lots of people had gathered from all over the island, but he was disappointed by his own ethnographic performance. He confessed to Elsie: ‘I found that my knowledge of the lingo is much less perfect than I imagined; then, suddenly, there cropped up lots of things of which I had not the slightest idea and which I could not work out with my informants.’<sup>23</sup> If he had been disheartened at Billy’s, he was even more so at Mick’s.

Billy accompanied him to Oburaku where they prepared to take photographs of the *sagali*. With ‘mixed feelings of cruelty and indignation’, he watched squealing pigs being singed alive, and while they were being butchered he elicited anatomical terms. During the spectacular *sagali* distribution, he observed that most of the villages of Kiriwina, Vakuta and even Kitava were called to receive their share of pork and vegetables. That evening Mick boasted how ‘Kiriwina had never seen such a *sagali*’. Malinowski did not comment on the interesting ethnographic fact that a resident white man had successfully deployed two Trobriand institutions, *kayasa* and *sagali*, to advance his business interests.

It is clear that the traders were an important and integral part of the social landscape of the islands, and Malinowski spent much longer in their company than he later cared to admit. Although this mixed bunch of Europeans (German-born Australians, ‘Turkish’ Jews from Paris, Scotsmen, a Cockney and a Greek) featured in his Conradian fantasies at that time, they are absent from the myth he confected about his life as an anthropologist in Kiriwina. Understandably, with hindsight they seemed irrelevant to any estimation of his achievement. For the record, however, Malinowski’s own final statement concerning his association with the traders must be contested. At the end of *Coral Gardens* he wrote, doubtless referring to both Trobriand field trips: ‘Only for brief intervals, all in all not more than six weeks, did I enjoy the hospitality of my friend Billy Hancock of Gusaweta, and of M. and Mme Brudo of Sinaketa. The rest of the time was spent right among the natives where I used to pitch my tent.’<sup>24</sup> For want of any diary it is impossible to check the 1915–16 trip, but according to his journal for 1917–18 (and where this is absent, his letters to Elsie), he spent eight weeks with Billy at Gusaweta, and three weeks with the Brudos at Sinaketa. He spent a further five weeks in Sinaketa staying in an old house of Billy’s, a short walk from the Brudos with whom he dined in the evenings. The nights he slept at Kiribi add up to yet another week. In the light of these figures it would be charitable to suppose that the ‘six’ in Malinowski’s statement ‘all in all not more than six weeks’ was a misprint for ‘sixteen’. It can

be calculated that he dwelt in his tent 'right among the natives' for only twenty-two of the forty-one weeks he spent in the islands between December 1917 and September 1918. To put it another way, his tent was folded for almost half his time in Kiriwina.

### *Tenting in Oburaku*

On Thursday 13 December, Malinowski returned to Oburaku. Guided by the village policeman, he chose a site for his tent a few yards from the muddy mangrove shore, next to the house of Toyodala and his pretty wife, Ineykoya. Mick's wife introduced her three brothers, who helped him with his first ethnographic task: to draw a plan of the village with its individual households. Oburaku was not arranged with the pleasing concentric symmetry of Omarakana, but consisted of an irregular cluster of seven *dala*-based hamlets. The sketch map was preparatory to a detailed census and genealogical mapping of the community that would intermittently occupy him during the weeks to come. He was soon complaining to Elsie that the census was 'damnably tedious work and my head is splitting after 2 hours of it', and to his diary that it was 'monotonous, stupid work, but indispensable'.<sup>25</sup>

It was in this settlement, conveniently close to Kiribi, that Malinowski chose to live for almost three months. His principal ethnographic objectives appear to have been threefold: to compare a non-ranked village with the chiefly village of Omarakana; to study a lagoon village reliant on fishing; and to explore the subtle differences between Oburaku and Omarakana in their horticultural and associated magical systems.<sup>26</sup> In addition, he sought to improve his command of the vernacular and apply more discipline to his methods of gathering and sorting information. As he told Elsie:

It was one of the main faults of my previous work that I worked on without any control whatever of what was done and what had to be done still. . . . I am going to set aside one day every week and go over the material and check it with our 'plans and problems' and see what there is gaping still and what must be filled out most urgently.<sup>27</sup>

He was referring to the many pages of questions he had compiled with Elsie's help. These often took the form of imperative instructions (such as 'describe landscape on the spot, so as to get the right *Stimmung*'). He had

also drawn up check lists of particular artifacts to collect and photographs to take, of places to visit and tasks to complete in each of them.

His susceptibility to the torpor of the tropics was about to be severely tested. Oburaku was tucked into the lee side of the island and, during the north-west monsoon, when the tepid air 'rolled along in clammy, indolent puffs', it had 'the atmosphere of a Turkish bath'.<sup>28</sup> He enjoyed 'tent life' more this time – he had 'simply hated' it on his first trip. 'It is rather nice to wake up and see through one end of the tent the blue lagoon and the green stripe of mangroves on the opposite island of Boimapou and to have a peep into the village through the other gable.'<sup>29</sup> But there was a disconsolate aspect to the lagoon that gradually oppressed him. Oburaku induced melancholy. Skyscapes provided some visual compensation, however, and he never tired of penning painterly descriptions of 'clouds with dirty-bronze reflections', of early mornings with 'chalcedony-coloured sky with patches of tea-rose', of sunsets of 'blazing brick-colour'.<sup>30</sup> Moonlight on the lagoon seemed to create an 'enormous space for thoughts and feelings' and gazing over it his thoughts would dissolve into shapeless reverie.

It was an hour's walk across the pinched waist of the island to Wawela on the sea side. On his first visit he 'cried with joy' at seeing the 'transparent water with a dark steely sheen in the distance and a line of black and white breakers'. The generous view 'created a kind of background of holiday spirits' quite absent on the lagoon. Once a large thriving village, Wawela had shrunk to a mere twenty huts; it was sad- and deserted-looking and surrounded by overgrown coconut groves. Even so, it promised to yield ethnographic gems. Wawela was an important centre of calendrical knowledge based on 'star-gazing', and its ritual experts dabbled in rain magic. Wawela was also reputed to be the home of flying witches, and walking back to Oburaku that night he sang 'Kiss my ass' to a Wagnerian melody to discourage the *mulukwausi*.<sup>31</sup>

Overcoming his fear of the dark, he would take out Mick's borrowed dinghy at dusk to row on the lagoon for exercise. 'I am always happy to be there in a melancholy and sentimental fashion,' he told Elsie. 'I can be myself and dream and long. . . . I can also think more freely and take a more "synthetic" view of my work.' In addition to the contemplative pleasure it brought him, there was a profound physical satisfaction to be derived from rowing. It was an activity that verged on sport – something he generally despised.

To row in a dinghy, on a slightly rough sea, with plain oars and rowlocks is simply heavenly. . . . Yachting on a small sailing boat makes me almost weep at the idea that I have missed it for 33 years of my life, and shall miss it probably for the rest of it. This and mountaineering (also a paradise lost for me) are the two sports I should love most.<sup>32</sup>

On 20 December he participated in what Europeans would have regarded as another kind of sport, though fishing was a matter of livelihood to the inhabitants of the lagoon. Malinowski was exhilarated at joining 'the most important ethnological event of this season' so soon after his arrival, and he thrilled with romantic joy at 'being with real *Naturmenschen*'. He outlined for Elsie the principle of participant observation:

It was another cardinal error in my previous work that I talked too much in proportion to what I saw. This one expedition . . . has given me a better idea of the Kiriwinan [sic] fishing than all the talk I heard about it before. It was also a more fascinating though not necessarily an easier method of working. But, it is *the* method.<sup>33</sup>

*I let the time do the rest'*

Christmas did not begin well. He awoke on 24 December to find that all the men had gone fishing. He tried to take photographs of women making mourning skirts but he 'blundered' with the camera and spoilt a roll of film. His frustration turned to 'rage and mortification' and by lunchtime he was in a chronic state of irritation. When he gave orders to Ginger it was with tears in his voice. In the late afternoon, two white visitors from Samarai appeared. Displeased, he endured their company on the long walk to Gusaweta, the 'poetic trip through the mangroves spoiled by their chatter'. Worse, his perceptions were influenced by what he imagined to be theirs: 'I saw and felt the utter drabness of the Kiriwina villages; I saw them through their eyes (it's fine to have this ability), but forgot to look at them with my own.'<sup>34</sup>

He arrived at Billy's place to find it besieged by villagers on the way to Oiabia. Wherever they established stations in Papua, the Methodist missionaries held sporting contests on Christmas Day; at Oiabia the tradition was at least a dozen years old. Malinowski peevishly complained to Elsie that there was a 'whole horde camped under Billy's house, the chosen ones

sleeping even on the verandah, snoring, chatting, chewing betelnut and making themselves a general nuisance'. There was no mail and his Christmas promised to be 'dull and monotonous and aimless'. He particularly longed for Elsie that night, reminding himself remorsefully of the sparkling Christmas celebrations of his Polish youth.

I have a chronic, almost subconscious pang of conscience about my mother, my friends in Poland and my country in general. I mean the callousness in which I am able to wrap myself up. . . . At every mail I am awaiting some bad news from Poland – I worry in a gloomy, dumb, philosophical manner.<sup>35</sup>

His premonition would be realized. His mother was unwell. Family legend has it that she cut her finger while killing a chicken for the pot and the wound festered. In what was the last of her letters to survive, dated 6 December 1918, she wrote: 'I'm weak, I have a problem with my hand – and at present I don't go out or write by myself.' She was anxious to know whether he was in New Guinea or Australia. 'What are you doing? How are you? Send me your photograph, even if self-made. Hugging you a million times.'<sup>36</sup> A cruel trick of fate delivered this letter to Malinowski several weeks after he had learned of his mother's death.

On Christmas Day, Billy went to Oiabia to watch the sports. Malinowski remained at Gusaweta and spent most of the day writing to Elsie. To escape the noisy household he sat outside in an easy chair, shaded by an umbrella held by a bored Ogisi. His Dobu manservant must have yearned to be at the mission compound, watching the canoe races and tugs-of-war, watching especially the short-skirted maidens in their holiday finery flirting seductively under the pained gaze of the missionaries. It did not trouble Malinowski that he too missed the spectacle. His general antipathy to sports, crowds and missionaries was enough to keep him away from Oiabia. But it was a curious dereliction of ethnographic duty to ignore what was going on there, to rely solely on Billy's account of what had already become a 'customary' event in the annual calendar. By confining his ethnographic interests entirely to 'traditional' Trobriand culture, he was inadvertently adhering to the agenda of the 'antiquarian' ethnologists he scorned.

On 27 December he reported to the government station at Losuia. Campbell and his immediate superior, Symons from Woodlark Island, made 'stupid, unpleasant jokes' about Malinowski's Austrian nationality. He hit

back in his diary. 'These fellows have such fabulous *opportunities* – the sea, ships, the *jungle*, power over the native – and don't do a thing!'<sup>37</sup> That night he returned to Oburaku and the four-hour walk gave him an opportunity to ruminate on his unsatisfactory attitude to work. '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.' Pulling himself together, he 'made it a point of honour' to think about what he was there to do. '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.'<sup>38</sup>

Looking beyond his fieldwork, he felt a strong 'spiritual impulse' to 'lead an intellectual life and live in seclusion, with E.R.M. for my *companion*. I visualize the happiness of possessing her so intensely that I am seized with polycratic fear lest something so perfect actually come true.'<sup>39</sup> As he put it to Elsie: 'Fate cannot be too good to us without planning some dreadful revenge.' Yet he also had a vague, equally irrational conviction that they had 'already paid the ransom to fate'.<sup>40</sup> Introspective insights such as this informed his anthropological theory of religion, which held that beliefs in Providence and Immortality were fundamental. If he found it impossible to believe in the latter, he obscurely believed in the first.

After the disruptions of the holiday period – as inescapable in the Trobriands as they were in Zakopane, London or Melbourne – Malinowski's life in Oburaku settled into a routine. Although tedious it was conducive to productive work. On a typical day he would rise between six and seven and, after taking tea and biscuits for breakfast, would make a round of the village. For a week or two he kept an ethnographic diary of daily village life, a running record of what people were up to. But he was soon dissatisfied with it for (as he explained to Elsie) 'it is not minute enough and does not record the *normal* so much as the *abnormal* and it is the first that really matters'.<sup>41</sup> Some mornings he attended *kayaku* – moots or meetings held by the men to discuss community matters concerning gardening, fishing and forthcoming exchanges and other celebrations. Then he returned to his tent to write his personal diary for the previous day. Beginning about ten o'clock, he worked for a few hours with selected informants. He was collecting as many magic formulas as he could – Trobriand culture was infinitely rich in them – having discovered that in the process of laboriously translating them with his informants, word by word and line

by line, many different things came to light: 'lots of superstitions, beliefs, taboos, technicalities and traditions [are] embedded there.'<sup>42</sup> Magic formulas, he believed, were the royal road to the Melanesian mind.

After a lunch prepared by Ginger, he would read a novel and take a nap (on particularly lethargic days he would take several); then he would work with pen and paper again in the late afternoon before taking Mick's dinghy out for a vigorous stint of rowing. Drifting awhile, he would dream of Elsie, the Clan and Melbourne. On other afternoons he would walk to the *raibwag* with Ginger and bathe in one of the blue pools of the limestone ridge. More often he would do Swedish gymnastics at a quiet spot just outside the village. In the evening, after what was usually a light supper – sometimes he only drank tea – he would work for another hour or two with informants before retiring under his mosquito net between ten and eleven, perhaps to read again. At least once a week he reviewed his notes and 'set in order' his papers, and at least once a week he visited other local villages for one reason or another: a *sagali*, a death, or in pursuit of an informant reputed to know a particular myth or magic spell. Occasionally he would row to Kiribi to see Mick, returning the same evening after a sumptuous supper.

He complained frequently of the tedium and monotony of the work in Oburaku. 'Writing down information, I have (1) a pedantic feeling that I must do *a certain measure* (3 pages, 2 hours, fill out a blank space in Chap. X or Y [of his draft monograph]), (2) too great a desire to skip wherever possible.'<sup>43</sup> When his interest waned, such time-serving was the greater part of ethnographic investigation. 'Work does not go brilliantly but I keep on without pressure and *I let the time do the rest*.'<sup>44</sup>

He had finished the notebooks he used on previous trips, and now used loose-leaf pages in a more efficient way. He began the systematic practice of drawing up schematic tables or synoptic charts after the model of his retrospective diaries. Such charts enabled him to picture his material and identify gaps. He now took down texts in 12-by-8 inch sketchpads. He wrote with the page in a horizontal position, leaving a wide margin on the left-hand side – just as he had made notes on his reading in Zakopane in 1912. Over time, each sheet – carefully numbered in an arcane mixture of Roman and Arabic numerals according to its place in the synoptic scheme of his draft monograph 'Kiriwina' – acquired in its left-hand margin a rich deposit of ethnographic and linguistic notes and *scholia*. In blue, red, orange or purple pencils, Malinowski cross-referenced these to numbered pages of



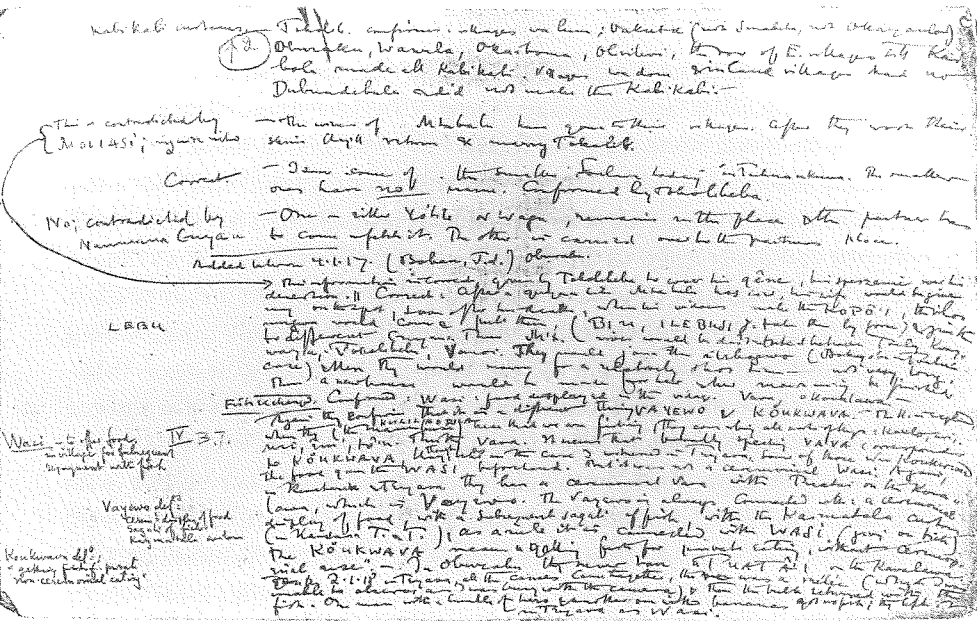


Fig. 3 Facsimile page of Malinowski's field notes in English and Kiriwini, January 1918, illustrating his method of working. For an exegesis of this page see M.W.Young, *Malinowski's Kiriwina*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998, pp. 143-4.

his notebooks, or to yet other texts. In this way, the sheets inscribed with verbatim texts became dense palimpsests. Heavily worked over, the texts sometimes became buried beneath their commentaries and expanding marginalia. No detail appeared to be too insignificant for his attention; vernacular terms sprout everywhere – in the margins and between the lines. These ostensibly untidy pages reveal Malinowski's infinite capacity for taking pains. As he wrote many years later, the ethnographer's 'supreme gift' was the ability to 'integrate the infinitely small imponderable facts of daily life into convincing sociological generalization'.<sup>45</sup>

He had returned to the Trobriands better equipped intellectually than two years before. His methods had been refined and he had discovered the integrating power of synoptic charts. His theories too had been sharpened. Language was the key to almost everything, and the sociology-of-knowledge approach that informed 'Baloma' promised a great deal. His aims were more clearly defined: 'the native's point of view' presented in terms accessible to Western readers, and the final theoretical goal of formulating 'laws' of social

psychology that would accurately describe the human condition in whatever cultural guise it appeared.

In tandem with his ethnographic recording, he gave thought, as always, to method. On 18 December he noted concisely: 'Yesterday while walking I thought about the "preface" to my book: Jan Kubary as a concrete [i.e. Riversian] methodologist. Miklouho-Maclay as a new type. Marett's comparison: *early ethnographers as prospectors*.'<sup>46</sup> Maclay, the aristocratic Russian scientist, deserves rather more credit. In addition to the year (1871) he had spent in pre-colonial New Guinea – in conditions incomparably more hazardous than those faced by Malinowski – he had actually visited the Trobriands for a few days in 1879, five years before Malinowski was born. Still, the latter acknowledged his fellow Slav as a precursor, a 'new type' of ethnographer – one, moreover, who documented the tribulations of life in New Guinea in detailed diaries.<sup>47</sup>

By now Malinowski was fully aware of the pioneering nature of his own fieldwork. He was not a 'prospector' or surveyor scratching the surface for ethnographic traces, but a miner digging for the mother lode, the well-springs of a culture. Ever since his student days in London (with Rivers in mind as a mentor), one of his broader objectives had been to place ethnography on a scientific basis, to give it the authoritative rigour of chemistry or physics. He would go beyond Rivers, whom he now regarded as having betrayed the cause by embracing ethnology as a quasi-historical discipline. In his diary he kept pondering the difference between history and sociology. The historical point of view was one of 'causality as in respect of *extraordinary*, singular things', whereas the sociological point of view sought '*law* in the sense of the laws of physics and chemistry'. In analogous fashion, "Historicists" à la Rivers' investigated 'geological history' by viewing societies as layered stratigraphically by discrete deposits of culture in time. For Malinowski, 'the physics and chemistry of history and ethnography' was social psychology.<sup>48</sup> Oburaku, then, was a laboratory in which he imagined himself to be conducting a kind of anthropological experiment.

*'The condition of the performer'*

'Anthropology is the science of the sense of humour,' wrote Malinowski in his introduction to Julius Lips's *The Native Hits Back* (1937). 'For to see ourselves as others see us is but the reverse and the counterpoint of the gift to

see others as they really are and as they want to be. And this is the *métier* of the anthropologist.<sup>49</sup> There is a cynical aphorism in the profession that anthropologists get the people they deserve (it can be inverted with equal validity). In Malinowski's case, he found in the Trobriands a society of tricksters and 'show-offs' with interesting sex lives, a passion for dancing and a keen interest in magic.

One of several nicknames given to him by Oburaku people was *Tosemwana*. It is a teasing sobriquet and was unlikely to have been used in his presence, so he was perhaps unaware of it. The prefix *to-* means 'man', the verb *semwa*, 'to put aside'. The man-who-puts-aside refers to a person who suspends his own identity in order to assume a different one, as does an actor. *Tosemwana* has mocking connotations, however. It is said of those who mimic their social superiors – as when a little boy struts around clutching betel-chewing equipment, or when a villager pretends to a grammatical command of English he does not possess. Thus *Tosemwana* can be a childish imitator, an amusing buffoon or a contemptible fool who affects to be someone he is not.<sup>50</sup> Malinowski perhaps appeared in all of these guises as he struggled with the vernacular, affected to chew betel nut, told ribald *kukwanebu* and in other ways emulated the behaviour of his bemused hosts. In a more sinister light, they saw how he closed the flaps of his tent whenever sorcery spells were being recited to him. While Oburaku people probably missed the irony of his performances, the nickname was a sharp and perhaps unflattering judgment on his participant observation. Would it have amused Malinowski, twenty years later, if this perception of him had somehow found its way into *The Native Hits Back*?

There is another sense in which Malinowski was a performer. 'Magic,' he wrote, 'is composed of three essential ingredients . . . the formula, the rite, and the condition of the performer.'<sup>51</sup> It is 'surrounded by strict conditions: exact remembrance of a spell, unimpeachable performance of the rite, unswerving adhesion to the taboos and observances which shackle the magician. If any one of these is neglected, failure of magic will follow.'<sup>52</sup> Being the receptacle of magic and the channel of its flow, the human body must be properly conditioned and purified. 'Thus the magician has to keep all sorts of taboos, or else the spell might be injured.'<sup>53</sup> Canonically, such interdictions concerned eating and sex.

Malinowski was well aware of his superstitious turn of mind and his propensity for magical thinking. His introspective monitoring of subconscious impulses nurtured, if not seeded, his theories concerning magic and

religion, both of which, he believed, arose and functioned in situations of emotional stress. Magic, he wrote, is a 'pseudo-science . . . based on specific experiences of emotional states in which man observes not nature [as in science] but himself, in which the truth is revealed not by reason but by the play of emotions on the human organism.'<sup>54</sup> Again, magic 'provides the spiritual strengthening of the individual mind and that discipline and preparation of the group which are necessary whenever the natives are confronted with a task difficult and not altogether controllable by knowledge and skill.'<sup>55</sup>

Performing as a pioneering ethnographer, inventing his role as he went along and not at all certain of the outcome, he was indeed confronted with a difficult task not altogether controllable by his own knowledge and skills. Regarding himself as an instrument of research – a keen eyewitnessing, participant observer – 'the condition of the performer' was crucial to his success as an ethnographer. Ever since his sojourn in the Canary Islands, if not before, he had tried to temper his physiology, master his body and subject it to his mind's control in service to an inchoate spiritual ambition. His ideal was a healthy body subservient to an alert, concentrated mind, perfectly atuned to its environment. There was a moral dimension to his instrumentality too: 'The fact that, in order to attain magical efficacy, we must pay undivided attention to our spiritual communion, demands what every theologian as well as the anthropologist or the man in the street would call a "clean heart".'<sup>56</sup> As he reminded himself in his diary, he was 'perfectly capable of an all but ascetic life' (desirable for a clean heart). Sensual enjoyment was acceptable in its place but it was important 'not to let it interfere with essential things'.<sup>57</sup> Among the most essential things, in his view, were the striving for integration, the 'deepening' of his subjective life, the mind's triumph through the economy of thought to theoretical clarity, and ultimately 'the smile of the Buddha' and a nirvana-like contentment.<sup>58</sup>

Towards the perfection of the performer he deployed his diary as a monitoring device. The purpose of keeping a diary 'must be to consolidate life, to integrate one's thinking, to avoid fragmenting themes'.<sup>59</sup> The chief instrument of investigation was his own observing, analytical self. Some components of this human apparatus he knew to be faulty. His physical body was recalcitrant, too often sluggish and distracted by wayward emotions. His health, the most fundamental aptitude, could not be guaranteed. (He suffered two bouts of incapacitating sickness while at Oburaku, and for at least a week was quite unable to work.) His linguistic facility fell short of what was needed. His mental attitude – another vital component of the research apparatus – was sometimes 'wrong', his motivation fickle. Elsie was at once

a mental support and a distraction. It was partly on her account that he wanted to 'succeed' in Kiriwina, but it was largely because of her that he yearned to be somewhere else. Yet other distractions conspired to prevent his full immersion in the field: the nagging question of his political status, the presence of the white traders, his obfuscating informants and rebellious servants. A sense of dislocation rarely left him – the jarring contrast between his dreams of civilization and his daily life among 'the savages'.<sup>60</sup> Whatever he later came to claim about his fieldwork experience (as one 'whose heart is in Melanesia,' he would write),<sup>61</sup> his immersion in Trobriand culture was only ever tentative and incomplete. It was impossible for him to transgress his profession's code and go native, and it would have seemed inconceivable to him even to try. It wasn't just the 'niggrophobia' – euphemistically, 'surfeit of native' – that occasionally gripped him, it was an inability to slough the skin of his European identity in the cause of ethnography. To that extent he was an incomplete Trickster, a failed Tokosikuna.

The irrefutable fact that 'man has a body subject to various organic needs' was a fundamental axiom of his mature theory of culture.<sup>62</sup> He dealt with his own body in a number of instrumental ways while in the field. He had to eat, sleep and exercise, and to some extent he could control the satisfaction of these needs. Although his body often betrayed him, the goal was to keep it in sound health. To this end, his faith in medications seemed boundless. He took calomel, Epsom salts and enemas to regulate his bowels, dosed himself regularly with quinine, aspirin and arsenic, and applied eye-drops daily. In moderation, physical exercise prevented listlessness and kept him alert: 'it calmed my nerves, restored my balance and put me in an excellent mood.' Gymnastics were also 'an essential form of solitude and mental concentration', though if overdone they induced 'a certain nervous tension' and even insomnia.<sup>63</sup> He bathed in the sea, too, though with some hesitation. He enjoyed the sensation of salt and sunshine on his skin, imagining that he felt 'the effect of salt on bones and muscles', but ever since he had almost drowned in the Canaries he had been a timid swimmer. 'As soon as I realize there is no bottom under my feet I lose my head,' he told Elsie. Fear of sharks deterred him from bathing in the placid lagoon, for 'it is well known that though blacks are practically immune, a white man runs a certain risk'.<sup>64</sup>

His diet was varied, a combination of local foods and European imports, though he appeared to eat little of the canned food that he had ordered so

lavishly in London. On 19 December he noted: 'What I eat at present: morning, cocoa, lunch relatively varied, and almost always *fresh food*. Supper very light, banana compote, *momiyapu* [pawpaw]; once I ate a lot of fish and felt no ill effects.'<sup>65</sup> He taught Ginger ('yelling and swearing') how to fry scrambled eggs in lard, and besides Billy's weekly loaf of bread, there were fried taro, crab soup, cucumbers and rice. He told Elsie that the three fresh foods he liked best were bananas, eggs and pawpaw.<sup>66</sup> He also relished taro: 'a splendid thing & I thank God for having created it, but even the best thing gets monotonous.'

It was one thing to regulate his bodily functions, it was quite another to control his sexual impulses. His excited imagination teetered between Dionysian surrender – letting nature have its way with him – and Apollonian balance. The refrain 'dirty thoughts under the mosquito net' was usually followed by a stern resolve 'absolutely to avoid all lecherous thoughts and achieve spiritual purity'.<sup>67</sup> But he forgave himself masturbatory fantasies that did not involve living women – they were not 'betrayals' of Elsie but mere physiological release, and although he did not approve of such weakness it was morally neutral. The part of his erotic imagination that he deplored was the one that conjured past lovers and other desirable women he had known: Annie, Ženia, Toška, Etonka, Nina, Leila and latterly Flo Gofton. Just occasionally did he rebel against his self-imposed moral strictures: 'I said to myself: "I don't regret my sins of the past, I wish I had committed more!"'<sup>68</sup>

### *'The shadow of death'*

On his first evening in Oburaku, Malinowski had been startled by a mournful dirge issuing from a nearby house – it was *walamsi*, 'a melodious, monotonous chant'. A woman had recently lost her son, and she punctuated the nights with her laments. Next day there was a torrential downpour and the crash of terrifying thunder, and two days later he was awakened by 'deafening *walamsi* in two voices'. The entire period of his stay in Oburaku was shadowed by death, for which the season of damp heat and violent squalls provided its own pathetic fallacy.<sup>69</sup>

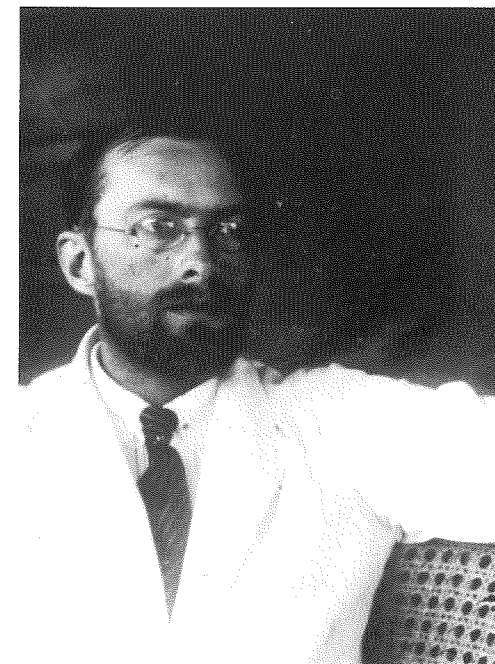
Several deaths in Oburaku and neighbouring villages provided opportunities for the exhaustive investigation of mortuary matters. He was already armed with a battery of questions formulated in Melbourne. The list

testifies to his thoroughness. 'Go over consecutive account of death. & mourning and inquire into native psychology of each detail.' Some of the details were unsavoury: why is mucous so avidly displayed by mourners; why is the corpse washed and by whom; why are its orifices stuffed before burial; why are certain kin unable to touch the corpse or grave; why do mourners stroke the corpse and fondle the nose and mouth; why are certain valuables buried with the body; why are certain bone relics treasured and others not? Under pressure from the missionaries, some of the more lurid practices had been abandoned and his notes to himself include: 'Go over a mimic representation of dying, so as to get the old customs, re stuffing of holes etc.' One cannot imagine Malinowski enacting the role; rather the hapless Ogisi would be induced to play dead. As for the innumerable mortuary distributions, the problems to be 'thrashed out' were legion, and in dialogue with the material from his first field trip they kept piling up. Another instruction to himself reads: 'Construct synoptic chart of definite death and mourning series.'<sup>70</sup>

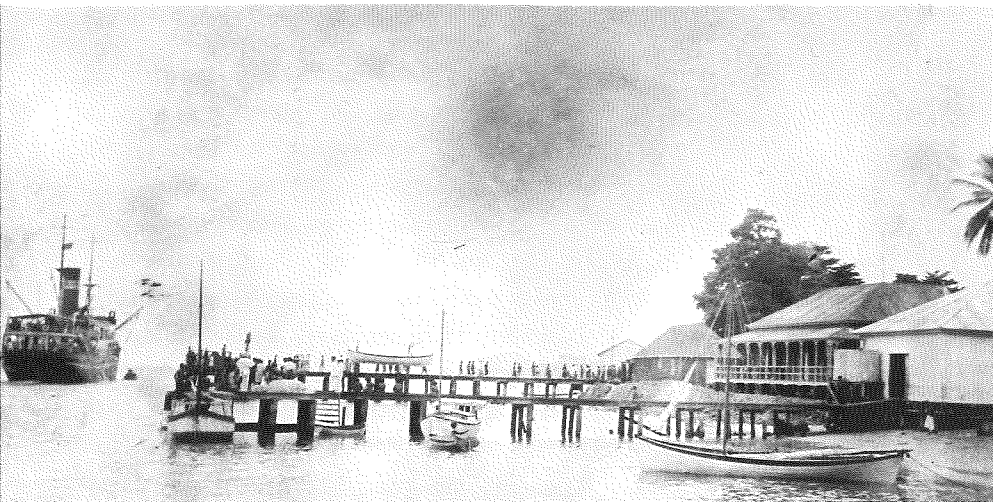
Weathering fits of nostalgia, on 3 January he fell under the spell of Swinburne's poem 'Tiresias'. 'It is the most forcible and clear expression of the feeling about heroic death,' he enthused to Elsie. He was thinking of Charles Matters and it brought his spirits to a low ebb. He saw his surroundings that day as from a great inner distance. A canoe gliding across his line of sight, the woman wailing next door: 'All this is so inexpressibly sad in its remoteness and detachment from my own life – I am stranded here far away from all that makes life.'<sup>71</sup> It was one of his periodic moods of alienation and 'a strong feeling of irreality'. Under the mosquito net that night he wondered if he would ever see Elsie again. 'Death, the bleary-eyed visitor, I am ready to meet,' sang sightless Tiresias. And the next day, Malinowski told Elsie that he was 'feeling almost hysterical . . . in such a mood, as would make a child capricious and crying'. His informants had been dispersed by a downpour; heavy low clouds crawled across the sky; there was a drumbeat of thunder, and he was irritated by the 'useless niggers' hanging around his tent. It attracted 'cripples, idiots and other sorts of drones, almost like a church gate in (civilized) Roman Catholic countries'.<sup>72</sup> Next day he reflected that his 'pessimistic temperament' never allowed him 'to enjoy life in a simple, unsophisticated manner' and he was full of forebodings. As he told Elsie, 'one always dreads all sorts of evils and especially death and annihilation, at a time when life is at an ebb.'<sup>73</sup>



25. Nina Stirling in the garden at St Vigean.



26. Malinowski in the tropics, c. 1914.



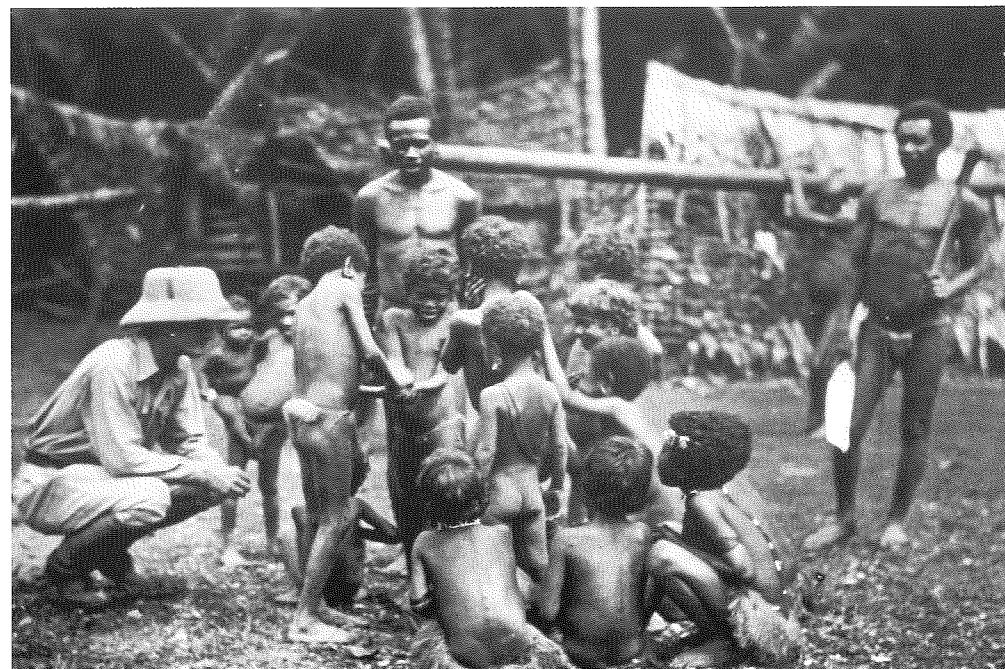
28. The *Makambo* leaving Samarai wharf, November 1917.



29. A Dobuan canoe in the Amphlett Islands *en route* to Kiriwina for Kula, March 1918.



30. J. H. P. Murray at Government House, Port Moresby, 1907.



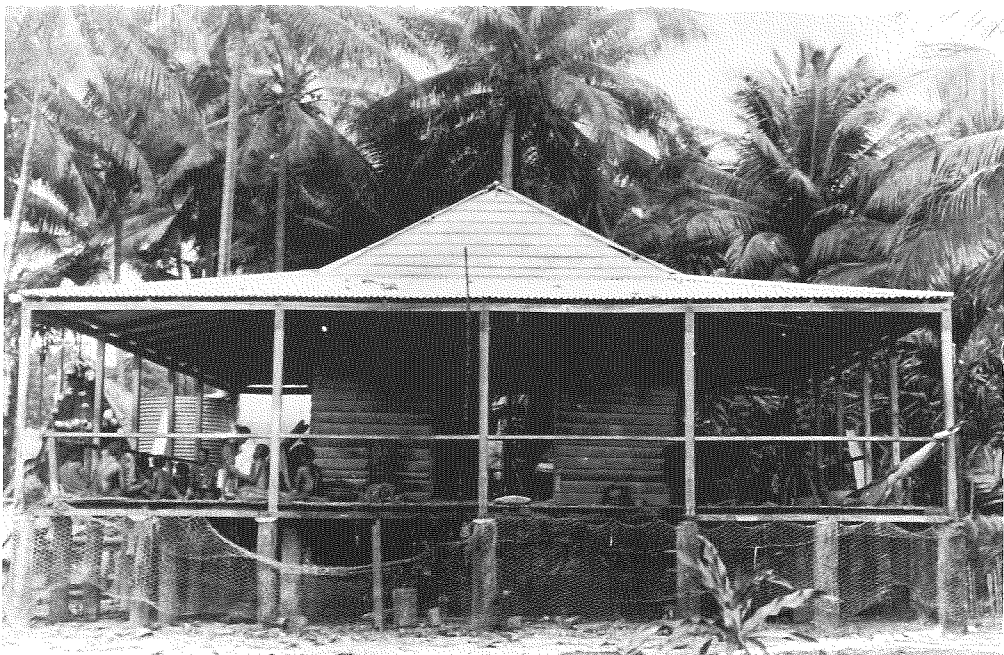
31. Malinowski watching children at play, Teyava village, Kiriwina, May 1918.



32. Malinowski's tent (*left*) in Omarakana. Chief Touluwa is on the right, his house behind him.



34. Ilakaise, the youngest of Chief Touluwa's wives, standing in front of her annual 'dowry'. The yam-houses have been filled by her maternal kinsmen. Omarakana, July 1918.



33. Mick George's house at Kiribi. Kiriwina Island, 1918.

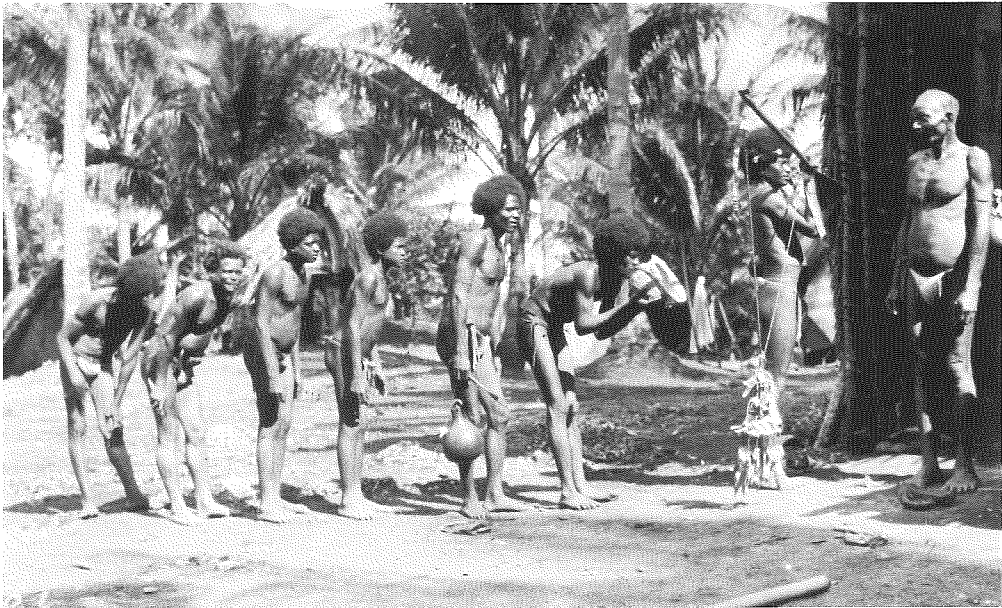




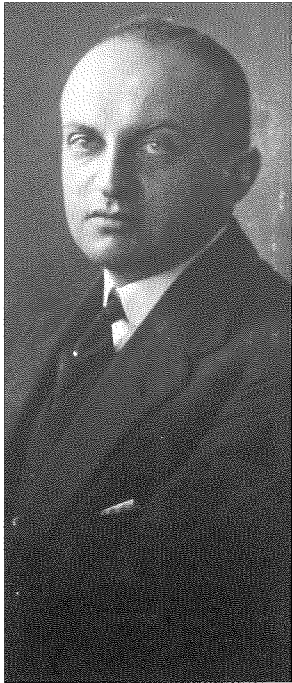
36. Billy Hancock inspecting pearls outside his store at Gusaweta.



38. Malinowski, Hede Khuner, Elsie Masson and Mim Weigall outside 'Carinya'. Melbourne, late 1918.



37. Chief Toulouwa ceremonially receiving a *soulava* necklace from his favourite son, Namwana Guyau. Next in line is Yobukwau with a conch shell, followed by Kalogusa with the chief's limepot, and an empty-handed Dipapa. Omarakana, November 1915.



39. Eli Malinowski.



40. Hede Khuner standing in front of the monument of the...

Superficially, his work seemed to be going well; he was recording magic formulas and translating them with excellent informants such as the *towosi* Navavile and the village policeman, Yosala Gawa. But he was dissatisfied with his 'mechanical' approach and lacked the feeling of 'the ultimate mastery of things'. Time-serving is the enemy of good ethnography. 'Toward the end of the day's work hidden longings come to the surface,' he noted; longings for Melbourne's 'elegant, well-dressed women' and most of all for Elsie.<sup>74</sup>

The day before he had seen some young Oburaku women, their heads shaved and their bodies charcoal-blackened in mourning, one of them 'with an animal like, brutishly sensual face. I shuddered at the thought of copulating with her.'<sup>75</sup> About his own face he was brutally honest.

The other day, when I looked at myself, with my face unshaven and my hair shorn, I saw the picture of one of those raw, impudent looking German prisoners of war, with its bulging, bald forehead, the small myopic bespectacled eyes, the small receding chin and badly designed nose, without shape, without line or meaning. Only lit up by this instrument-like, mechanical intelligence. 'A face like a scientific instrument of sorts' as Witkiewicz described Dr Ignatius Wasserberg.<sup>76</sup>

Not unlike, too, Staś's lampoon of Malinowski as the Duke of Nevermore.

On 19 January a man died in Kwabulo, and Malinowski, although feeling unwell, was taken there in a canoe. 'I went to the grave and talked about the cutting of trees and the wrecking of houses after a man's death.' Next day, the condition of his neighbour's ailing wife deteriorated. Ineykoya, tragically youthful, had tuberculosis and could scarcely breathe; she haemorrhaged, 'groaned horribly, and was apparently dying'. He thought about poor consumptive Nina and suddenly felt that he was deserting her. 'I wanted to be with her at any cost, to allay her sufferings.' He thought also of Elsie: 'I told myself: "*the shadow of death is between us and it will separate us.*" My betrayal of N.S. confronted me in all its starkness. . . . Kabwaku [a bird of ill omen] sings melodiously and clearly. – Death – all this is like an ebb tide, a flowing off into nothingness, extinction.'<sup>77</sup>

On 23 January another bag of mail arrived, bringing with it 'emotional turmoil'. A long letter from Elsie included her diary of their meeting, their blossoming friendship and eventual love. On his first avid reading the diary unnerved him: 'My portrait in it is not sympathetic, as I see it. I don't like



41. Elsie Malinowska relaxing in Whitfield, late 1919.





this fellow and I feel that she does not like me.<sup>78</sup> Letters from Nina pierced him with guilt. Sitting in a canoe on the lagoon he felt 'that this fundamental error casts a shadow over my life, over my relation with E.R.M. I shouldn't have started anything with her before definitively breaking off with N.S.' Her letters were 'especially beautiful and affectionate' and he 'simply howled with despair'.<sup>79</sup>

Ineykoya was laid out in the house, waiting for death and the voyage to Tuma. She had been decorated with shell valuables, her lips painted red with betel juice. Her husband, Toyodala, was crouched behind her, holding her pathetically in his arms and stroking her. She was almost unconscious and mumbled incoherently as the people who surrounded her tried to keep her thoughts clear. 'You can imagine,' Malinowski told Elsie, 'that the purely human aspect of the events got hold of me much more strongly than the ethnological.'

It was a mixture of the hideous and the touching, the publicity of it, the ingredients of human belief distorting and banalizing the tragic depth of natural events, the mixture of the inevitable real feelings and of a histrionic display dictated by custom. Again the sight of these two, clinging to each other – in true fondness or in obedience to tribal law? – threw such an unexpected and such a strong light on my thoughts of love and affection. Of two people, who love each other, one is bound to die in the arms of the other, or to die away from the beloved one, yearning and missing her or him.<sup>80</sup>

Ineykoya lingered for a few more days. Her shrieks tore at Malinowski's insides. 'The moon had struggled through the clouds and shone on the village from among the high palm-tops. . . . and somehow the whole serene, beautiful scene seemed to recede into a darkness to become engulfed by the shadow of approaching death.'<sup>81</sup> He thought: '*Desertion in the face of the enemy*', and felt that if Nina's life depended upon it he would have to sacrifice Elsie (and himself) and go back to her. He was confused as well as distressed. 'More clearly than ever I feel now that I love them both. . . . Aesthetically, I should never go back to Australia. Death, the ebb tide of reality, does not seem as terrible as a few days ago.'<sup>82</sup>

On Thursday 24 January, the day of his mother's death in distant Poland, he recorded a secret myth about canoe-carving, and after lunch took photographs of men roasting fish. Then he set out for Gusaweta. Restless

at Billy's, he returned to Oburaku the next day. Ineykoya died during that night. Some hours earlier, Józefa Malinowska had died, too, and although news of her death would not reach him for almost six months, Malinowski grieved through the vicarious death of a pretty young Papuan woman. At 3.30 a.m. he visited Ineykoya's deathbed. 'Deep impression. *I lose my nerve*. All my despair, after all those killed in the war, hangs over this miserable Melanesian hut.'<sup>83</sup>

### *'The heroic struggle against illness'*

Elsie had sent Malinowski an edition of Robert Louis Stevenson's letters. He identified immediately with the sickly Scot who lived a tropical idyll in Samoa with his wife and his mother, one who exemplified 'the heroic struggle against illness and exhaustion'.<sup>84</sup> To Elsie he wrote:

Stevenson's egotistic interest in his health and in his work is, alas, so damnably like my own case that I cannot help finding passages which I almost have said myself. . . . I was very much struck by a passage in which he sings the praise of his enduring, patient heroism in the continuous struggle with ill health and in his striving to do the work in spite of sickness and depression and failing forces. I felt like that myself so often and indeed had I not felt this note of heroism in this ignoble battle . . . it would have been impossible to go on.<sup>85</sup>

On Sunday 27 January he awoke with his skull throbbing and the feeling that something was wrong. 'Subjectively I am very indifferent, I don't believe in the possibility of danger, but if I died, it would be *an excellent way out of the muddle*.' On Monday he felt worse, and in the afternoon he collapsed, wracked by fever. He was beginning to believe that he might die. 'A sense of having perfect conditions for dying. Alone, calm, *air of finality*.'<sup>86</sup> He dosed himself with several medications and the quinine possibly saved him, though he preferred to believe it was a purgative. By Thursday he was feeling well enough to believe that he would recover. He felt an unjustified resentment against Elsie, and the 'complication' with Nina weighed heavily upon him. On Friday there was another mail delivery, with more loving letters from Elsie. But there was further aggravation in store with her account of Baldwin Spencer's 'slanders'. She was being circumspect, and Malinowski did not yet know the worst. With this mail came notification that Hubert

Murray had granted him an extension of his stay in Papua until 31 October. Until this point he had been in a state of uncertainty.

After a few recuperative days at Gusaweta, feeding on cow's milk and other fresh food, by 5 February he was able to concentrate again and resume his diary. It had been almost two weeks since he had written to Elsie. 'All this period lived literally from day to day. Impulse to read trashy novels. Through all this strong, unexpressed longing for E.R.M. Now I really can say she is the only woman for me.'<sup>87</sup> One night he dreamed he was living with Nina in Mały Rynek. 'Mama surprised and reproachful because I am not married to N.S. "She has only two weeks left to live." I, too, was very sad.'<sup>88</sup> Another ambivalent betrayal featured in his dreams the following night. He was in Germany 'fraternizing' with two crippled cavalry officers. He expressed his sympathy for German culture and told them that he had been a prisoner of war in England. A few days later, in an imaginary conversation with William Strong, he spoke about the shortcomings of the English: 'the embodiment of self-assurance . . . the whole world *in the palm of their hands*, yet how they lack enthusiasm, idealism, purpose. The Germans have a purpose, possibly lousy and thwarted, but there is an *élan*, there is a sense of mission.' Spencer's meddling in his affairs was undermining Malinowski's Anglophilia.<sup>89</sup>

Although at first he felt 'incomparably better' back in Oburaku, his fever soon returned. He fasted for a few days and again dosed himself heavily with aspirin and quinine, and purged himself with salts and an 'enema. He put hot compresses on his chest, too, for the sudden rises in temperature affected his lungs. This time, he told Elsie, he suspected 'regular malarial fever', though in his diary he proposed the more fanciful hypothesis of septicæmia. Still, he reflected, a high temperature 'is a wonderful invention of Providence: it narrows down your consciousness to a mere thread and you do not mind a bit if this snaps.'<sup>90</sup> On 11 February he felt well enough to eat toast and indulge himself with Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. Like *Pride and Prejudice*, it charmed him with its 'feminine tact, intuition, grasp of *inwardness of things* and longing for life' – though one of its less pleasant effects was to remind him of how 'wicked' he was.<sup>91</sup>

For another week he remained feeble, sweated at night, and suffered insomnia. He was tired and grumpy and lacked that 'vital thread'. *Villette* was his only solace. But he forced himself to work with the garden magician Navavile, and found that even short spells of concentration banished

his dejection and helped him break out of his 'prison mood'. He worked also with Molilakwa on sorcery texts and with Niyova on flying witches. Niyova, he told Elsie, was 'quiet, respectful, without any "dog" or other form of self importance . . . nicely spoken, volunteering information and relatively very uncadging'.<sup>92</sup> One evening he visited Tomwaya Lakwabulo, a seer who reminded him of Sir Oliver Lodge. The old man was in a trance – presumably communicating with his spirit wife-cum-daughter in Tuma. Malinowski had already recorded what Tomwaya purported to be the speech of *baloma*, and tried to determine whether it was an invented language or, as he suspected, mere gibberish. Tomwaya's dealings with the after-world fascinated him, and he returned to the topic in several publications, always with jocular scepticism.<sup>93</sup> As if subconsciously thinking about the traffic of spirits to and from Tuma, the next day he wondered what would happen if Charles Matters 'came back' to claim Elsie. It jolted him to realize anew how much she meant to him.<sup>94</sup>

There followed another cycle of physical debility and mental dullness. For several days he rose late, feeling as if he had been 'put through a wringer'. But he forced himself to work intensively for the sake of his self-respect: there were mortuary exchanges to observe and analyse with the help of informants' commentaries. The ethnography of death was proving productive, and he sketched a completely new outline of the 'Disease and Death' chapter for his monograph. 'I told myself that although my work was not amusing and not glamorous, it was not entirely pointless.'<sup>95</sup> He was also completely reworking his material on sorcery, telling Elsie that his earlier information was not only incomplete 'but downright incorrect'.<sup>96</sup> She was surprised, and her reply put into simple words the main plank of his revolutionary fieldwork methodology. 'It made me think how much absolutely false there must be in nearly all ethnology. So few know the language and stay a long time in the country, camping alone among the niggs, but still fewer, I should think, ever go back to test their conceptions with reality.'<sup>97</sup>

'I simply loathe the whole village and all its inhabitants,' he told Elsie on 21 February. It was a 'monotonous empty existence' and he could hardly bear the prospect of another eight months' fieldwork. He was only now recovering from the 'fits of terrible mental depression' for which work had become the only cure.<sup>98</sup> His depression was joined to a profound pessimism, and his paranoid hypersensitivity was detrimental to fieldwork – as he was fully aware:

Here, in my dealing with the natives, one bloody nigger who does not want to come & give me information or says that I don't pay them well enough (which is true, because I pay them miserably) will spoil my whole day & I imagine at once a general mutiny of the whole village, I get suspicious & irritable, swear at all the niggers & spoil really my chances of getting good informants.<sup>99</sup>

The work of ethnography itself was beginning to bore him, and he longed to be back in a library doing 'some theoretical work': 'I am a philosopher by temperament and I like "pure thinking" better than anything else and moreover I believe in its value. Just this work here teaches me that general ideas are the only thing for fertilizing observation and experimental research.'<sup>100</sup>

On Friday 22 February, he rowed to Gusaweta with Ginger. The place seemed sad and deserted. Mick George and Marianne were there, but Billy was in Samarai attending his sick son. Mick was supposedly looking after Gusaweta but Malinowski found pandemonium. 'The niggers have completely invaded the verandah, betel chewing, spitting, putting their blackened skins (those in mourning & always 50% are in mourning) on every conceivable place.'<sup>101</sup>

He had been pondering his reaction to Elsie's diary-letter: why had it 'unnerved' him so? One reason, he told her, was that he found himself 'most unromantic and uncongenial' in her description and could not understand how she could have come to care for him. 'It is almost as if this ungainly foreigner had used some *mequa* [magic] and not acted by his own personality.'<sup>102</sup> But it also occurred to him that Elsie might have begun to love him precisely because – not being in khaki and not marching off to war – he had felt unworthy of her. His love for her was still intricately ambivalent. So it would remain until he could exorcise Charles, against whose imagined heroism he measured himself. At least he could admit to himself that his lack of heroism was the cause of her devaluation: 'I loved her in relation to C.A.M. and I believed in her eternal faithfulness.'<sup>103</sup>

### *The turmoil of letters*

Between January and March the monotony of Malinowski's life in Oburaku was broken by irregular mail deliveries. He anticipated them with nervous

strain, for they invariably agitated him. As he read and re-read his letters the world beyond the islands crowded in. While they satisfied what he called 'a craving for strong and complicated impressions' and delivered 'a condensed dose of a friend's personality', the intrusion of another's presence was deeply unsettling.<sup>104</sup>

It is quite a magic effect which a mail has, at a long distance: suddenly all things visible and palpable vanish. The crowd of niggers around my tent become blurred and unreal; Wawela and Oburaku cease to be localized in space and time, and I see only the bundle of papers which exhale a peculiar spiritual fluid.<sup>105</sup>

While personal letters – Elsie's especially – reaffirmed his identity and maintained his morale, they were apt to increase rather than allay his yearning for civilization. Paul Khuner gently played upon his friend's nostalgia for Melbourne and for the life that used to be:

If you were to enter 'Carinya' just now you wouldn't notice much of a change. I am sitting in the study, Hede is lying on the front verandah reading Masefield's 'Gallipoli' . . . Your room, still officially called 'Malinowski's Room', is waiting for you, the *Schlafrock* [dressing gown] is hanging on the doornail. . . . Your spirit is constantly hovering over the place, whatever 'important' happens in the household is judged and discussed under the aspect 'what would Malina say?'<sup>106</sup>

On opening his mail bag, Malinowski would sort the letters to read in a certain order. Mama's first, scanned with urgency despite its being several months old, followed perhaps by Seligman's for news of his finances and the fate of his publications. Then the 'less important ones' from Leila, Mim, the Khuners, the Mayos, Pitt and Broinowski. (The trickle of Annie Brunton's letters had all but ceased, but he would have placed them in this category.) Finally, in a 'crescendo of sentimental intensity', he would open Elsie's neatly numbered envelopes, each bearing the censor's sinister stamp. Or he would leave until very last Nina's letter, dreading its innocently affectionate message. After reading them all, he would feel deflated, a 'characteristic dissatisfaction and restlessness'.<sup>107</sup> Mim Weigall caught the mood when she wrote: 'Don't you sometimes feel even worse just after you've read your mail and laid it down, than you did before? There is such a ghastly period of flatness after the reading, when the voices one has been listening to so eagerly suddenly cease, and silence falls for another month.'<sup>108</sup> Mim

was among those he chided for not baring their souls to him. She wittily repaid his reproach with a protest that Elsie would have endorsed:

My soul does not like going abroad without a concrete covering. Remember, please, that I am a British plum-pudding after all, with all the somewhat unappetizing mysteriousness of the genus. Prod in me patiently enough, & you might occasionally be rewarded with a plum; but do not be angry with the poor pudding because it does not flow & froth all over you like champagne.<sup>109</sup>

By far the largest correspondence was with Elsie, and between October 1917 and September 1918 they exchanged well over five hundred pages. Often her letters transported him; he read and re-read them 'in a trance, drunk – the *niggers* don't exist. I don't even want to eat or drink.'<sup>110</sup> Then he would spend the whole of the following day writing to her. He confessed that her letters threw him 'off balance', evoking a mad, restless longing for her.<sup>111</sup> She also sent him packets of newspapers. The *Argus*, redolent of Melbourne and thus fodder for his nostalgia, was also a form of local currency, for islanders used it to roll their cigarettes of black twist. 'You can buy virtue, extort secrets, pervert chastity with a number of newspapers,' he told her.<sup>112</sup> The arrival of the mail reminded him of his dislocated relationship to time. 'I have been brought out of equilibrium by this mail and put in touch with Actuality and the war and the outer world.'<sup>113</sup>

The news that Malinowski received in this way was weeks, sometimes months, out of date. Such delay added to his sense of alienation, of being outside the orderly passage of time. 'I just wait, endure, and time flows along beside me,' he complained to his diary.<sup>114</sup> His longing to be with Elsie simply aggravated the condition. 'Sometimes I can screw myself up to a kind of philosophical quietism and feel that it won't do to fret through this time of separation. And then again I cannot: I feel that I am here not living but waiting.'<sup>115</sup> The sense of being stranded appears to have been most acute in the parochial backwater of Oburaku. In Omarakana he could at least fancy himself to be drifting in the island's political mainstream, while in Gusaweta and Sinaketa his everyday intercourse with other Europeans connected him to a measured colonial time with its clocks and calendars, its determined routines and regularities.

In the limbo of Samarai he had been waiting to enter the field; in the limbo of Oburaku he was waiting to leave it. It is one of the most telling

paradoxes of his fieldwork that he experienced such chronic ambivalence about 'being there'. He had a persistent, worrying sense that 'real life' was going on elsewhere without him, that he was being bypassed by 'actualities', marooned in an ox-bow river bend. He was out of the war, out of civilized life, and the stream of time flowed around him. He waited like his homeland, the inert nation of Poland sidelined by Hegelian History, waiting for liberation and for real life to begin again. Yet it is arguable that his best ethnography was done during such periods, when he felt that time was annulled, when he could suspend his imaginary life elsewhere and enter wholeheartedly into the present moment of the islanders. Those were rare moments of immersion, when a joyful enthusiasm for ethnography took him out of himself.

It is arguable, too, that the key to his epoch-making ethnography and theoretical anthropology was a concept grounded in his dislocating experience of time suspended. Synchrony was the atemporal condition – the very bedrock – of his functionalism. Time present, not time past, was of the essence in his here-and-now ethnography. Synchrony, not diachrony, provided the methodological purchase, the Archimedean point, for his descriptive exploration of social institutions. Functionalism subordinated history to sociology. So his sense of being out of time in the field surely enabled his understanding of the perfect scientific ethnography as one grounded empirically in the ethnographic present, a timeless sociological construct rather than a conjectural historical sequence. Malinowski himself would claim that the 'functional method . . . was very largely born in the field'.<sup>116</sup> So it must be allowed that personal experience, too, led him to conceive of myth and history as ideological 'charters' for present-day social and political arrangements.

As Malinowski well understood, history was being made with a vengeance on the other side of the world. Battlefields were blazing while he fiddled with magic formulas for sailing and sorcery. Aside from the dull anguish he felt for his mother, what troubled him most was 'the problem of heroism' and a 'definitive regret' that he could not put himself to the test of war. It stung him afresh with every mention of Charles in Elsie's letters.

I recalled my superstitious feeling that if E.R.M. fell in love with me, I would have *mala sombra* in N[ew] G[uinea] – For one moment I thought that there is no room for me in her heart in the shadow of his glory. I wished that he had come back and that I had never met her.<sup>117</sup>

Elsie half-believed 'that fate had sent her and broken her to give happiness to Charles' before his violent end. Malinowski drew his own humbling lesson from this. What he was suffering in the islands was as nothing compared to the unimaginable horrors of Gallipoli.

I know that if I had had to go to war, I would have gone calmly without too much inner fuss. Now: place my everyday life in that heroic frame; be ruthless in relation to appetites and weakness; not to yield to depression and such digressions as the inability to take photos. Shake off clumsiness, yearning, sentimentalism. My love for E.R.M. can be, must be, based on the feeling that she has faith in my heroism.<sup>118</sup>

Many of his letters to Elsie at this period include expurgated transcriptions of his diary. It was as if he invited her to eavesdrop on his daily conversation with himself; though he allowed her to hear only snatches, of course, and the real diary was in a language she could not understand. In both diary and letters he frequently pondered his Polish identity and obliquely examined the roots of his patriotism. 'I'll surely be "an eminent Polish scholar";' was one of the more comforting thoughts that occurred to him while drifting in the dinghy. 'This will be my last ethnological escapade. After that, I'll devote myself to constructive sociology: methodology, political economy etc., and in Poland I can realize my ambitions better than anywhere else.'<sup>119</sup>

It sometimes worried him that he would be 'estranged from Polishness' if he married Elsie.<sup>120</sup> At one point he regretted that Elsie was not Polish, but then decided that it did not matter: 'I shall go back to Poland and my children will be Poles.' She had few such doubts about him. 'I'm so glad you are a Pole,' she told him. 'I couldn't imagine you anything else really.'<sup>121</sup> In time, Elsie would help him to achieve his ambitions and, crucially, help him decide that Poland was not, after all, the best place to realize them. Yet it had been his idea that she would adopt Polishness to the degree that he had already adopted Britishness. At the time he was testing her willingness to live in Poland:

you represent for me all that I like best in English culture, and none of its drawbacks . . . I almost feel that with us two, it will be a mutual adoption of our countries, the exchange of patriotisms. . . . I wonder how you feel about your adopted country? You see, Poland is more in need of 'people' than Australia. On the other hand, life there must be much harder & the task more thankless.<sup>122</sup>

Much of the emotional turmoil that attended mail deliveries was due to Baldwin Spencer. From 8 January, each successive delivery brought more disturbing news from Melbourne, news relayed by Elsie of 'Baldy on the warpath'. On the last day of the old year she told him how Spencer had informed her of Malinowski's multiple entanglements.

One was that of N.S. (spoken of finally by name) and, he said, there were others - 3 other girls with whom you had relations, or had had in the very near past. He thought, and wanted me to think, that I was one of a series of dupes, to all of whom in turn you made a confession of your 'pasts'.<sup>123</sup>

Spencer always had a soft spot for her and wanted to protect her from a man whom he regarded as a scoundrel. Elsie knew Malinowski would be 'in a fearful rage' with him but begged him not to take any action - a letter of protest to Spencer would only make matters worse.

I must say I do feel slightly indignant when I remember how generously you have behaved towards his weaknesses. But I do not want any open rupture to come between you and those who can influence your fortunes. . . . owing to the war you are at a tremendous disadvantage, and I am so anxious for you to steer clear of any rocks while this is so.<sup>124</sup>

The weaknesses Elsie alluded to concerned Spencer's immoderate drinking. This had become increasingly noticeable - to the Massons at least - since the British Association meeting at the beginning of the war. He was under enormous pressure of work, combining several jobs, occupying prominent positions in the university, the museum and the art gallery, as well as fulfilling self-imposed civic duties. His marriage was under great strain, and Lady Spencer seemed to be of little comfort to him. Whisky consoled, or so he believed, though it shortened the fuse of his explosive Lancastrian temper. Malinowski was just one of several provocations.

Malinowski replied to Elsie in early February, admitting that the news had depressed him but assuring her that he would not act rashly. Still, the thought of his private affairs being 'hawked about' was loathsome, and he even wondered whether Spencer had hired a detective to spy on him. Elsie was right to blame him about Nina; as to the other three girls, he had already told her that he had not behaved 'in a puritanic manner' at Nyora the previous Easter. He concluded his confession with a declaration, as true to himself as he could make it: 'You are the only woman in the world for

me. I do not expect that I shall have never any lapses or regrets. But to my ideal of faithfulness it is necessary that there should be the "only one" feeling between the two people.<sup>125</sup>

Elsie's next letter brought more unwelcome news. She had learned that Spencer now had documentary evidence of Malinowski's several entanglements, and he intended to tell Edward Stirling and David Orme Masson, for the sake of their daughters, just what he thought of his character. 'He also is seriously thinking of writing Home [England] in order to disclaim all responsibility for you personally, and discourage further supplies [of funds].' She now pleaded with Malinowski to write immediately to Nina or to her father. 'No hesitation can spare her any pain now, or me either, and you may simply ruin your own position here.' He saw the wisdom of her advice but continued to procrastinate.

Malinowski suspected Spencer was acting out of pure malice – but why the hatred? As he told Elsie, somewhat disingenuously: 'I usually either make friends or enemies and it sometimes astonishes me, how suddenly & without any provocation on my part there crop up around me sworn enemies, people who go out of their way to do me harm.'<sup>126</sup> He feared that Spencer had already written with 'calumnious insinuations' to Mond and Frazer, perhaps even to Seligman. He was depressed, too, by the painful scrutiny of his conscience, forced upon him by this 'unsympathetic intrusion' into his private life. It coincided with Ineykoya's final days, with the arrival of heart-rending letters from Nina, and with his own morbid slide into sickness. Now, for Elsie alone, he accurately nailed his moral flaw:

I may be furious with that man, but none the less I must own that I have behaved abominably both to N.S. and to yourself. . . . I ought to have wound up the other affair. But I am most damnably weak, sentimental and soft – & very egotistically so: it is very hard for me to tell people definitely that I must give up any claims to their affection & friendship. Coupled with a congenital fickleness, it produces that abominable combination, of which I am an example.<sup>127</sup>

### *The Ethnographer's legend*

On Monday 11 March 1918, Malinowski packed up his things and dismantled his tent. He reflected sourly that he had no sentimental feelings

about his departure. He noted dismissively: 'I am glad that the Oburaku *niggers* are behind me, and that I'll never again live in this village.' A group of 'friendly' people had come to his tent the previous evening, presumably to bid him farewell, but at noon he left the village without fanfare. He was irritated by the difficulty of finding a canoe to carry his gear to Gusaweta, and complimented only Morovato, who 'helped me loyally to the end'.<sup>128</sup>

Malinowski's attitude towards the people who had hosted him for three months seems ungracious and churlish. He had imposed himself upon them uninvited, yet they had provided him with priceless information on their way of life. They had taken him into their houses and gardens and on their fishing expeditions. Oburaku elders and ritual specialists had taught him their secret lore: their myths and complex magical formulae which accompanied gardening, village prosperity, fishing, canoe-making and other technical tasks. His collection of sorcery spells was larger and more varied than could be claimed by any single villager. He had been allowed to penetrate the mysteries of their cosmological beliefs and their mortuary customs. Despite the cycles of tropical ennui, the bouts of sickness and the oscillations of his energy levels, his months in Oburaku had been hugely productive. Yet he gave no hint of gratitude in his diary for the villagers' gifts of knowledge, and it was with obvious relief that he left them.

What the people of Oburaku really thought of their ethnographer in 1918 is beyond recovery. But almost eighty years later one of their descendants could tell stories about him that had been orally transmitted across three generations. Although the veracity of such testimony must remain suspect, the gist of the anecdotes is curiously positive. Oburaku people appear to have liked the *dimdim* who lived among them. In June 1995, Linus Digim'Rina interviewed an Oburaku man of some seventy years named Kewaiyabisila.<sup>129</sup> He was the maternal grandson (sister's daughter's son) of Kadilakula, one of Malinowski's informants. Three brief references to Kadilakula occur in his diary. On 25 February 1918 a gale blew: 'The palms swayed, the leaves like arms flailing madly, or wild locks of hair tossed in passion. . . . Kadilakula sat bravely and performed the *megwa* [to still the wind].' Two days later, his head 'bursting with fatigue', Malinowski took down from him the magical formula. On 6 March they discussed a *sagali* in Kaytuvi.<sup>130</sup> The following account of what Kewaiyabisila remembers being told by his grandfather and other elders contrasts markedly with what Malinowski recorded in his diary.

It was Mick the Greek who introduced him to the villagers of Oburaku. They helped him pitch his tent a few yards from the shore by a tall *natu* fruit tree, long since fallen. The site of his tent is well remembered, though not commemorated by any sign as in Omarakana. Malinowski's knowledge of the language was said to be defective, and he arrived with an 'interpreter' (*toropeta*), thought to have been a Suau man. (Ginger was in fact from Sariba, though he would have spoken a Suau dialect.) Malinowski was correctly said to have worked mostly with Navavile, the *towosi*, investigating gardening techniques and magic. Kewaiyabisila had been told that the ethnographer had not explained the purpose of his stay, but simply assumed that everyone he asked would tell him everything he wanted to know. Kewaiyabisila patiently listed 'everything' from net-fishing rites to the *mwasila* magic of Kula. Malinowski was also said to have accompanied Kadilakula, Molilakwa and Navavile on Kula trips to Kitava – though by his own account, he never went to Kitava. He was remembered to have witnessed the funeral procession, burial and mortuary ceremonies for Ineykoya, and to have taken photographs of her decorated corpse. He did indeed, and published one of them in *The Sexual Life of Savages*.<sup>131</sup> Touches of authenticity also occur in Kewaiyabisila's account of how the young men of Oburaku would paddle Malinowski to Kwabula to visit Tomwela 'the seer' and accompany him to Wawela to consult the stargazers.

The name Malinowski meant nothing to Kewaiyabisila, for he was known by the sobriquet *Tolilibogwa*, 'the man of *libogwa* or *liliu*' (myths, legends, folklore).<sup>132</sup> A more concise translation would be 'Historian'. As we have seen, another nickname was *Tosemwana* which might freely be translated as 'Performer', 'Show-Off' or 'Exhibitionist'. The name implies that he was 'proud' of the way he affected certain Trobriand mannerisms. Kadilakula was said to have given him a handsomely decorated, cassowary-bone lime spatula. The gift indicated that Malinowski was accorded the noble status of *guyau*, and he was thought to have enjoyed flaunting the spatula in public.<sup>133</sup> He was also said to have carried a coconut-leaf basket in which he stored his betel nuts and chewing equipment. In truth, he refers in his diary very rarely to partaking of this narcotic, and the precarious state of his dentures would have made betel-chewing a risky if not uncomfortable exercise. He could, of course, have ground his betel, lime and pepper leaf in a mortar as did the toothless elders, but made not a single reference to having done so. Yet another engaging nickname alluded to his funny

habit of hitching up his trousers while peering through the lens of his camera: he was a 'man of laughter', *Topwegigila*.

Oburaku legend records that Malinowski was unusual for a white man in that he employed no cook or other servants, except for his 'Suau' interpreter. Ogisi the Dobuan and the informal retinue of hangers-on (whom Malinowski referred to collectively as 'the boys') appear to have been forgotten. This modest lack of servants (at least in legend) endeared him to the villagers, but Kewaiyabisila maintained that, far from being self-sufficient, Malinowski relied on village women to cook his yams and taros and to bring him bananas and fish. 'They looked after him,' he said. The diary maintains otherwise. Apart from those occasions when he shared feast food with the villagers, it was the much-abused Ginger who purchased or bartered for local produce and prepared his daily meals.

Even so, Malinowski's supposed generosity in doling out tobacco in exchange for gifts of food, together with his considerate treatment of people (by invidious comparison with the bullying tactics of traders, government officers and missionaries), form an essential part of his legend. Kewaiyabisila said: '*Tomota sena tombwelisi. Pela bikikatupoi, e ibigatonasi e mapela bilokeyesa wala tuta tuta. Tau bwena. Gala iluluki tomota, o kena iwaweya.* [People liked him very much. Because whenever he asked questions, they responded and therefore enjoyed paying him visits time and again. He was a nice man. He did not berate people, nor beat them.]'

Asked about Malinowski's sexual behaviour in Oburaku (a question that can be put in Kiriwina without undue indecorum), Kewaiyabisila declared that the visitor did have a few intrigues with village women. His verbatim testimony is blunt: '*Sena kaduwanoma isisu. Iulatila. Iseki tobaki vivila, mapusi. Pela tovau e sena wala magisi vivila.* [He lived here for a long while. He had affairs. He gave tobacco to women as payment for sexual favours. Because he was new, the women were very fond of him.]' Against this, however, there is no evidence whatsoever in his diary (including in those elisions demanded by his widow before its publication) that Malinowski ever did more than 'fondle', 'pat' or 'paw' the Trobriand sirens who inadvertently aroused him. His disgusted reaction to his own responses are honest enough, and his evident fear of caste-based sexual pollution – not to mention his commitment to 'purity' for the sake of Elsie – tell convincingly against the Oburaku legend.

The most remarkable fabulation, however, concerns Malinowski's departure, convincingly represented in his diary as unsentimental and

ill-tempered. One would expect his leaving to have been equally unmourned by the villagers of Oburaku. But their generosity extended to imagining that they had feasted one another, and his departure was reconstructed as an emotional and spectacular event. Initiated by Kadilakula, the villagers staged a grand farewell feast for him. Kewaiyabisila relished the description. Many taros were harvested, cooked and mashed to make *mona* pudding; bunches of yellow betel nuts were gathered and laid by the cooking pots; and three pigs were slaughtered for the occasion. At the conclusion of the feast Malinowski distributed farewell gifts to his favourites. Kadilakula himself received a tomahawk, a bush knife and canvas from the ethnographer's tent. Finally, in blatant contradiction to Malinowski's dismissive version of his departure ('Looking for a *waga* in the village irritated me'), Kewaiyabisila said that when *Tolilibogwa* boarded the boat the people of Oburaku 'wailed as if someone had died'.

## Chapter 25

### *Fear, Love and Loathing*

#### *'Creating' the Amphletts*

On Wednesday 13 March 1918, Malinowski finished packing at Billy Hancock's, obtained a permit from Campbell at Losuia, and boarded the *Kayona* bound for the Amphlett Islands. Among his belongings was a box of medications containing quinine, calomel, iodine, bromide, smelling salts, bay rum, glycerine, vaseline, magnesia, eye-drops, arsenic and extra aspirin. He expected the worst: 'brackish water, swarms of mosquitoes or sandflies, no mails, no fresh food.' But as long as he kept his health, he believed he could tolerate such discomforts and even 'enjoy them as a kind of lark'.<sup>1</sup>

Ginger and Ogisi accompanied him; the skipper was Monauya, a Sariba islander, and the crew were from Suau. As the cutter sailed southwards across the shallow sea-arm of Pilou, heading directly for the Koya and 'the fabulous world of the little islands', Malinowski was exhilarated by a sense of freedom. By late afternoon they were approaching the oriental shapes of the Amphletts in pastel shades of pink and green. Gumasila, 'a tall, steep mountain with arched lines and great cliffs, suggest[ed] vaguely some huge Gothic monument'.<sup>2</sup> To the left of it loomed the massive pyramid of Domdom.

Darkness had already fallen and the *Kayona* was cruising between Gumasila and Domdom when a violent northwesterly squall forced it to run before the wind. There was clamour on the deck, and from the stifling cabin where he lay, queasy with seasickness, Malinowski heard the cry: 'Look out for the reef!' He was soon 'in a state of unmitigated funk'. Ginger and Monauya could see witches flickering over the masthead, and when the wind shredded the mainsail, Malinowski realized their situation was serious. For the first time in his life (he told Elsie) he literally trembled with