

## The Ethnographic Unconscious: Malinowski and the Freudian Text

Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice, too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced.

*Heart of Darkness*

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### Introduction: texts inhabited by aliens

"Truly I lack real character" — on 18 July 1918 on the Trobriands, Bronislaw Malinowski broke off his field diary with this abrupt self-denunciation.<sup>(1)</sup> For a few days he had been confessing that the Trobrianders, his ethnographic work, his academic ambitions, and all that made up his present life, seemed to him colourless and meaningless. He had been always preoccupied with distant places and the past: Poland, old friends, his ex-lovers and his dead mother. Now he found himself drowned in disconnected memories. The diary's last sentence thus seems to be saying that the lack of a "real" self, or rather his awareness of the lack, had finally come to the point where it was no longer possible for him to continue to write.

The last words of Malinowski's Trobriand diary, even though written before his major academic works were published and before his "Functional School" came to dominate anthropology in Britain, have proved to be prophetic. The authenticity of western ethnography had become more and more questionable since nineteenth-century evolutionism had come to be found bankrupt. When ethnographers threw away the scheme of evolutionary history, they also lost their confidence in describing any history.

My formulation of twentieth century ethnography as suffering from uncertainty and self-doubt might sound contrary to the commonplace that it was only by discarding evolutionary assumptions that "anthropology" became a proper science. It was at the turn of

the century that ethnographers realised that they needed more first-hand knowledge, and more reality than facile theory, when it came to investigating the "natives." Nineteenth-century anthropologists were "armchair" scholars who did not collect data themselves but simply relied upon the nonspecialist reports made by missionaries and colonial administrators. It was the generation of anthropologists working at the turn of the century, such as A. C. Haddon, William Rivers, C. G. Seligman and Baldwin Spencer, who made the first relatively intensive field studies and helped to promote the professionalisation of the subject. These new research methods — intensive fieldwork and synchronic analysis — were established as academic disciplines mainly by those of the next generation, Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and became rapidly institutionalised within the university system.<sup>(2)</sup>

However, it could be said that the new academic disciplines only provided the device for repression — a device which was to quash such self-doubts as expressed secretly in Malinowski's diary. The problematic has come to the surface in the postcolonial era, where the traditional power relationship between Europe and non-Europe has been demolished through the process of decolonisation. As Talal Asad and others forcibly argue, colonialism provided social anthropology with ideological support and organisational basis. Decolonisation after World War II has changed the political situation which the anthropology of the pre-war era inhabited. Today we are more conscious of the ever-existing "predicament"

(James Clifford's word) of western representations of other cultures. The "participant-observation," which earlier ethnographers endorsed as their ideal method of field study, has turned out to be another illusion. Even though they sometimes take part in the activities of local communities, western ethnographers cannot be fully equipped with the native eye with which they would be "authorised" to observe and write. Moreover, today the "natives" no longer remain silent objects in the show-cases of western ethnographers, but have started to talk, and have even become ethnographers themselves.

It is clear that this situation affected the actual style of ethnographic writings. As an example I will examine the significance of the choice of narrator. The first-person singular narrator was indispensable to Malinowski and other earlier ethnographers: those who wanted to make themselves appear convincing witnesses of other worlds. Yet the status of this "I" narrator, the single speaking-subject, became more and more controversial, as modern ethnographers now found their texts inhabited by voices from other worlds or, we might say, by the voice of the Other.

By reconsidering Malinowski, reputedly the founder of British social anthropology, this study aims to trace the primal scene of that newly-born sense of loss/discovery which has brought about the ethnographic predicament of our time. I will attempt to discover when it was that the image of the Other, who was no longer the objectified "native" formerly described but who now had *her* own intimidating voice, started to deconstruct the established mode of ethnographic writing. (This voice is often sexualised or feminised even in these modern texts, since in our age, the Other is normally conceived as the opposite and, according to patriarchal convention, female sex.)

It should be also noted that the theory concerning the relationship between self and other was being developed simultaneously with the establishment of social anthropology. Freudian psychoanalysis, indeed, showed a deep insight into the problems of ethnographic writing. Arguably Freud was the first person to suspect the "literariness" of ethnography, and to present a radical alternative to "realism." In the last part of this paper I will discuss briefly Freud's

(rather hidden) contribution to the poetics of ethnography. By doing so, I would like to show how the crisis as described above had been building up long before its existence was realised.

### (i) Writing other cultures

The modern predicament is caused by our awareness of the gap between "native reality" and its ethnographic reconstruction. At the beginning of the century, fieldwork methods created a new academic conscience about faithful representation. The ethnographers of today are becoming more and more self-conscious about their power and their privileged positions, both of which could distort the reality of other cultures. James Clifford contends that stepping away from naive realism should have been the first step for modern ethnographers, although he notes that the extreme self-consciousness felt by recent ethnographers about their representational methods has the danger "of irony, of elitism, of solipsism, of putting the whole world into questions."<sup>(3)</sup>

This trend is also related to the fact that there now exist no "uncontaminated natives": those who have not had contact with western cultures. At the same time, western discourse has in reality become a universal one: as Malinowski himself noticed in his last years, "[t]he African is becoming an anthropologist who turns our own weapons against us."<sup>(4)</sup> Clifford aptly describes this modern situation as follows: "If the ethnographer reads culture over the native's shoulder, the native also reads over the ethnographer's shoulder as he or she writes each cultural description."<sup>(5)</sup>

As Clifford and other recent anthropologists emphasise, ethnography is primarily a "writing" — a textual/cultural construct and not a simple representation of the so-called "real world."<sup>(6)</sup> Thus ethnography turns out to be fundamentally "literary": some classics of ethnographical writings have also started to be read from entirely new aspects instead of for their representational reliability. This is the context in which Malinowski's field diary has been revalued recently. Its plotless textuality is compared to modernist fiction, e.g. Joycean stream of conscious-

ness. Also, the colonial problem in which the diary is deeply involved reminds us of Joseph Conrad's fiction. Malinowski himself admired Conrad and regarded him as his counterpart in literature.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, modern ethnography, which developed from a "serious" confrontation with other cultures and peoples, had something in common with literary modernism. Modernist authors were often cosmopolitan in outlook and their imaginations were frequently inspired by encounters with other cultures. More curiously, the two classics of social anthropology, Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and Radcliffe-Brown's *The Andaman Islanders*, came out in 1922, the same year as the three prominent modernist works, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* were published. However, the styles Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown used in their academic works were closer to that of realism than of modernism. In 1922, the crisis to come — that of narrative, representation and the text itself — remained repressed in their academic discourses. Malinowski's field diary was to be kept unpublished until the 1960's, the age of decolonisation.

And yet, despite his manifested realism, Malinowski's academic writings, certainly at an unconscious level, were involved in a problematic of which ethnographers today are keenly aware. In the introduction to *Argonauts* Malinowski confessed:

In fact, I spent a few months between my first and second expeditions, and over a year between that and the subsequent one, in going over all my material, and making parts of it almost ready for publication each time, though each time I knew I would have to re-write it.... In fact, I have written up an outline of the Kula institution at least half a dozen times while in the field and in the intervals between my expeditions.<sup>68</sup>

He seems to have believed naively that he could fill the gap between what he called "constructive attempts and empirical checking" by revising texts continuously. Or rather, he might have thought that the ethnographic "text" could finally be identified with

reality. However, this passage discloses that by "writing" Malinowski actually widened his temporal and spatial distance from the "real world."

An ethnographic text cannot stand by itself. It is a form of discourse and requires a certain kind of audience. When Malinowski wrote a draft of his Trobriand study, he was certainly conscious of publication. His half-a-dozen revisions of the outline of the Kula institution could not be free from his European mode of thinking. Malinowski, after all, endeavoured to present a picture of "natives" plausible to western eyes.

And yet, looking carefully into his discursive practice, Malinowski employed a more complicated strategy. As seen in the above-cited passage, Malinowski, along with other contemporary ethnographers, used the first-person narrator in his academic writings. This "I" is symptomatic of the ethnographer's desire to be a convincing eyewitness ("I-witness"). It stands for the authority of the author who has "been there" and witnessed reality. The author must be superior to the audience not only in his or her first-hand knowledge but also in her or his individual sensitivity.

By employing the first-person narrator in this strategic way, the earliest authors used a sort of literary technique, consciously or unconsciously. Thus they cut themselves off from their own cultural code and become faithful witnesses of other cultures, that is to say, true "participant-observers." Clifford Geertz relates this narrative strategy to "the I-witnessing approach to the construction of cultural descriptions," saying: "To be a convincing 'I-witness,' one must, so it seems, first become a convincing 'I.'"<sup>69</sup>

Malinowski needed this unitary "I" all the more because he inwardly noticed that he lacked "true character." Living among all sorts of different peoples, the solitary Polish ethnographer's self was inevitably intermingled with other peoples'. The over-abundant "I" in his text is symptomatic of his reaction against his awareness of this predicament of the self.

Today "literary" approaches, or the practising of specific narrative methods, enjoy some popularity among ethnographers, who are now conscious of the

interaction between the thematic and structural aspects in their writings. Many of them have come to consult and implement modern literary theories. Unlike Malinowski, they tend to employ multiple “I” narrators instead of a singular, authentic “I-witness,” since they consider that this unitary “I” is the cause of distorted descriptions of other cultures. Paradoxically, they have started using their “lack of true character” as the weapon to deconstruct the authority of established ethnography.

However, things are even more complicated than this. Most ethnographers have not yet found a way out of the dilemma. What is at stake now is that, in spite of listening to the voices of other peoples, ethnographers find their own voices still as dominant as before. As James Clifford points out, no matter how dialogical or polyphonic their form, ethnographic writings have to arrange discourses hierarchically.<sup>(10)</sup> It seems the ethnographers’ fate that they should always remain the first editors of an ethnographic book, possessing the power to interpret, criticise, and even censor the other texts in the book. It is as if the colonial situation, the inequality between ethnographers and “natives” which inevitably affected earlier ethnographic writings, has not yet ceased to exist. The Malinowskian “I,” the ghost of the colonialist self, haunts us.

### (ii) Cultural translation

The problem of the power structure within the ethnographic text is best explained by the notion of “cultural translation.” It is interesting to note that Malinowski regarded “translation” as an obstacle to free communication with his informants. In the Foreword to *The Sexual Life of Savages* he wrote:

the learning of a foreign culture is like the learning of a foreign tongue: at first mere assimilation and crude translation, at the end a complete detachment from the original medium and a mastery of the new one.<sup>(11)</sup>

Malinowski repeatedly insisted on the need to master local languages. For him the ability to communicate

with informants in their native languages was the most effective weapon for ethnographers: “pidgin English” was an imperfect instrument for expressing such delicate ideas as religion and myth. Malinowski himself was a linguist in the practical sense of the term: in *Argonauts* Malinowski said that he was even taking notes in local languages while listening to his informants. When he had to translate Kiriwian texts in his books for his English-speaking audience, he often used the style of word-for-word translation regardless of the proper English sentence structure. By doing that, Malinowski seems to agree with Walter Benjamin on what makes for good translation. Benjamin argued that translators should try to turn their language into the original one, critically reexamining the norm of their own — instead of forging the original into the rigid framework of their own language as they normally did. Good translation “does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully.”<sup>(12)</sup>

Nineteenth-century anthropologists tended to assume that different languages could be put into different stages of evolutionary order, and non-European languages were regarded as more primitive. They also considered that race determined language and vice versa.<sup>(13)</sup> Before Malinowski, several anthropologists had already attacked these evolutionary biases, e.g. Franz Boas, who created the American School of cultural anthropology. Malinowski’s concept of language and translation was also oriented towards the social determinism which conditions a person’s adoption of a certain language as part of his or her social environment. It might be considered that his linguistic theory derived from his own multilingual/cultural background as a Pole of Austrian nationality. Through his personal experience of learning and adopting other languages and cultures (i.e. Austrian-German, English and Melanesian), he became free from the evolutionary bias of the nineteenth century, when differentiation was not made between language and racial characteristics. However, Malinowski did not get round to considering the inequality between languages, although such an

inequality existed in his polyglot texts.

According to Asad, it is since the 1950s that the notion of cultural translation has been used to describe one of the ethnographer's most important tasks. Asad, however, censures the traditional way in which social anthropologists (e.g. Ernest Gellner) consider this notion, saying that they disregard the fact that cultural translation in itself is an institutionalised practice. Ethnography has so far implied the translation of non-European cultures, initially narrated in their native languages, into European languages/cultures. It is unthinkable that Malinowski would ever have tried to translate English into Kiriwinian. This situation has, however, not completely altered. A glance at a recent anthology of feminist ethnography tells us that most of the authors in the book are Europeans or of European descent; all the non-European contributors did their fieldwork in their own countries whereas only two Europeans did so; and, above all, all the authors wrote in western languages.<sup>(14)</sup> Asad contends that western and Third World languages/cultures are still unequal, and that translation is always exercised within a certain political relationship between unequal societies.<sup>(15)</sup>

Indeed, it seems that "literature," with all its liberty of choice of obscure metaphors and fictional voices, is able more easily and freely to express this complication of political and textual problems. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for example, Marlow the narrator-protagonist, on his way up the Congo, encounters Africans on the shore roaring at his boat. Marlow does not understand their language; his colonialist point of view represents it merely as a "noise." However, he admits that there is in him "just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it." Then he says to these Africans:

Very well, I admit, but I have a voice, too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced."<sup>(16)</sup>

"Cultural translation" from non-western into western languages tends to end in the same violence against other voices: the translator might "admit" that other voices transmit some meaning, yet ultimately states

the superiority of the translator's own speech — "the speech that cannot be silenced."<sup>(17)</sup>

### (iii) "Multilingualism"

Certainly, Malinowski's multilingualism made his field diary more modernist than any other writings by him. The diary was basically written in Polish but with inclusion of words, phrases, and sometimes whole passages in various languages, showing that several languages coexisted, and were even intersected with each other, in this polyglot anthropologist's consciousness. Those inserted "foreign" languages serve to interrupt and digress from the coherent logic of his narrative.

Yet we should note one of the ambivalences of this multilingual practice; that Malinowski himself undertook his translating tasks within the contextual inequality between the languages he dealt with. His field diary thus presents us with the best text with which to observe the way those languages were being sorted into this hierarchy.

Before starting to analyse it as a "text," we should look at the significance of this diary in the history of ethnography and social anthropology. The publication of the diary in 1967 (*A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*) caused a scandal about Malinowski's public image. His attitude towards the local people particularly shocked readers: far from the impartial and benevolent author of *Argonauts*, the Malinowski of the *Diary* was frequently expressing outbursts against the "niggers" (as he called Melanesians in the *Diary*, following the usage of the word by his contemporaries). However, it is not only the "natives" but also his fellow Europeans in the field; missionaries, traders and administrators, against whom Malinowski expressed his hatred in the *Diary*. There are times when he called his feeling towards the English "Anglophobia."

This diary was probably not intended for publication. Since it was written mostly in Polish, Malinowski's mother tongue, Malinowski was distancing himself from his audience, and from his adopted cultural code. Thereby he became an even more touching individual witness than when he wrote

in English, his "official" language. It might seem ironical that the "I" Geertz talks about as a typical example of the "convincing 'I'" is, indeed, the narrator of the *Diary*. Literally, however, Geertz is right: anthropologists have considered that this "I," no matter how ideologically incorrect and dangerous, represents the most realistic image of fieldworkers. (In his introduction to the *Diary* Raymond Firth aptly says: "My own reflection on this is to advise anyone who wishes to sneer at passages in this diary to be first equally frank in his own thoughts and writings, and then judge again.")<sup>(8)</sup> The terrible "I" in the *Diary*, who is eager to exterminate the presence of others and their voices, is the ultimate conclusion of the I-witnessing approach.

The Malinowski of the *Diary* radically contradicted himself as the Malinowski of the epoch-making *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, which is the most immediate result of the field work depicted in the *Diary*. The *Argonauts* is well-known as his manifesto of a new methodology. There he asserted that commercial relationships and malevolent feelings based upon prejudice had obstructed a truly scientific study of other cultures. In his opinion, missionaries and administrators, even though they stayed in foreign countries longer than ethnographers, could not reach a true knowledge of local cultures. Their points of view were distorted by their motives, whether financial or missionary. Ethnographers were free of these interests and could observe other cultures with impartial eyes. In *Argonauts*, Malinowski gave a list of "proper conditions for ethnographic work." First of all, ethnographers must cut themselves off from other Europeans and remain in as close contact with the "native" as possible; for "by means of this natural intercourse, you learn to know him, and you become familiar with his customs and beliefs far better than when he is a paid, and often bored, informant."<sup>(9)</sup> Ethnographers were also strongly recommended to have command of local languages and take part in activities in the village.

In the *Diary*, on the other hand, Malinowski represented himself as far from this ideal figure of "participant-observer." Take an example: one day (January 1915), while staying with the Mailu as an

apprentice fieldworker, Malinowski expressed his irritability with his informants:

At moments I was furious at them, particularly because after I gave them their portions of tobacco they all went away. On the whole my feelings toward the natives are decidedly tending to "*Exterminate the brutes.*" In many instances I have acted unfairly and stupidly — about the trip to Domara, for example. I should have given 2£ and they would have done it. As a result I certainly missed one of my best opportunities.<sup>(20)</sup>

This passage contains a great deal of the *Diary*. Firstly, it makes it clear that the relationship between fieldworker and native informant was primarily based on trade or negotiation. Fieldworkers had to buy information as raw material in order to manufacture their ethnographic representations. This fact also reminds us that "knowing other cultures" is itself motivated by a colonialist desire. Secondly, there is a manifestation of the fieldworker's hostility against his reluctant informants. Last, but not least, this hostility is expressed in English — quoted incorrectly from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* — while the original of this passage is written in Polish.

What concerns us is the inter-relationship between these three points: politico-economic (the financial loss and gain between ethnographer and informant), psychological (the ethnographer's frustration) and textual-linguistic (the confusion in the writing). Indeed, why did Malinowski express his most personal (or honest) feelings in English, the "official" language in which he wrote his major academic works? Looking at other instances of his using foreign (i.e., non-Polish) languages in the *Diary* might help us answer this question. The foreign words and phrases suggest that they are "borrowed" from somewhere else. Yet the use of Melanesian languages, albeit frequent, is limited to the names of local places and things specific to Melanesian cultures, for which he could not find any European substitutes. On the other hand, European languages other than Polish, especially English, are often used where he might possibly have found synonymous expressions in

Polish.

One day in the Mailu diary (the first half of the *Diary*), he wrote about his sexual desire for "T" (with whom he had broken in London):

Yesterday night it occurred to me that if I had dragged her to my house, enticed her, persuaded her, begged — and *raped* her, everything would have been fine.<sup>(21)</sup>

In the original, "raped" is written in English. Like the quotation from *Heart of Darkness*, this word seems to articulate *what the author really wants to say*. (And indeed, the main drama of the *Diary* is about his struggle with "lecherous thoughts" rather than his field studies). It is as if he should avoid uttering the most sincere thoughts — unless he does so in foreign, borrowed and more official languages. English thus becomes the device of both repression and revelation of the author's true desires.

The *Diary* has another curious aspect; it frequently describes dreams. These dreams present the most irrational narratives in the *Diary*. Take one example:

Dream: I am in Germany, 2 crippled cavalry officers; met them in some hotel. Walking with them in some German city. Fraternizing with them. I express my sympathy for Germany and German culture, and tell them I was a *Kriegsgefangener* [prisoner of war] in England.<sup>(22)</sup>

To understand this German outburst, we probably need to consider Malinowski's political situation at that time. It was during World War I, and Malinowski was technically an Austrian subject — an enemy of the British. Owing to Seligman's patronage, he was allowed to proceed with his field research in Australasia. However, this dream reveals that he at the same time, regarded himself as being confined to this place — as a "prisoner of war." This dream might easily be interpreted as revealing his hidden hostility towards the British, whom he betrays by addressing the Germans in the German language. However, this intrusive German word also seems to be avoiding the

more direct Polish utterance. Even if he discards one mask (Englishness), he must immediately adopt another one (Germanness).

It goes without saying that there was a political inequality between Britain, Austria-Germany, Russia, and Malinowski's native land, Poland, which did not exist as a nation at that time. It might be that his use of different European languages in the *Diary* reflects this inequality in a distorted way. The *Diary* is regarded as a confession of honest feelings partly because it is written in his native tongue. And yet, the most sincere parts of those feelings are uttered in more politically "powerful" languages which are at the same time repressing the original language.

The central character in the Trobriand diary (the latter part of the *Diary*) is Elsie (E. R. M.) his fiancée, whom he left in England. He repeatedly expressed his fierce and sincere love for Elsie. Yet, there are times when he had to "persuade [himself] that she [was] really the most suitable person,"<sup>(23)</sup> for he found it very difficult not to be attracted by other women. He not only regretted having betrayed his other girlfriend Nina but found some Melanesian women physically attractive. A relationship parallel to one between these "strong" and "weak" languages can be seen in this side of the story. Elsie, his English fiancée, represents the ambivalent state of his official language, which expresses and yet represses his sexual desire.

This psycho-sexual drama affects the *Diary's* textuality, making it more "literary" than scientific. The *Diary* not only discloses what is hidden under his consciousness, his hidden "desire," but also describes the whole process in which he represses his desire and produces a "purely" ethnographic work. One day Malinowski wrote down a list of his disciplines:

E. R. M. is my fiancée, and more, she alone, no one else, exists for me; I must not read novels, unless I am sick in a state of deep depression; I must foresee and forestall either of these conditions. The purpose of my stay here is ethnological work, which ought to absorb my attention to the exclusion of all else.<sup>(24)</sup>

This passage could be seen an example of stream of consciousness in the *Diary*. However, even though the

author is simply listing what occurred to him, the list itself reveals that the "fiancée" represents something parallel to his proper "ethnological work." Desire for any other women should be repressed — and in the same way he, the ethnographer, should not indulge himself in reading novels. Novels are also associated with mental illness, "a state of deep depression" which disturbs his academic work.

It is also symptomatic that the use of Kiriwinian is strictly limited in the *Diary*, James Clifford compares Malinowski's Kiriwinian to Conrad's French. Polish is the mother tongue of both authors, and English is "the language of future career and marriage." Between these two "a third intervenes, associated with eroticism and violence." According to Clifford, Conrad's French is linked with Poradowska ("a problematic love object,") and the imperial Congo, whereas Malinowski's Kiriwinian is associated with "a certain exuberance and ludic excess" and also with the "erotic temptations of Trobriand women."<sup>(25)</sup> Truly, the Kiriwinian language was also a medium in which Malinowski's academic work was involved in what he calls "savage sexuality."

### (iii) What is the "father"?

The *Diary's* preoccupation with sex and sexuality was to be projected into his later academic study of "savage sexuality" (e. g., *The Sexual Life of Savages* published in 1929). Certainly, it had been a popular belief that "savages" were equipped with superfluous sexual energy and lacked morality. Malinowski's descriptions of sexual activities in the Trobriands appealed to this common idea, although they appeared sensational and "obscene" in the eyes of his readers of the time.

While depicting Trobriand society as to some extent a utopia of sexual freedom, Malinowski realised the importance of describing the institution of marriage in the islands where function was to control this freedom. He did not see the Trobrianders' sexual activities as merely orgiastic but, instead, found that the islanders acted according to legal and moral codes peculiar to their society. At that time, it had been believed that the Trobrianders did not consider a male

physiologically necessary to the constitution of the family. Malinowski contended that, for all their apparent ignorance of biological paternity, the Trobrianders felt a strong necessity to establish the sociological role of "father."

Marriage conventions in non-European societies formerly attracted nineteenth-century evolutionists, such as John MacLennan, Henry Maine and Herbert Spencer. MacLennan's *Primitive Marriage* was published as early as 1865, and in it the author attempted to seek the origin of marital forms in the exogamy of contemporary "savage" societies. According to MacLennan, savage sexuality was free from any restraint, and the primitive marriage in its "capturing wife" (in his definition) appears little more than a rape. MacLennan also pointed out that civilised societies might find "survivals" of this violent marriage in the form of marriage ceremonies where the "capturing" was symbolically performed.

It is true that the study of marital laws and conventions in other cultures revealed the fact that the western institution of marriage was not a universal one. At the same time, however, social evolutionists assumed that "civilisation" would control savage sexuality through its highly complex social system, and attempted to place different forms of marriage in a single evolutionary ladder. Late nineteenth-century anthropologists devoted themselves to the question of whether matriarchy, seen typically in Melanesian societies, pre-dated patriarchy in the history of social evolution.<sup>(26)</sup>

Although suspicious of the concept of universal evolution, Malinowski adopted the basic idea of the institution of marriage from these evolutionists. He regarded marriage as the foundation of culture, yet he found a complicated system of marriage even in the most "primitive" society. His methodological problem was how to describe a specific system as faithfully as possible, not how to compare one system with another. In other words, he argued for the particularity, rather than universality, of each culture.

Most typically, Malinowski considered the concept of "father" in Trobriand society to be evidence for a fundamental difference between the Trobriands and Europe. He contended that the



Kiriwinian word *tama* does not have the same meaning as the English "father." For the Trobrianders, who seemed quite ignorant of physiological paternity and traced their ancestors only through maternal lines, *tama* implied "husband of my mother." Malinowski suggested that *tama* possibly derives from the same origin as *tomakava* (a stranger). As the Trobriander (male) child grows up, he would learn

that he is not of the same clan as his *tama*, that his totemic appellation is different, and that it is identical with that of his mother. At the same time he learns that all sorts of duties, restrictions, and concerns for personal pride unite him to his mother and separate him from his father.<sup>(27)</sup>

As Malinowski observed, in the typical Trobriand family the child's uncle (mother's brother) would replace and take the role of "father."

Malinowski's detailed observation of the institution of marriage in other cultures led to his questioning the adequacy of the institution in western society itself. The Trobrianders' concept of *tama*, which was radically different from that of the "father" in western patrimonial society, gives us an opportunity to examine whether the "standard" role of "father" was accepted only within western culture and society. Later, when Malinowski became more critical of Freudianism, his main attack was on its contention that the nuclear family was universal. According to Freud, it was in the nuclear family that the whole drama of the Oedipus complex took place. Yet Malinowski argued that the Oedipus complex was not relevant when it came to explaining the psychodrama in a Trobriand family, where the father did not take the same role as in a European family.

However, it was also true that Malinowski himself, as well as the Freudians, chose this single term "father" as being central to the constitution of the marriage system, the system which he regarded as fundamental to human society. The different roles of "father" testified to the difference between cultures. And yet, why was it always the "father" who was considered to be central — why not the "mother" or "sister" instead? It should be noted that the question

Malinowski raised, "what is the father?" hardly avoided the biases of a western-modelled, patriarchal view. Also, several critics have pointed out that the Malinowskian system of Trobriand society conforms to Freudian theory: the "mother's brother" in the Trobriands is a repressed form of "father" — the power of "father" is simply displaced to this "mother's brother."<sup>(28)</sup>

#### (iv) The ethnographic Unconscious

The best-made and most powerful story about the "father" that has ever been told in anthropological discourse is no doubt Freud's "Totem and Taboo" (first published in 1912, nearly ten years prior to *Argonauts*). Freud's enterprise in this essay was to reconstruct the basis of human society in the name of the "father." By seeking for the origin of totemism and taboos observed in some present non-European societies, he attempted to describe the primal scene in which both the most primitive institutions of human society and the device of repression came into being.

Freud's whole scheme in the essay, although directly related to the trend of diffusionism in the 1910s, might seem to owe too much to nineteenth-century evolutionism. Indeed, Freud's argument is almost entirely dependent upon instances quoted from James Frazer. Possibly for this reason, Freud's direct influence on British anthropology of his time was minor and even misleading (for example, the "culture and personality" theory formulated around the time of World War II). Anthropological criticism of Freud has tended to focus on the superficial phase of his theory, e.g. the biologism of his libido theory.<sup>(29)</sup> Malinowski himself, although being deeply attracted by Freudian psychoanalysis, repudiated Freud's premise of the universality of the nuclear family and the Oedipus Complex. In short, Freud did not appear to the academics to be scientific enough. In *Sex and Repression*, Malinowski attacked Freud's reconstruction of the primal scene of human history (the murder of the big father), stating that in spite of his Darwinian assumption of the pre-cultural "primal horde," Freud "[tried] to explain the origins of culture by a process which implies the previous existence of

culture and hence involves a circular argument."<sup>60</sup>

The essay is, indeed, manifestly "literary" or "novel-ish"; it can be enjoyed like a detective story. The "detective's" goal is to relate a simple story—the story about the murder of the "big father." Freud starts the essay by scrutinising all sorts of contemporary discussions on savage customs, especially on prohibition of incest, other taboos and the origin of totemism—all of which make the discourse of the text diversified. The author's "plot" seems, however, to pull a single narrative out of this multiplied text, and reunite the strands by a monological thread.

Totemism, the system by which the religious and social institutions of some Australian and other non-European peoples were controlled, had attracted great scientific interest since the late nineteenth century.<sup>61</sup> Australian tribes, for example, were divided into smaller clans, each of which had its own "totem"—normally an animal, more rarely a plant or a natural phenomenon—which was worshipped by the members of the clan. There was an obligation on all the members of the clan: not to kill or eat their totem. However, at festivals, as part of sacred ceremonies, these people ate the flesh of their totemic animal.

Nineteenth century anthropologists also noted another curious custom among Australian aborigines which was allied with totemism. A man was not allowed to marry a woman in the same totemic clan; instead, he had to have a wife from a different clan. This custom was named exogamy. The question as to whether exogamy predated, or derived from, totemism, aroused vigorous discussion among anthropologists.<sup>62</sup> Yet, Freud was the first to associate the system of exogamy with the horror of incest. Exogamy was, as Freud explained, an extended form of the incest taboo, by which a man was prohibited not only from marrying his blood relatives but also from marrying all women in his clan, whether they had a blood connection with him or not.

The well-known story of the "primal horde" was constructed as a result of this investigation of the close relationship between totemism and incest taboo. According to Freud, in the beginning of human history there was a group of humans dominated by a single male who possessed all the females in the group. One

day his sons, who had been expelled from this harem, took their revenge on their father. They killed him and ate his flesh. But the sons felt guilty, and their original remorse was the basis of the taboos universal to all societies: taboos of murder and incest. All other institutions and laws in human society derived from the need to repress this original sin.<sup>63</sup> Freud also argued that totemic animals were a replacement of the murdered father. Curiously, although totems are worshipped and forbidden to be killed, there must be occasions—festivals—in which they were killed and eaten. Thereby the clansmen unconsciously repeated the original act of murder.

Malinowski's criticism of Freud is to some extent justifiable. The aim of realist-ethnographers was to present the most objective and realistic picture of other cultures possible. Freud, on the other hand, did not pay very much attention to such objectivity or reality. It is true that his "historical" approach towards the origins of totemism was unashamedly Eurocentric and, as it were, "fantastic." Indeed, Freud presented one of the best-constructed European fantasies about "primitive" society. The "primal horde" story has not been induced from any scientific observation; it is a rather unlikely hypothesis that in the beginning of the history there truly existed such a group of people, an hypothesis which no one can prove; and thus what Freud insists on as the truth lacks authority, apart from the fact that its premise does work within his own theoretic framework. Moreover, the story in itself, adopting the Oedipus Complex theory deduced principally from the family of the European model, in itself can be called a fantasy, not less than some dream episodes in Malinowski's field diary.<sup>64</sup>

And indeed, the "primal horde" story was the most sensational and widely considered part of "Totem and Taboo." Nevertheless, the essay is not only concerned with that story. More important is the *process* by which Freud gets to that conclusion. While there already existed quite a few literary texts dealing with metatextual problems, "Totem and Taboo" was probably the first anthropological text which described what the text itself was doing, i.e. writing about "savage" customs. Neither "other peoples" nor their peculiar cultures really mattered to Freud; the most

important thing to him was how and why *he* described them. What he terms the “savage” or “primitive” no longer refers to the real people but to an imaginary construct, created by the various academic texts he quotes. Thus Freud’s text discloses what is kept hidden in texts by Malinowski and other contemporary ethnographers, or what is only disclosed by Malinowski’s personal diary.

The primary premise of “Totem and Taboo” is the parallelism between neurotics and savages. Freud found, for example, that seemingly unreasonable taboos in some non-European societies were similar to the obsessional prohibitions. Both derive from internal necessities — ambivalent desires, or hatred and love towards prohibited objects. Most significantly, these desires remain unconscious to those who suffer them. Neither neurotic patients nor people in primitive societies know why they have to observe these taboos or prohibitions; all they know is that they must do so.

Thus Freud regarded these taboos as symptoms of what lies underneath. In other words, savage customs are like dreams, both of which present us with fragments of more significant past events. The repressed past is to return in the present; the past no longer exists beside the present, but exists *in* the present. Yet the present does not represent the past as it was. The past is always distorted, disguised; even misleadingly interpreted.

According to Freud, the prototype of all such systems as totemism and taboos, which constitute the view of the universe (“Weltanschauung”) of primitive peoples, is what Freud terms the “secondary revision” of the content of dreams.<sup>(35)</sup> This notion is fully discussed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Dreams do not only disconnect and confuse the content, but also “interpret” the content before submitting it to waking interpretation. And, like waking interpretation, the dream-work prefers order and rationality. Its function is to give senseless and confused dreams an appearance of rationality; as Freud puts it, dreams seem to be saying: “Quick! gather things up, put them in order — any order will do — before he [waking interpretation] enters to take possession.”<sup>(36)</sup>

The secondary revision by the dream-work presents only false interpretations. It disguises the true

content of dreams by interpolating in the dream-content story misleading punctuation and subjunctives. Now, applying this notion concerning the dream-work to his analysis of the psychology of primitive society, Freud insisted that primitive society had a system but that it was the wrong one. Primitive customs, laws and religions would, indeed, present a philosophy of the universe which might be rational from the savage point of view. However, such a philosophy would only serve to repress the problematic underneath. Hence the task of psychoanalysts was to see beyond the false appearance of the systems, whereas the text by realist-ethnographers was concerned only with the surface descriptions of the systems.

And yet, Freud’s argument finds its own dead-end. Provided that the “savage” system is a wrong interpretation of the truth, then how can he prove that his own interpretation is the right one? Doesn’t the “primal horde” story present another false system, adapted from the European system to interpret non-European ones? The only difference between the two systems, totemism and Freud’s Oedipus Complex theory, is that the latter seems to fit better in European society.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud discussed “fantasy” as a typical example of the secondary revision of the dream-content. Fantasy as Freud terms it is a ready-made day-dream which is introduced into the content of a dream. Unlike an ordinary dream, this fantasy often appears to be as consistent as a proper narrative. Freud took an example of a man who, stimulated by the touch on the neck while asleep, made up a long, incredibly detailed and consistent dream about the French Revolution which ended up with his death by guillotine. Actually, as Freud argues, this story had been constructed long before he dreamed of it, although he had remained unconscious of it; and the story replaced the simple thought that the touch on the neck was like being guillotined.<sup>(37)</sup>

It is Freud himself who, in “Totem and Taboo,” described his fantasy, or rather that of all Europeans, about different peoples and cultures. The mysterious, uncanny customs of other cultures had stimulated him to complete his story of the Oedipus Complex. And

yet, despite its unrealistic assumptions, the “primary horde” story has ignited serious discussion among academics of various fields. For, even though it presents an incorrect interpretation of other cultures, the text points to what is at stake in “our” culture.

Freud discovered that the human emotion is fundamentally ambivalent; it consists of two conflicting principles of (unconscious) desire and conscience (or consciousness). What he calls “savageness” then represents the neurotic outbursts of the Unconscious, or desire repressed through the process of civilisation. In “Civilization and its Discontents,” he articulates the fact that “our” civilisation, even after its success in controlling our “savageness,” is haunted by frustration and anxiety: namely, its “discontents.” Thus Freud disclosed that “the speech that cannot be silenced” is *both* the conscious, rational voice of the civilised West, *and* the voice which comes from the more distant, yet not quite unfamiliar place called the Unconscious.

#### Notes

- (1) Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (London, 1967) p.298.
- (2) Phyllis Kaberry, “Malinowski’s Contribution to Fieldwork Methods and the Writing of Ethnography,” Raymond Firth ed., *Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski* (London, 1957) pp.71-91.
- (3) James Clifford, “Partial Truths,” Clifford, George E. Marcus ed. *Writing Culture: The Poetics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986) p.25.
- (4) Malinowski, *The Dynamics of Culture Change* (New Haven, 1945) p.59.
- (5) Clifford, “On Ethnographic Allegory,” *Writing Culture*, p.119.
- (6) This statement instantly evokes in us the paradox which Edward Said disclosed in his *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth, 1991): even though western representations of other cultures distort reality, there has so far existed no such reality outside western discourses — the reality of the non-European world has been created by colonialist westerners.
- (7) Malinowski is reported to have said that: “Rivers is the Rider Haggard of anthropology; I shall be the Conrad.” *Man and Culture*, p.6. James Clifford points to the similarity between Malinowski’s *Diary* and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Clifford, “On Ethnographic Self-fashioning: Conrad and Malinowski,” *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, 1988) pp.92-113.
- (8) Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London, New York, 1922) p.13.
- (9) Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Cambridge, 1989) pp.78-79.
- (10) “Partial Truths,” p.17.
- (11) Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages* (London, 1932) p.xlvii.
- (12) Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” *Illuminations* (London, 1992) p.79.
- (13) Hilary Henson, “Early British Anthropologists and Language,” Edwin Ardener ed. *Social Anthropology and Language* (London, New York, 1971) pp.3-32.
- (14) Diane Bell, Pat Caplan, Wazir Jahan Karim ed., *Gendered Fields: Women, Men and Ethnography* (London, New York, 1993) p.19.
- (15) Talal Asad, “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology,” *Writing Culture* pp.141-164.
- (16) Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London, 1946) p.97.
- (17) My interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* is indebted to Robert Hampson, “‘Heart of Darkness’ and ‘The Speech that Cannot be Silenced,’” *English* 39 (1990) pp.15-32.
- (18) *Diary*, p.xix.
- (19) *Argonauts*, p.7.
- (20) *Diary*, p.69.
- (21) *Diary*, p.65.
- (22) *Diary*, p.203.

- (23) *Diary*, p.133.
- (24) *Diary*, p.110.
- (25) "Ethnographic Self-Fashioning," p.102.
- (26) George W. Stocking Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York, 1987) pp.197-208.
- (27) *Sexual Life*, pp.5-6.
- (28) Malinowski quotes Ernest Jones's criticism of him in *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (London, New York, 1927) pp.136-141.
- (29) Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (London, 1969) pp.422-448.
- (30) *Sex and Repression*, p.153.
- (31) Freud pointed out that John MacLennan was the first to recognise the importance of totemism in human prehistory. Freud, "Totem and Taboo," *The Origin of Religion*, The Penguin Freud Library vol.13 (1990) p.55.
- (32) See for example James Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy* (London 1910). Malinowski also took an interest in this topic at the earliest stage of his academic career, and wrote an essay on Frazer's book (this essay was originally published in Polish). "Totemism and Exogamy (1911-1913)," *The Early writings of Bronislaw Malinowski* (Cambridge, 1993) pp.123-199.
- (33) "Totem and Taboo," pp.202-203.
- (34) As for the similarity between these two texts, George Stocking points out that, although Malinowski was not familiar with Freud's theory at the time he undertook his first Trobriand fieldwork, the field experience depicted in the *Diary* can be read in a Freudian context. See George W. Stocking, Jr., "Anthropology and the Science of the Irrational: Malinowski's Encounter with Freudian Psychoanalysis," *History of Anthropology* 4 (1986) pp.22-28.
- (35) "Totem and Taboo," p.153.
- (36) Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Penguin vol.4 (1991) p.644.
- (37) *Interpretation of Dreams*, pp.636-638.

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