Off the verandah? A puzzle from Malinowski and British social anthropology

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. This paper presents a seemingly inconsistent triad from Malinowski and a solution to it, concerning the requirement to do intensive fieldwork.


“Amateur fieldwork or professional scientific fieldwork?” When giving guidance about how to do fieldwork and why it should be done, in his founding text *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Bronislaw Malinowski concedes that amateur efforts are usually better than previous scientific efforts in one respect:

This is in the presentation of intimate touches of native life, in bringing home to us these aspects of it with which one is made familiar only through being in close contact with the natives, one way or the other, for a long period of time. In certain results of scientific work—especially that which has been called “survey work”—we are given an excellent skeleton, so to speak, of the tribal constitution, but it lacks flesh and blood. We learn much about the framework of their society, but within it, we cannot perceive or imagine the realities of human life, the even flow of everyday events, the occasional ripples of excitement over a feast, or ceremony, or some singular occurrence. (1922: 17)

Malinowski thought that the fieldworker who properly immerses themselves in native life, rather than conducting surveys on the verandah of a colonial house, will be better equipped to achieve this quality of amateur writing. The British tradition identifies Malinowski as a founding figure,
who initiated a revolution which requires every anthropologist to do intensive fieldwork. But it also emphasizes social structure as its primary object of interest (Radcliffe-Brown 1940) – the skeleton, the tribal constitution, to use Malinowski’s metaphors – and Malinowski says that this is something that on the verandah studies give us.

That leaves us with a puzzle composed of the following propositions:

(i) Malinowski initiated a fieldwork revolution in British anthropology in which it became a requirement that every anthropologist does fieldwork in which they immerse themselves in the way of life of a small society over a period of at least a year, rather than just doing surveys on the verandah.

(ii) The anthropologist need not go beyond a survey on the verandah in order to learn about the structure of the society – even Malinowski, who championed fieldwork and turned it into a requirement, agrees with that.

(iii) The chief interest of the British social anthropology that emerged was in types of social structure.

Proposition (i) refers to an intensive fieldwork requirement, but given (ii) and (iii) why is it there? There are various solutions to this puzzle, some of them nice and some of them less nice. I shall present a less nice one.

A solution to this seemingly inconsistent triad is to take a piece of fieldwork advice that Malinowski did not include in his book, but informally gave to one who asked various masters for helpful guidance beforehand:

Finally, I asked Malinowski and was told not to be a bloody fool. (Evans-Prichard 1976: 240)
The reason for why fieldwork became a requirement is because with the increasing professionalization of anthropology, anyone proficient enough on paper might get to the stage of being sent to the field, and it is not reasonable to expect such a fieldworker to follow this instruction; and it is only if they can do this that they can learn the structural information from the verandah. Proposition (ii) in the triad should be replaced with:

(ii*)  The anthropologist who is not “a bloody fool” need not go beyond a survey on the verandah in order to learn about the structure of the society.

To repeat: there is no reason to think that the exception-making condition would be met! By the way, some might wonder whether that term in “scare quotes” should be taken literally.

References

