

VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Film Review

Savage Memories: How Do We Remember Our Dead?

Zachary Stuart and Kelly Thomson, dirs. 77 min. Distributed by zstuartx@yahoo.com, 2012.

Peter S. Allen

Rhode Island College

Zachary Stuart is the great-grandson of Bronislaw Malinowski. There are many reasons why he made this film, not the least of which was to purge some family demons. Making the film was clearly a cathartic experience for him, one that enabled him to confront the “great God of the family” and what various members of his family call the “Malinowski curse.” To be sure, Malinowski was a complex character. He was certainly one of the greatest anthropologists of the 20th century, but there were controversies in his lifetime and then, in 1967, 25 years after his death, a bit of a scandal broke out when his diaries (Malinowski 1967) were published, as they revealed some unsavory things about him. Nonetheless, his professional reputation is secure. His place in the pantheon of anthropology is solid, as attested to here by Robert LeVine of Harvard, Shirley Campbell of the Australian National University, Robert Welsch of Franklin Pierce University, Polish anthropologist Andrzej Paluch, and others. Their remarks are interspersed with commentary by various descendants of Malinowski: David Stuart, Rebecca Stuart, and Sebastian Stuart, the three children of Josefa Stuart, Malinowski’s eldest daughter; David Stuart’s twin sons, Daniel and Zachary (the filmmaker); and Malinowski’s youngest daughter, Helena Wayne.

Today the diaries are largely forgotten, and although the book is still in print and there are numerous used copies available, I doubt if it is read by many people today. The profession has moved on. There is little or no mention of them in several recently published histories of anthropology, and today they have largely been relegated to the status of a footnote in most discussions of Malinowski. Nevertheless, they are front and center in this production, a reflection of the angst that still plagues Malinowski’s descendants. The rest of the angst suffered (in varying degrees) by the current generations of Malinowskis has its roots in more personal matters, and this is where the film makes its greatest contribution, although it raises as many questions as it answers.

For example, despite his avowals of abiding love in the letters he sent to his first wife from the field, Malinowski was not much of a family man. He fathered three daughters but remained aloof and distant from them. Helena, the youngest,

felt “unwanted” and “useless” and remembers only one time in her life that he hugged her. His wife and children felt abandoned by him, and none ever read his books, even though earnings from his 1929 publication, *The Sexual Life of Savages*, paid for one daughter’s education. All three of the daughters seem to have had ambivalent (skewing toward the negative) feelings about him, an ambivalence that was transmitted to their offspring and subsequently to the next generation, that of Mr. Stuart, who has chosen to explore those feelings and the reasons for them. It is understandable that his daughters were unhappy enough with Malinowski to have ignored his writings and renown, but this production does not provide any real insights into the neglect shown him by members of subsequent generations, none of whom even knew him because they were born after his death. There is little depicted in this production that bears out Stuart’s contention that the “painful legacy” Malinowski bequeathed “crippled” subsequent generations of his family, although, admittedly, emotional scars are hard to portray on film.

“Every family has a legend and every legend has a hero,” states Stuart, indicating that Malinowski is his family legend’s hero, albeit one viewed ambivalently. Indicative of this ambivalence is the fact that none of Malinowski’s daughters nor their children or grandchildren showed enough interest in Malinowski even to read any of his publications (although Helena published *The Story of a Marriage: The Letters of Bronislaw Malinowski and Elsie Masson* in 1995). To them he was “the great man”—but evidently not great enough for them to be curious about his writings or life. Zachary only looked at Malinowski’s publications when he decided to make this movie. Further evidence of this ambivalence is found at Malinowski’s gravesite. For 24 years it remained unmarked in Evergreen Cemetery in New Haven, Connecticut (Malinowski died in 1942 while teaching at Yale, blocked from returning to England by the circumstances of World War II). Only in 1966 did it receive a headstone—but not from someone in his family; a grateful student placed it there.

Stuart errs, however, in projecting the ambivalence of the family onto the profession. Although Malinowski still has his detractors, there is very little disagreement in the professional community about his importance to anthropology. Even those who remember the diaries have long since



FIGURE 1. *The Trobriand anthropologist Linus digim'Rina interviewing Bunemiga, previously an informant to Annette Weiner. (Frame capture from Savage Memories)*

forgiven him the sins contained therein and have returned to the altar of worship. Clifford Geertz, for instance, wrote a rather negative review (1967) of the diaries when they were first published but changed his tune a decade or so later, as did others.

The images of the film comprise still photographs of the Trobrianders taken by Malinowski interspersed with approximately contemporary moving footage of the same, along with modern scenes of the islanders and interviews with anthropologists and Malinowski's descendants. There are also some striking photographs of Malinowski in the field, clad in all-white outfits that contrast sharply with the half-naked black bodies of the natives surrounding him. Many images of Malinowski as an infant, toddler, young man, and mature individual are interspersed at appropriate junctures. Other images are overlaid with quotations from various Malinowski's publications. One of the individuals shown is Linus digim'Rina, the first Trobriander to become a professional anthropologist (he teaches at a university in New Guinea). He is interviewed and shown interviewing some of the Trobriand elders about the legacy of Malinowski. There are even clips from an Indiana Jones movie where Indy meets up with Malinowski on the Trobriands. The soundtrack combines commentary by Stuart with interviews and other live dialogue and narrative.

An abiding theme in this production is the similarity between the Trobrianders' concept of *baloma* (ancestral spirits) and the legacy of Malinowski. In the Trobriands, the spirits of the dead reside on a nearby island and then are reincarnated. Stuart draws parallels between this concept and the works and deeds of his famous great-grandfather. Just as the influence and personae of the Trobrianders' ancestors are remanifested in their reincarnations, the personal and professional legacy of Malinowski persists in the lives of his descendants and the modern discipline of anthropology.

Another theme developed here is how Malinowski humanized the natives, despite referring to them as "savages" (as was customary at the time he was writing), a sharp contrast to his depiction of them in his diaries as almost less than human. Yet Stuart is largely unsuccessful in his attempt here to reconcile the historical Malinowski, the "great anthropologist," with the person who neglected his family and never seemed to have extended to them the love and concern he should have felt, preferring to devote his time and energy to his work and career. It is clear, however, that Malinowski was a very hard-working and demanding field worker. The quality of his anthropology has never been challenged, and Zachary never questions it.

Overall, this is a compelling piece. Modern Trobrianders report on memories of Malinowski passed on by their

parents, who knew him; his only surviving daughter offers valuable insights into his character as a person and as a parent; and Mr. Stuart's twin brother denies having been influenced by his great-grandfather's legacy, a denial that "doth protest too much" as he seems to have structured his life in ways that often mirror those of his famous kinsman. Stuart's production is highly introspective, attempting to delve into the psyche of Malinowski and provide a deeper understanding of a man who has been described as the "founder and hero of modern social anthropology" but also as "lustful," "arrogant," "lying," and "indiscreet." Although he was an extraordinary anthropologist, Malinowski appears to have been a rather ordinary person. The diaries reveal an all-too-human individual, and his treatment of his family, although certainly negligent, can hardly be deemed pathological.

In the end, what Zachary Stuart gives us is a highly nuanced portrait of one of the greatest and most significant anthropologists of all time. For the most part, *Savage Memory* conveys this material in a skillful and engaging manner. Stuart provides new insights into the great man's persona and his family life that enhance our understanding of him but

in no way diminish his professional achievements. This is an important film that should be viewed by all anthropologists, not just to learn new things about Malinowski but also for deeper insights into the profession and the whole enterprise of anthropological fieldwork.

REFERENCES CITED

Geertz, Clifford

1967 Under the Mosquito Net. *Review of A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. New York Review of Books 9(4), September 14.

Malinowski, Bronislaw

1929 *The Sexual Life of Savages in Northwestern Melanesia: An Ethnographic Account of Courtship, Marriage and Family Life among the Natives of the Trobriand Islands, British New Guinea*. New York: Eugenics.

1967 *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Wayne, Helena, ed.

1995 *The Story of a Marriage: The Letters of Bronislaw Malinowski and Elsie Masson*. 2 vols. London: Routledge.