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Strange mythologies: cultural and linguistic opacity in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*

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ABSTRACT

During the years he spent conducting fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands, Bronislaw Malinowski became convinced that foreign cultures should be studied in their entirety, as fully integrated, “organic” structures. In what follows, I explore his attempt to achieve this objective, with regard to a specific cultural practice, in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). I begin by discussing his use of certain tropes, discursive techniques, and narratorial modes that are more often associated with the genres of travel writing and adventure fiction. I then address his conviction that even the most mundane features of social and cultural life carry ethnographic value, allowing the anthropologist to produce a comprehensive overview of any given culture. As I argue, however, this totalizing impulse is frustrated on more than one occasion in *Argonauts*, when Malinowski encounters various “opacities” that cannot be so easily assimilated into ethnographic discourse, thus revealing the limits of the very omniscience that he claims to be pursuing.

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Saturday, March 20 ... Lunch; read Kipling (very poor); then collected esoteric information about *poulo* and *waila*—[but] whenever I touched upon magic or intimate matters, I felt they were telling lies.

Bronislaw Malinowski, Field Diary, Trobriand Islands, 1918

I

This essay explores the representation of cultural difference in Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), a seminal ethnographic study of the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands—or, as the subtitle would have it, *An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. More specifically, the subject of Malinowski’s study was a system of interisland “trade” known as the *kula*, which involves the ceremonial exchange of two different objects: long necklaces of red spondylus shell, called *soulava*, and armbands made of

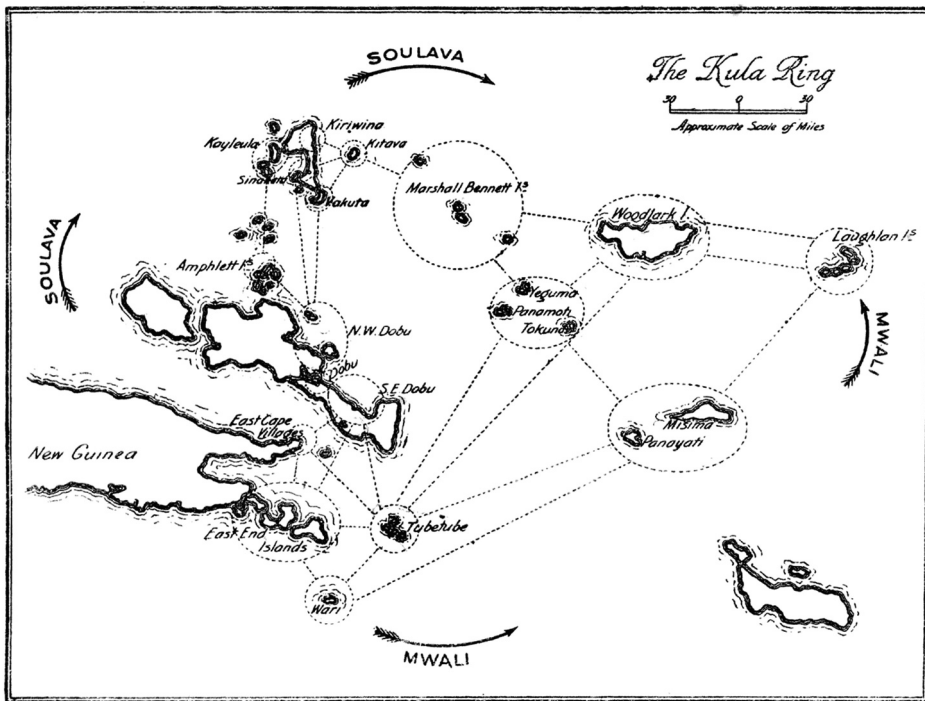


Figure 1. The Kula Ring

a white shell known as *mwali*. These articles travel around the archipelago in opposite directions, each being traded for the other in an endless circuit of exchange (see figure 1). And although the *soulava* and *mwali* carry no economic or utilitarian value themselves, the system by which they are exchanged serves a crucial function within Trobriand society—generating social and political prestige, facilitating interisland trade, and creating an intertribal network of exchange “partners” (*karayta’u*). In short, Malinowski argues, the system of *kula* exchange “welds together a considerable number of tribes, and it embraces a vast complex of activities, interconnected and playing into one another, so as to form one organic whole.”¹

According to Malinowski, the larger social and economic function of the *kula* was beyond the comprehension of the Trobrianders themselves, as they had “no knowledge of the *total outline* of any of their social structure.”² So, from his standpoint, it was necessary to study the various activities associated with this institution—whether it be the construction of the canoes, the voyage from island to island, or the ceremonial exchange itself—in order to achieve a macrocosmic understanding of its function within Trobriand society. In what follows, I explore some of the strategies that Malinowski employs in the service of this objective. I begin by discussing his use of certain tropes, discursive

techniques, and narratorial modes that are more often associated with the genres of travel writing and fiction—particularly narratives of discovery and adventure. These strategies are designed to serve an authenticating function within *Argonauts*, convincing us that what we are reading is based on direct empirical observation; yet at the same time, somewhat paradoxically, they also remind us of the mediated or “fictional” nature of the discourse. I then address Malinowski’s conviction that even the most mundane aspects of social and cultural life carry ethnographic value, allowing the anthropologist to produce a “comprehensive, synthetic *coup d’oeil*” of any given culture.³ As I argue in conclusion, however, this totalizing impulse is frustrated on more than one occasion in *Argonauts*, when Malinowski encounters certain cultural and linguistic opacities that cannot be so easily assimilated into ethnographic discourse, thus revealing the limits of the very omniscience that its author claims to be pursuing.

II

One of the most famous arrival scenes in modern anthropology can be found at the beginning of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*:

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight . . . Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you . . . This exactly describes my first initiation into fieldwork on the south coast of New Guinea . . . Imagine yourself then making your first entry into the village . . . Some natives flock round you, especially if they smell tobacco. Others, the more dignified and elderly, remain seated where they are.⁴

The scene Malinowski is describing here took place in October 1914.⁵ It was the beginning of a four-year period during which he would spend a total of two and a half years studying the Mailu and Trobriand people of southeast Papua New Guinea. In the latter case, the fieldwork he conducted would ultimately lead to the 1922 publication of his career-defining study, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. But it all began eight years earlier, with a young anthropologist arriving on the remote Melanesian island of Mailu, a place known locally for its refined pottery and its ocean-going canoes.

As Mary Louise Pratt observes, such arrival scenes are a “convention of almost every variety of travel writing”; but, in the discipline of anthropology, they serve an “authenticating” function that is quite specific to the genre.⁶ This is all true, they assure the reader; you can believe it because the author himself or herself was *there*. In other words, scenes of this kind serve as a rhetorical strategy by which the anthropologist is able to establish his or her ethnographic authority, grounding the “objective” discourse to follow in

personal experience, while also emphasizing the various logistical and cultural challenges that are associated with such an enterprise. “[P]ersonal narrative,” Pratt writes,

is a conventional component of ethnographies. It turns up almost invariably in introductions or first chapters, where opening narratives commonly recount the writer’s arrival at the field site, for instance, the initial reception by the inhabitants, [and] the slow, agonizing process of learning the language and overcoming rejection . . . Though they exist only on the margins of the formal ethnographic description, these conventional opening narratives are not trivial. They play the crucial role of anchoring that description in the intense and authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork.⁷

According to Pratt, “personal narrative persists alongside objectifying description in ethnographic writing” because it mitigates a fundamental contradiction, within the discipline, between “personal and scientific authority.”⁸ Fieldwork, she argues, “produces a kind of authority that is anchored to a large extent in subjective, sensuous experience. One experiences the indigenous environment and lifeways for oneself, sees with one’s own eyes, even plays some roles, albeit contrived ones, in the daily life of the community.”⁹ And yet, the resulting ethnographic study is “supposed to conform to the norms of a scientific discourse whose authority resides in the absolute effacement of the speaking and experiencing subject.”¹⁰

Ethnographic writing employs the personal narrative in an attempt to mediate between these conflicting imperatives; and it does so, in many cases, by utilizing tropes—such as the arrival scene—that are more typically associated with the genres of travel writing and adventure fiction. This is true of many ethnographic studies, but what is remarkable about *Argonauts*, in particular, is that Malinowski’s peripatetic narrative gives him the opportunity to arrive at his field site not once but multiple times. In the first two chapters, for example, we are taken on an imaginary journey around the region, tracing an itinerary that includes some of the following newly “discovered” locales:

As we sail North, passing East Cape, the Easternmost point of the main island—a long, flat promontory covered with palms and fruit belts, and harbouring a very dense population—a new world, new both geographically and ethnographically, opens up before us . . . After another turn, we enter a big bay, on both sides bordered by a flat foreshore, and in the middle of it rises out of a girdle of tropical vegetation, the creased cone of an extinct volcano, the island of Dobu. We are now in the centre of a densely populated and ethnographically important district. From the island, in olden days, fierce and daring cannibal and head-hunting expeditions were periodically launched, to the dread of the neighbouring tribes.¹¹

As we sail on, rounding one after the other the Eastern promontories of Fergusson Island, a group of strongly marked monumental profiles appears far on the horizon from behind the receding headlands. These are the Amphlett Islands, the link, both

geographically and culturally, between the coastal tribes of the volcanic region of Dobu and the inhabitants of the flat coral archipelago of the Trobriands . . . When our boat anchors there, the natives approach it in their canoes, offering clay pots for sale. But if we want to go ashore and have a look at their village, there is a great commotion, and all the women disappear from the open places.¹²

Further ahead, through the misty spray, the line of horizon thickens here and there, as if faint pencil marks had been drawn upon it. These become more substantial, one of them lengthens and broadens, the others spring into the distinct shapes of small islands, and we find ourselves in the big lagoon of the Trobriands . . . [A]s we approach the main island, the thick, tangled matting of the low jungle breaks here and there over a beach, and we can see into a palm grove, like an interior, supported by pillars. This indicates the site of a village. We step ashore on to the sea front . . . and passing through the grove, we enter the village itself.¹³

As I have suggested, scenes of this kind serve an important authenticating function within the discipline of anthropology, assuring us that what we are about to read is based on direct personal experience, but they also serve as a means by which the subjective reality of fieldwork can be integrated into the “objective” ethnographic discourse to which it eventually gives rise. Or to put it another way, such passages could be regarded as the discursive residue of the various subjective writing practices—the field notes, the interviews, the diaries, etc.—that serve as the preliminary to any modern ethnographic study.¹⁴ Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that these traces are what make such studies modern in the first place.

Since the seventeenth century, James Clifford observes, “Western science has excluded certain expressive modes from its legitimate repertoire: rhetoric (in the name of ‘plain,’ transparent signification), fiction (in the name of fact), and subjectivity (in the name of objectivity).” The discursive features “eliminated from science were localized in the category of ‘literature,’” which was seen as “incurably figurative and polysemous.”¹⁵ In *Argonauts*, however, this generic boundary becomes increasingly blurred, allowing those qualities previously associated with the “literary”—indeterminacy, dialogicity, subjectivity—to infiltrate a product of the social sciences.¹⁶ The arrival scenes quoted above, for example, allow us to trace a clear genealogy of influence, one that includes both travel writing (Robert Louis Stevenson’s *In the South Seas* [1896] immediately comes to mind) and adventure fiction, particularly castaway narratives such as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) or Herman Melville’s *Typee* (1846).¹⁷ The physical mobility that our narrator demonstrates in these opening scenes, as he makes his way from one island to another, could thus be regarded as an objective correlative for the *generic* mobility that the text itself demonstrates, as it moves freely between the different “discourses” of travel writing, fiction, and ethnography. And this mobility, in turn, has a profound influence over the narrator’s subject position within *Argonauts*, giving him

a kind of ubiquity and versatility that allows him to employ a wide range of narratorial modes. For one thing, the parameters of his ethnographic knowledge are constantly expanding and contracting, ranging from complete omniscience in some passages—what Gérard Genette would call “zero focalization”—to absolute ignorance in others, while his own status as narrator also oscillates between the intradiegetic and the extradiegetic, allowing him to reside within the narrative as a subjective presence (where he can serve the authenticating function we discussed earlier) or to situate himself outside the diegesis altogether, where he can produce the type of “impartial” scientific discourse that the discipline traditionally requires.¹⁸ In *Argonauts*, to quote Pratt once more, the narrating self can be “understood not as a monolithic scientist-observer, but as a multifaceted entity who participates, observes, and writes from multiple, constantly shifting positions.”¹⁹ Indeed, such are “the reflective capacities of this versatile, larger-than-life subject that it can absorb and transmit the richness of a whole culture.”²⁰ And as we shall see, this comprehensive understanding (and representation) of Trobriand culture was precisely what Malinowski hoped to achieve in writing *Argonauts*—“to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world.”²¹

III

While conducting his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski claimed to have discovered the “secret” of anthropology—the “magic” by which the anthropologist is “able to evoke the real spirit of the natives, the true picture of tribal life.”²² Unfortunately, this secret turned out to be rather prosaic. “As usual,” we learn, “success can only be obtained by a patient and systematic application of a number of rules of common sense and well-known scientific principles.”²³ But when he came to write *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, while living on Tenerife in 1920–21, Malinowski realized that he would need to do something else too. In order to convey this unfamiliar vision, this foreign world, to the reader, he would need to employ some of the narrative strategies that are typically associated with fictional discourse. As Clifford Geertz observes,

The ability of anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously has less to do with either a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance than it has with their capacity to convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly “been there.” And that, persuading us that this offstage miracle has occurred, is where the writing comes in.²⁴

In Malinowski’s case, as suggested above, this writing would be heavily influenced by the generic conventions of travel literature and adventure

fiction. We know from his letters that he was an avid reader of Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Joseph Conrad; and, in his Trobriand field diary, Malinowski's personal identification with these authors becomes increasingly obvious. On 29 November 1914, for example, he admitted to being "strongly under [the] spell of [Kipling's] *Kim*—a very interesting novel, [which] gives a great deal of information about India"—while elsewhere he compares his own physical suffering to that of Stevenson, who waged "a heroic struggle against illness and exhaustion."²⁵ But Malinowski's primary influence, and the authorial figure with whom he most strongly identified, was his older compatriot Joseph Conrad. "[W. H. R.] Rivers is the Rider Haggard of anthropology," he famously declared. "I shall be the Conrad."²⁶ In the Trobriand diary, there are several direct references to Conrad (e.g., "On the whole, my feelings toward the natives are decidedly tending to '*Exterminate the brutes*'"), and the novelist's stylistic influence is often palpable.²⁷ On 19 December 1914, for instance, shortly after his arrival on the island of Mailu, Malinowski describes hearing a distant noise:

the protracted, piercing sound of a sea shell being blown . . . and with it a monstrous squealing of pigs and roar of men. In the silence of the night it gave the impression of some mysterious atrocity being perpetrated and threw a sudden light—a somber light—on forgotten cannibal ceremonies.²⁸

Strange noises, mysterious atrocities, and forgotten cannibal ceremonies: Conrad's influence could hardly be more pronounced than it is here. By the time Malinowski came to write *Argonauts*, however, this influence had been diluted, refined, one might even say sublimated. Another, more authoritative ethnographic subjectivity had been fashioned, and this preliminary autobiographical mode of writing had been converted into "legitimate" ethnographic discourse—full of common sense and well-known scientific principles.²⁹ But as I have argued, traces of these anterior writing practices and influences can still be identified in *Argonauts*. The mysterious atrocities and forgotten cannibal ceremonies may have been removed or moderated, but, in their place, we find more acceptable, more versatile literary tropes, such as the arrival scene and the voyage—both of which retain an underlying genealogical connection to earlier adventure narratives.

We have already discussed the arrival scenes in some detail, but it is worth acknowledging, at this stage, the difference between these scenes as they were recorded in Malinowski's field diary and the versions that eventually found their way into *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. This, for example, is how he describes his arrival on the island of Dobu in the diary: "Dobu, extinct volcano; Bwayo'u to the left and [the] distant ranges on Normanby beyond . . . I climbed up the ladder and enjoyed the marvelous landscape. Sunset; I went down [into my cabin], washed, [and] dressed."³⁰ And here's

his description of Gumawana, a small island in the Amphlett Archipelago: “Ashore; comical fences; miserable houses on pilings . . . Yellow ocher pots lie under each house. I try to talk to [the villagers]; they run away or tell lies.”³¹ Such passages are undoubtedly authentic, but in order to signify, at a secondary level of meaning, the principle of authenticity itself, in order to acquire a higher degree of verisimilitude, they will need to undergo a discursive transformation. If the anthropologist is to persuade readers that the “offstage miracle” of cultural communion has genuinely occurred, then he will need to employ certain tropes, certain devices, certain images, that are ultimately derived from fictional discourse. And therein lies the ambiguity. These fictional strategies are employed to create a “reality effect”—to signify the real, the authentic—but in so doing, they inevitably evoke their fictional antecedents, thus conveying a message of authenticity *and* fictionality with the very same referential gesture.³²

The other literary trope that Malinowski employs in order to transform his field notes and diary into a “persuasive” ethnography is that of the voyage. If we put all of the arrival scenes together, they obviously constitute a single journey; and a large proportion of the following pages (Chapters V–XVI) is structured around an imaginary *kula* voyage, from the village of Sinaketa, which is located on the “flat, muddy shore of the Trobriand Lagoon,” to the volcanic island of Dobu and back again.³³ This transforms what might have been a static and synchronic representation of Trobriand culture into a dynamic and diachronic narrative—one that allows us to join the Trobrianders on a “perilous and difficult” journey of roughly 250 kilometers.³⁴ According to Robert J. Thornton, the “imaginative travel of [Malinowski’s] narrative reinforces the descriptive discourse of the real journeying of the Trobrianders,” creating an immersive correspondence between the structure of the narrative and the cultural practice it is describing.³⁵ Moreover, by organizing his monograph in this way, Malinowski manages to impose an overarching narrative logic on the “brute material of [ethnographic] information,” transforming various canoe-making techniques, navigation practices, and ceremonial exchange protocols into a single picaresque adventure (remember that subtitle: *An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*).³⁶ Yet, here too we encounter significant ambiguities. Although this increase in narrativity certainly gives the reader a more tangible sense of “being there,” of accompanying the anthropologist and his subjects as they travel from one island to another, it also serves to foreground the mediated or reconstructed nature of the discourse, once more raising the disciplinary specter of fictionality.³⁷

As we have observed, one of Malinowski’s priorities, while writing *Argonauts*, was to demonstrate the authenticity of his ethnographic writing—to convince us that his expertise was based on direct “personal

experience.”³⁸ But this wasn’t always the case. At times, readers are able to catch fleeting glimpses of the narrative’s “fictional” substructure. Halfway through the return journey to Duba, for instance, Malinowski confesses that his account of the voyage thus far has been largely composed of “reconstructed” scenes. “Such a reconstruction,” he claims, “for one who has seen much of the natives’ tribal life and has . . . intelligent informants,” is neither “very difficult” nor particularly “fanciful.”³⁹ That may be so, but this is still a revealing admission. When we study the chronology of *kula* events that Malinowski witnessed firsthand (on page 16 of my edition), we make an interesting discovery. Aside from an unsuccessful attempt to sail to the nearby island of Kitava in September 1915, when the fleet encountered adverse winds that were attributed to his presence, Malinowski never actually joined a *kula* expedition.⁴⁰ So if he was going to structure his monograph around a single, emblematic *kula* voyage, he would need to rely, quite heavily, on such reconstructed scenes. “As a rule,” we are told, “even in minute details, my reconstructions *hardly differed from reality* . . . [But] it is possible for an ethnographer to enter into concrete details with more conviction when he describes things [he has] actually seen.”⁴¹ Indeed. This is a useful reminder, if one were needed, that the “implied” ethnographer in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*—the intrepid participant-observer who describes these daring voyages so vividly and with such methodological rigor—ought to be carefully distinguished from the *actual* ethnographer, the historical figure of Malinowski himself, who may have been somewhere else altogether.

IV

During the two years he spent conducting fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski became increasingly convinced that a foreign culture should be studied in its entirety, as an interrelated and organic whole. Ethnographies, he argued in the introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, “should deal with the totality of all social, cultural and psychological aspects of the community, for they are so interwoven that not one can be understood without taking into consideration all of the others.”⁴² According to Malinowski, it was essential that the anthropologist study even the most mundane and quotidian practices so as to compile a more complete picture of a particular culture or society. And of course, in order to achieve this objective, it was necessary to develop a more empirical form of anthropology—one that required the anthropologist to observe these practices directly, rather than relying on secondary sources or the testimony of the “natives” themselves. “[T]here is,” Malinowski writes,

a series of phenomena of great importance which cannot possibly be recorded by questioning or computing documents, but have to be observed in their full actuality. Let us call them *the imponderabilia of actual life*. Here belong such things as the routine of a man's working day, the details of his care of the body, of the manner of taking food and preparing it; the tone of conversational and social life around the village fires, the existence of strong friendships or hostilities, and of passing sympathies and dislikes between people; the subtle yet unmistakable manner in which personal vanities and ambitions are reflected in the behaviour of the individual and in the emotional reactions of those who surround him . . . [I]f we remember that these imponderable yet all important facts of actual life are part of the real substance of the social fabric, that in them are spun the innumerable threads which keep together the family, the clan, the village community, the tribe—their significance becomes clear.⁴³

It is worth noting that Malinowski's emphasis on the empirical observation of daily activities did not mean that the more "conspicuous acts of tribal life, such as ceremonies, rites, [or] festivities," should be neglected.⁴⁴ Rather, he was advocating a nonhierarchical form of anthropology in which equal attention was paid to both the mundane and the extraordinary aspects of a culture—while also recognizing the interrelated nature of these two categories. "An ethnographic diary," Malinowski argues, "would be the ideal instrument for this sort of study. And if, side by side with the normal and typical, the ethnographer carefully notes the slight or the more pronounced deviations from it, he will be able to indicate the two extremes within which the normal moves."⁴⁵ For Malinowski, then, the ideal anthropological study refuses to differentiate between "what is commonplace, or drab, or ordinary, and what strikes [the anthropologist] as astonishing and out-of-the-way."⁴⁶ Instead, it initiates a dialectic between these two categories that will eventually assimilate the mundane and the extraordinary, the familiar and the strange, into "one inseparable whole," thus providing the anthropologist with a comprehensive overview of an entire culture.⁴⁷

The methodology that Malinowski is advocating here emerged out of an understanding of culture that would come to be known as functionalism—a theoretical perspective and ethnographic practice based on the conviction that "every item of culture, every custom and belief, represents a value, fulfills a social function, has a positive, biological significance."⁴⁸ *Argonauts* is full of such functional practices, all of which contribute to the functionality of Trobriand society as a whole, but let us take, as a representative example, the magical rites surrounding the construction of ocean-going canoes (*masawa*). In the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski writes, "the general injunction for always building canoes under the guidance of magic is obeyed without the slightest deviation."⁴⁹ For if these rites were omitted, it is believed that the resulting canoe would be "unseaworthy, slow in sailing, and unlucky," particularly when undergoing long interisland voyages. In the folklore surrounding the construction and "propitious sailing" of the *masawa*, he continues, one can see

quite “plainly the power ascribed to magic in imparting speed and other qualities to a canoe.”⁵⁰ Indeed, “[a]ccording to native mythology, which is literally accepted and strongly believed, canoes could be even made to fly, had not the necessary magic fallen into oblivion.”⁵¹

In addition to their symbolic value, however, such rites also serve an economic function within Trobriand society. Magic, we are told,

far from being a useless appendage, or even a burden on the work, supplies the psychological influence, which keeps people confident about the success of their labour, and provides them with a sort of natural leader. Thus the organisation of labour in canoe-building rests on the one hand on the division of functions, those of the owner, the expert and the helpers, and on the other on the co-operation between labour and magic.⁵²

From a functionalist perspective, even a simple ceremony such as the cleansing ritual that is performed before a tree is felled serves a specific social and economic function.⁵³ It also carries a more general significance within the Trobriand social structure as a whole, given its relationship to a wide range of interconnected esoteric practices. “[A]ll magical formulae,” Malinowski argues, “disclose essentials of belief and illustrate typical ideas in a manner so thorough and telling that no other road could lead us as straight into the inner mind of the native.”⁵⁴ By gathering together various instances of magic, he says, the anthropologist will be able to “arrive at a certain synthesis [with regard] to the [Trobriand] theory of magic,” while also revealing the extent to which such magic infiltrates every aspect of tribal life.⁵⁵ For example:

- (1) “The birth of a child is always ushered in by magic, in order to make the child prosper, and to neutralize . . . dangers and evil influences.”
- (2) “The passion of love . . . has a very elaborate magical counterpart, embodied in many rites and formulae, to which a great importance is attached, and all success in sexual life is ascribed to it.”
- (3) “There is a form of beauty magic, performed ceremonially over . . . dancers, and there is also a kind of safety magic at dances, whose object is to prevent the evil magic of envious sorcerers.”
- (4) “Natural forces of great importance to man, such as . . . wind, which must be controlled for purposes of sailing and fishing, are also governed by magic.”
- (5) “There is the magic of conditional curses, performed in order to guard property from possible harm, inflicted by others; there is war-magic; there is magic associated with taboos put on coconuts and betel-nuts, in order to make them grow and multiply; there is magic to avert thunder and resuscitate people who are struck by lightning; there is the magic of toothache, and a magic to make food last a long time.”⁵⁶

Considered in isolation, such examples of magic may be of little significance; but if they are viewed as part of a larger social organism, and seen to perform a vital function within that organism, they become a far more valuable source of ethnographic knowledge. “An analysis of the contents of [these] spells,” Malinowski writes, “the study of the manner in which they are uttered; in which the concomitant rites are performed; the study of the natives’ behaviour, of the actors as well as of the spectators; the knowledge of the social position and social functions, of the magical expert”—all of this “reveals to us, not only the bare structure of their ideas on magic, but also the associated sentiments and emotions, and the nature of magic as a social force.”⁵⁷ This, then, is the “ethnographer’s [own] magic,” the process by which he or she is able to subject a wide range of cultural practices to ethnographic scrutiny, and, through the “patient and systematic application” of various “scientific principles,” integrate them into a single, organic whole—creating a cultural *summa* that encompasses everything from the construction of a canoe to the birth of a child, from the fear of thunder to the feeling of love.⁵⁸ Only thus, Malinowski declares, can we hope to “grasp the inner meaning and the psychological reality of all that is outwardly strange, at first sight incomprehensible, in a different culture.”⁵⁹

V

What a piece of writing says it is doing, however, and what it actually does are not always the same thing; and that is certainly the case in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, where Malinowski often struggles to make sense of the disparate particles of ethnographic knowledge that he accumulates. Despite all of his interpretive labor, in other words, Malinowski’s totalizing impulses are consistently frustrated, and he is forced to acknowledge those aspects of Trobriand culture that remain opaque—the practices, both mundane and extraordinary, that defy his understanding.⁶⁰ Such limitations become particularly pronounced when he is transcribing the magical spells that are used during various Trobriand ceremonies. Time and again, he comes across words and phrases that are simply untranslatable. “A considerable proportion of the words found in magic,” he writes, “do not belong to ordinary speech, but are archaisms, mythical names and strange compounds, formed according to unusual linguistic rules . . . [And even] if we obtain a series of meanings corresponding to each term of the original [spell], there is often considerable difficulty in linking these meanings together.”⁶¹

In one case, for example, Malinowski concedes that “[i]t was very difficult to translate the expression *kubara, takuba, kubara*.” So, in the end, he is obliged to speculate: “It is evidently an archaic [phrase], and I have found it in several formulae of the *mwasila* [a form of magic]. It seems to mean something like an encounter between the approaching fleet [of canoes] and

the *koya* [mountain].”⁶² When confronted by such linguistic difficulties, Malinowski often relies on translations provided by his local informants, but this doesn’t always get him very far. While observing the construction of a canoe in Chapter V, for instance, he witnesses a number of magical rites that are designed to make the felled tree—and eventually the canoe itself—lighter. One of the spells he transcribes during this episode reads as follows:

“He fails to outrun me” (repeated many times). “The canoe trembles with speed” (many times). *A few untranslatable words are uttered; then a long chain of ancestral names is invoked.* “I lash you, O tree; the tree flies; the tree becomes like a breath of wind; the tree becomes like a butterfly . . . One sun (i.e., time) for my companions, midday sun, setting sun; another sun for me . . . the rising sun, the rays of the (rising) sun, (the time of) opening the huts, (the time of the) rising of the morning star!”⁶³

Several chapters later, we learn that the untranslatable word is in fact *mabuguwa*; but when Malinowski asks one of the Trobrianders what this word means, he is told, rather unhelpfully, that it is *megwa wala* (“just magic”).⁶⁴ And so he is forced to transcribe the word directly, in the original Kilivila language, without providing any indication of its literal meaning. “[The] spell of lightness,” he writes, “begins with a typical *u’ula* [introductory passage]”:

Susuwayliguwa (repeated);
He fails to outrun me;

mabuguwa (repeated);
magical word;

mabugu, mabuguva’u.
mabugu, mabugu-new.⁶⁵

Titavaguwa (repeated);
the canoe trembles with speed;

mabugu,
mabugu,

mabugamugwa;
mabugu-ancient;

Here, Malinowski is obliged to forego the traditional interpretive function of the anthropologist. Rather than rendering this esoteric terminology intelligible for the reader, he can do little more than gesture toward its magical significance in a fairly uninformative and tautological way. *Megwa wala*, we are told; it’s just magic, that’s all.

Of course, some magical phrases, such as *abracadabra*, do not actually have a literal or denotative meaning—their only “meaning” residing in their connotative value as mystical utterances. But Malinowski could never identify these phrases with complete certainty, as he himself concedes: “Often a fairly good informant, quite capable of reciting a spell slowly and intelligibly, without losing his thread, will be of no use as [a] linguistic informant”—that is, “in helping to obtain a definition of a word, in assisting to break it up into its formative parts; in explaining which words belong to ordinary speech, which are dialectic, which are archaic, and which are purely magical compounds.”⁶⁶ According to Malinowski, the Trobrianders divide

their language into two basic categories: the language of magic (*megwa la biga*) and the language of ordinary speech (*livala la biga*).⁶⁷ In the first case, the discourse demonstrates a “considerable coefficient of weirdness”—ungrammatical phrases, condensed structures, archaic terminology, etc.—which he found almost impossible to decipher.⁶⁸ Perhaps not surprisingly, the Trobrianders were also reluctant to discuss this aspect of their culture with Malinowski, and would employ various “defensive phrases” in order to avoid doing so.⁶⁹ “*Aysekigala takateta, megwa la biga,*” they would say: “I am ignorant, we do not know, it is the language of magic.”⁷⁰ But as we have seen, even if the word or phrase could be translated, and even if a willing interpreter could be secured, there was no guarantee that the meaning of the “magical utterance” would be adequately delineated, thus allowing it to be converted into ethnographic knowledge.⁷¹

On more than one occasion in *Argonauts*, Malinowski also struggles with cryptic references to Trobriand mythology:

I cannot give a correct commentary to the mythological names Kausubiyai and Nabonabwana in the first part of the [preceding] spell. What this part means, whether the reclining individual who hears the noises of the sea is the magician, or whether it represents the sensations of the fish who hears the callings for help, I could not make out.⁷²

And even those passages that are legible can often give rise to frustrating ambiguities. Take the following spell, for example, which Trobriand sailors recite as they are abandoning a damaged canoe:

Mist, gathering mist, encircling mist, surround, surround me!
 Mist, gathering mist, encircling mist, surround, surround me, my mast!
 Mist, gathering mist, etc. . . . surround me, the nose of my canoe.
 Mist, etc. . . . surround me, my sail,
 Mist, etc. . . . surround me, my steering oar,
 Mist, etc. . . . surround me, my rigging,
 Mist, etc. . . . surround me, my platform, [etc.].⁷³

At first, Malinowski writes that this particular spell (from which I have quoted only a few lines) requires very little commentary. But then, almost immediately, he acknowledges the “ambiguity” of the section I have cited here. “I am not certain,” he confesses,

whether this is to be interpreted in the sense that the *toliwaga* [the “master” or owner of a canoe] wants to surround his whole canoe with mist so that it may not be seen by the sharks, etc., or whether, on the contrary, just on the verge of abandoning his canoe, and anxious to cut himself off from its various parts which may turn on him and “eat him,” he therefore wants to surround each of them with mist so that it might be blinded. The latter interpretation fits the above-quoted belief that certain parts of the canoe . . . “eat” the shipwrecked men. But again, in this spell, there are enumerated

not certain parts, but every part, and that is undoubtedly not consistent with this belief, so the question must remain open.⁷⁴

It is appropriate, perhaps, that the spell in this case should refer to an encircling, obscuring mist, for this is precisely what Malinowski encounters, with some regularity, throughout *Argonauts*. Although he concludes by proclaiming his “love of the final synthesis,” a synthesis brought about by the “assimilation and comprehension of all the items of a culture,” this is an objective that the text itself quite clearly fails to achieve.⁷⁵ Malinowski, as anthropologist and author, may aspire to a state of complete omniscience, but the ethnography he ultimately produces pulls in the opposite direction, consistently revealing the *limits* of that omniscience—drawing our attention to those features of Trobriand culture that resist ethnographic assimilation.

It is this “failure,” this inability to elucidate everything it describes or transcribes, that makes *Argonauts* such an exemplary work of modern anthropology. Malinowski was obviously driven by a powerful epistemophilic impulse—by a desire to know all there was to know about Trobriand culture—yet he was also prepared to accommodate those cultural practices that defied interpretation and understanding. So although he painstakingly transcribes spells such as the ones quoted above, and subjects them to exhaustive linguistic analysis, he candidly acknowledges their opacities and ambiguities too. Moreover, he has the ethnographic integrity to leave these fragments of unassimilated data in their “original” condition—as signifiers that carry no real denotative meaning for the typical reader, but at a deeper, connotative level could be said to represent the principle of cultural difference itself—thus preventing his study from achieving the “final synthesis,” the perfect and complete coalescence, that he claims to be pursuing.⁷⁶ In an essay entitled “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” James Clifford has identified two different tendencies within modern anthropology. There is what he calls “anthropological humanism,” which “begins with the different and renders it—through naming, classifying, describing, interpreting—comprehensible”; and then there is “ethnographic surrealism,” which, by contrast, “attacks the familiar, provoking the irruption of otherness—the unexpected.”⁷⁷ What makes *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* so modern, I would argue, and so fascinating, is the fact that it demonstrates both tendencies at once, meticulously cataloging those aspects of Trobriand culture that are amenable to such a process, while also acknowledging the various features that remain irredeemably foreign—the untranslatable magical spells, the obscure incantations, and the strange mythologies.

And with this final observation, our argument has traced a full circle. At the beginning of the essay, I explored some of the literary strategies that Malinowski employs in order to establish the authenticity of his narrative—in order to convince us that what we are reading actually happened. Yet, at

the same time, these strategies also reveal the mediated or “fictional” nature of the discourse. Similarly, while the cultural opacities that Malinowski encountered in the field attest to the “authenticity” and methodological rigor of his ethnographic writing, its faithful reproduction of an inconvenient reality, they also carry a certain literary resonance. In places, for example, I am reminded of Stephen Greenblatt’s notion of “strategic opacities,” a term he uses to describe the “technique of radical excision” employed by Shakespeare in his late tragedies. According to Greenblatt,

Shakespeare found that he could immeasurably deepen the effect of his plays, that he could provoke in the audience and in himself a peculiarly passionate intensity of response, if he took out a key explanatory element, thereby occluding the rationale, motivation, or ethical principle that accounted for the action that was to unfold. The principle was not the making of a riddle to be solved, but the creation of a strategic opacity.⁷⁸

Of course, such opacity is another trope—like the arrival scene and the voyage—that we tend to associate with narratives of discovery and adventure. In Melville’s *Typee*, having witnessed several “native” ceremonies on the Marquesas, our narrator confesses that he “saw everything, but could comprehend nothing”; and as any reader of the novel will know, we encounter similar opacities on almost every page of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (an “adjectival insistence upon inexpressibility and incomprehensible mystery” that F. R. Leavis found particularly frustrating).⁷⁹ But perhaps this was the real “secret” that Malinowski discovered while conducting his fieldwork in the remote archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea: the fact that the future of anthropology lay somewhere *between* the opposing categories we have been discussing—at the intersection of reality and fiction, the empirical and the imaginary, the lucid and the opaque. And if the anthropologist was going to “evoke the real spirit of the natives, the true picture of tribal life,” this is precisely where he or she would have to reside.⁸⁰

Notes

1. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 83.
2. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 83.
3. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 510.
4. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 4.
5. Young, *Malinowski*, 328.
6. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 78.
7. Pratt, “Fieldwork,” 31–3. For more on the discursive strategies by which ethnographic authority is established, see Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority.”
8. Pratt, “Fieldwork,” 32.
9. Pratt, “Fieldwork,” 32.
10. Pratt, “Fieldwork,” 32.
11. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 38–9.

12. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 45–7.
13. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 49–51. For a brief biographical account of this journey, which Malinowski undertook in November and December of 1917, see Young, *Malinowski*, 492–3.
14. When Malinowski's own diary from the years 1914–15 and 1917–18 was published in 1967, its candid declarations of boredom (“This interview bored me and did not go well” [*Diary*, 151]), alienation (“I thought of civilization with a *pang*” [*Diary*, 151]), and misanthropy (“The [natives] were getting on my nerves, and I could not concentrate” [*Diary*, 284]) generated considerable controversy.
15. Clifford, “Introduction,” 5.
16. This is a particularly salient example of what Clifford Geertz refers to as “genre blurring” (*Local Knowledge*, 19)—a “state of affairs,” he argues, that has become “the natural condition of things and . . . is leading to significant realignments in scholarly affinities” (*Local Knowledge*, 8).
17. For more on Malinowski's literary influences, see Thornton, “Imagine”; Clifford, “On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning”; and Thompson, “Anthropology's Conrad.”
18. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 189.
19. Pratt, “Fieldwork,” 39.
20. Pratt, “Fieldwork,” 39.
21. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 25.
22. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 6.
23. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 6.
24. Geertz, *Works*, 4–5. In a fascinating analysis of modern anthropology, Marilyn Strathern makes a similar observation. “Preparing an [ethnographic] description,” she argues, “requires specific literary strategies, the construction of a *persuasive fiction*: a monograph must be laid out in such a way that it can convey novel compositions of ideas. This becomes a question of its own internal composition, of the organization of analysis, the sequence in which the reader is introduced to concepts, the way categories are juxtaposed or dualisms reversed . . . So whether a writer chooses (say) a ‘scientific’ style or a ‘literary’ one signals the kind of fiction it is; there cannot be a choice to eschew fiction altogether” (“Out of Context,” 256–7 [my italics]).
25. Malinowski, *Diary*, 41, 160.
26. Firth, “Introduction,” 6. With this comparison, as George W. Stocking infers, Malinowski was most probably drawing a distinction between “the surveying of an ethnographic surface and the mining of its deeper psychological meaning” (“The Ethnographer's Magic,” 51).
27. Malinowski, *Diary*, 69.
28. Malinowski, *Diary*, 50–1. This particular passage is one of several discussed by Christina A. Thompson in “Anthropology's Conrad.”
29. In his essay “On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning,” James Clifford describes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) as a “paradigm of ethnographic subjectivity,” and he explores the “specific echoes and analogies linking Conrad's situation of cultural liminality in the Congo with Malinowski's in the Trobriands” (“On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning,” 100). “Obviously,” Clifford notes, “these are different writing experiences: ethnographies are both like and unlike novels. But in an important general way the two experiences enact the process of fictional self-fashioning in relative systems of culture and language that I call ethnographic” (“On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning,” 110).
30. Malinowski, *Diary*, 137–8.

31. Malinowski, *Diary*, 140. The reader may like to compare these passages to the corresponding arrival scenes, taken from *Argonauts*, that are cited above.
32. It was Roland Barthes, of course, who first used the term “reality effect” to describe those “superfluous” details whose primary narratological purpose is to persuade us that what we are reading is real: “Flaubert’s barometer [in ‘Un Coeur Simple’], Michelet’s little door [in *Histoire de France: La Révolution*] finally say nothing but this: *we are the real*; it is the category of ‘the real’ (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified [and] the *reality effect* is produced” (“The Reality Effect,” 148). As we have seen, the fictional dimension of ethnographic discourse serves a similar authenticating function—allowing the anthropologist to establish his or her ethnographic authority (Pratt) and persuading the reader that the “miracle” of cultural communion has actually occurred (Geertz). In what follows, however, I shall be emphasizing the underlying ambiguity of such “fictional” strategies, arguing that they can also have an irrealizing or *deauthenticating* influence on the discourse.
33. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 195.
34. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 25.
35. Thornton, “Imagine,” 10.
36. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 3–4.
37. In the field of narrative theory, “narrativity” is a term that is used to designate “the quality of being narrative, the set of properties characterizing narratives and distinguishing them from non-narratives.” It also refers to “the set of optional features that make narratives more prototypically narrative-like, more immediately identified, processed, and interpreted as narratives” (Prince, “Narrativity,” 387).
38. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 13.
39. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 376.
40. Apparently, To’uluwa, the chief of Omarakana, “got it into his head that [Malinowski] had brought him bad luck, and so when he planned his next trip, [the anthropologist] was not taken into his confidence or allowed to form one of the party” (Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 479).
41. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 376 (my italics).
42. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, xvi.
43. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 18–19.
44. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 20.
45. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 21.
46. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 11.
47. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 515; One could see this methodology as the ethnographic equivalent of Barthes’ insistence that every detail of a narrative, however minor, carries semiotic value. “[E]verything in [a narrative] signifies,” he argues. “Even were a detail to appear irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality, it would nonetheless end up with precisely the meaning of absurdity or uselessness” (“Introduction,” 261). And this, in turn, may bring to mind Malinowski’s notion of phatic communion, as elucidated in his 1923 essay “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages.” Here, Malinowski proposes that “a mere phrase of politeness, in use as much among savage tribes as in a European drawing room, fulfills a function to which the meaning of its words is almost completely irrelevant” (“The Problem of Meaning,” 313). Such “meaningless” pleasantries, he says, are simply designed to create an “atmosphere of sociability” and to avoid the “strange and unpleasant tension” that people feel “when facing each other in silence” (“The Problem of Meaning,” 314–15).

48. Malinowski, "Ethnology," 214. For the functionalist, Malinowski would explain in a posthumously published essay, culture is regarded as (1) "an instrumental apparatus by which man is put in a position the better to cope with the concrete specific problems that face him in his environment in the course of the satisfaction of his needs"; (2) "a system of objects, activities, and attitudes in which every part exists as a means to an end"; and (3) "an integral [organism] in which the various elements are interdependent" (*A Scientific Theory*, 150).
49. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 115.
50. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 115.
51. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 115.
52. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 116.
53. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 127.
54. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 392.
55. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 392.
56. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 393–5.
57. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 397.
58. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 6; These principles are famously enumerated in the introduction to *Argonauts* (see, in particular, 6–25).
59. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 517.
60. In *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935), a two-volume study of Trobriand cultivation practices, Malinowski goes so far as to include a substantial appendix entitled "Confessions of Ignorance and Failure" (*Coral Gardens*, vol. 1, 452–82). "[I]t is the duty of the field-worker," he argues, "to render a careful and sincere account of all his failures and inadequacies" (*Coral Gardens*, vol. 1, 452)—a duty that the author himself discharges in admirable detail over the following thirty pages.
61. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 432.
62. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 344.
63. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 130 (my italics). This last passage indicates that the speaker's companions will arrive at their destination in the evening, while he will arrive earlier in the day (with the "rising sun").
64. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 443.
65. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 443.
66. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 433.
67. Malinowski, *Coral Gardens*, vol. 2, 225.
68. Malinowski, *Coral Gardens*, vol. 2, 221–2.
69. Malinowski, *Coral Gardens*, vol. 2, 225.
70. Malinowski, *Coral Gardens*, vol. 2, 225.
71. Malinowski, *Coral Gardens*, vol. 2, 218. In an essay on the interpretation (and over-interpretation) of Balinese culture, Mark Hobart uses the term "hyporeality" to describe a "domain of underdetermined [cultural] facts" that are subject to continued ethnographic analysis—yet remain "delightfully intransigent to explanation" ("As They Like It," 136).
72. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 262.
73. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 255.
74. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 255.
75. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 517; As James Clifford observes, "Cultural descriptions in Malinowski's style of functionalism strove for a kind of unified personality, but a convincing totalization always escaped them. Malinowski never did pull together Trobriand culture; he produced no synthetic portrait, only densely contextualized monographs on important institutions. Moreover, his obsessive inclusion of data,

‘imponderabilia,’ and vernacular texts may be seen as a desire to unmake as well as to make whole; such additive, metonymic empiricism undermines the construction of functional synecdochic representations” (“On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning,” 104). For more on the contradictory nature of Malinowski’s functionalism, see Gellner, *Language*, 134.

76. Of course, Malinowski’s methodological candor doesn’t entirely resolve the tension between his desire for ethnographic omniscience and the various opacities he encounters (and acknowledges) while in the field. On the contrary, it is during such encounters, as he struggles to understand a magical spell or mythological narrative, that the disparity between omniscience and ignorance becomes most acute.
77. Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” 145.
78. Greenblatt, *Will*, 323–4. Incidentally, in his preface to *Argonauts*, James Frazer praises Malinowski for acknowledging the “complexity of human nature”—and compares him, in this regard, to Shakespeare, whose characters are also “solid” and three-dimensional, “being drawn not from one side only but from many” (“Preface,” ix).
79. Melville, *Typee*, 177; Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, 177.
80. Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 6.

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