



COLLOQUIUM

Malinowski as ancestor

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Jarillo et al. present evidence showing that Trobrianders today do not espouse rebirth, contrary to Trobriand views as described by Malinowski. Closer attention to Malinowski, however, shows that Jarillo et al.'s reading of him does not take account of a suggestive theoretical and anthropological framework concerning ideological variability and susceptibility to change which he was attempting to develop.

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The paper by Jarillo et al., the collaborative work of outsider ethnographers and Trobrianders, is grounded in the authors' observation that Trobrianders today do not believe in rebirth or reincarnation. This appears counter to a tenet of Trobriand ethnography from Malinowski onwards. Of other revisions and extensions to the picture of Trobriands' social practices and ideas (Weiner 1976; Mosko 2017; Lepani 2012; MacCarthy 2016), Weiner and Mosko reaffirm rebirth as an aspect of Trobriand belief, including the continuity of *dala* (matri-lineage) identity (which, Malinowski says, Trobrianders asserted emphatically).

Malinowski's (1916) report of what he learned from Trobrianders about rebirth is clear enough. He was told that aged *baloma* "spirits" (of the dead, whose continuing involvement in Trobriands' social life he describes), shed their skin and become "a young child again; really an embryo, a *waiwaia*—a term applied to children *in utero* and immediately after birth" (1916: 216). *Waiwaia* are placed in women's wombs by other *baloma* (maternal kin, 1916: 219). They also tend to float on ocean spume, making women cautious of bathing to avoid unwanted pregnancy.

Jarillo et al. deal with the disparity between their observation (absence of belief in rebirth) and the ethnographic record in several ways. They report on the outcome of surveys and focus groups they conducted; consider what may be the implications of their observations; and ask what to make of the disparity. Their opinion-gathering was almost certainly wider than that

of others (they mention conducting ninety-two interviews). In the end they ask: Have things changed a great deal? Or was Malinowski's report of rebirth flawed from the start? Did he ignore exceptions, alternatives to it?

These are reasonable questions. But they miss the unfolding nature of Malinowski's treatment of *baloma*, the extent to which his ethnographic experience stimulated his efforts toward an interpretive framework, and thus some of the reasons for which we deem his work on this anthropological, rather than simply (and interestingly) ethnographic and observational.

At several points Malinowski writes of two puzzles which continued to perplex him, and prompted his inquiries. One was the apparent "nescience" of Trobrianders concerning the father's role in impregnation. As in other Melanesian societies, Trobrianders averred that continued male contribution of semen to growing a fetus was necessary; and they believed a woman could not bear a child without sexual experience. But they did not express the male contribution as that of impregnation per se. Second was the continuing involvement of *baloma* "spirits" (of the dead) in many aspects of Trobriand life "from the native perspective" (1916: 238). Clearly, Trobrianders felt *baloma* to be present in everyday life; they attributed important roles to them in ritual and magic; *baloma* were recognizable (as the persons they had been in life) and often visible; their presence did not give Trobrianders a "creepy feeling" (1916: 161) or make them fearful.





In various places Malinowski considers the relation of the two observed phenomena: Trobriand “nescience” of paternal impregnation, and the widespread view that pregnancy results from *baloma* inserting *waiwaia* into women. But he explicitly denies (1916: 220) that one may infer a necessary or causal relationship between these two things: one may not make “obvious” inferences, or arrive at some view of their relationship as necessary. Each has a certain indeterminacy, and independence of the other.

In his treatment of *baloma*, he persistently points to what he characterizes as “inconsistencies” (1916: 166) of native belief, but even more, to questions about whether some views are “private opinion,” “speculation,” or “extemporized” (1916: 166, 220, 230), whether they are “crystallized” into any orthodox or definite doctrine, whether they are “dogmatically settled” in native belief—and he firmly rejects the idea of a “one-dimensional” interpretive framework of the sort, “The natives believe that . . .” (1916: 240).

He moves instead to ask, What may be a useful interpretive framework? How may one make sense of the “fragmentary,” “contradictory,” “diverse,” and “multiple” character of beliefs, the “endless diversity” of observable “facts” (1916: 237), and the ways in which beliefs inform and are woven into social practice, embodied in social institutions (1916: 240)? He comes up with a framework of graduated embeddedness of beliefs in institutions (not necessarily verbally expressed), versus “orthodoxies” (which may often be expressed by specialists), popular views (not embedded in specialisms), and “individual speculations.” With the latter, he attributes a dimension of speculation to “intelligent, mentally enterprising informants” (1916: 252)—which may sound patronizing, but is intended by him to recognize a domain of opinion-formulation, not couched in dogma or conventional modes of expression.

Seeing Malinowski working toward a framework of this kind, we understand some of the other remarks he makes along the way. He discusses a distinction commonly made between two moments or forms of the spirit of the dead, which people typically labeled *baloma* and *kosi*. Does one of these depart for Tuma, the land of the dead, and the other stay around for a few days, as some said? Does one transform into the other? What is the relationship between them? He concludes that there are various ideas expressed about this, but these have not “crystallized into any orthodox or definite doctrine” (1916: 169). He also suggests that there is similar indetermi-

nacy in Trobriand thought concerning the relation of the *baloma* to the living person.

In this context we may understand better Malinowski’s statements such as: “The ideas and beliefs about reincarnation, though undoubtedly there, are of no eminent social importance, and are not at all to the fore in the native’s store of dogmatic ideas” (1916: 247). Here he comes close to proposing a graduated view of what he (as ethnographer) apprehends as subject to variable understanding and interpretation on Trobrianders’ part; what may be subject to variation and change; and what may be subject to either in its relative institutionalization and fixity. This kind of interpretive framework might be useful to Jarillo et al.

It is clear that ideas of rebirth tended to be of a certain kind in Malinowski’s day. Transformation of *baloma* and their return as part of the cycle of parturition was salient then (and maybe thereafter). But insofar as Malinowski found it necessary to consider reincarnation (and many related matters) as subject to questions of multiplicity, informality, indeterminacy—we ought not attribute to him a simplistic conviction concerning the status of rebirth in Trobriand belief and practice.

Jarillo et al. are probably right that there may have been considerable change since Malinowski’s day. Emphases have almost certainly shifted. Malinowski’s intuition that rebirth is not foremost in the store of “dogmatic ideas” has apparently been more completely realized.

Now, enough of hallowing ancestral Malinowski. A big question remains: given his insights, what kept him from considering some of the sources of variation and change—missionization and its acceptance, for instance (cf. Barker 1992)? That might have been too close to home: he would then have been looking into the conditions of his own ethnographic possibility.

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