



## Film Review

### **Savage Memory: A Documentary about a Legendary Anthropologist and the Shadows of Our Ancestors.**

Z. Stuart, K. Thomson.

Jamaica Plain, MA: Sly Productions, 2011.

Few anthropologists gain the sort of celebrity that generates public interest in their private lives. Margaret Mead and Bronislaw Malinowski are exceptions, having had their biographies, diaries and letters published. Outside the academy their fame probably rests almost entirely on their notoriety as writers about the sexual lives of Pacific islanders and the subsequent revelations about their own. Within Anthropology, the more contentious debates have centred on their theoretical contributions to the discipline and the authority of their ethnographic works. When Malinowski's fieldwork diaries were published, many were appalled—both by their revelations of racism and by his widow's indiscretion in encouraging their publication.

Malinowski's legendary status as 'the father' of intensive field research and elucidator of the *kula* exchange system remains intact. While his functionalist arguments have been abandoned, his ethnographies continue to be read and to influence the work of successors, especially those who work in Melanesia. This film explores his paternal legacy from the perspective of his descendants and the stuff of legend has a quite different cast—albeit a predictable one given what we already know of his personal life.

Malinowski's great-grandson, Zachary Stuart, has produced a film in conjunction with Kelly Thomson that is in many respects a personal quest. The journey takes him to many of the places where Malinowski lived and worked. The film documents his pursuit of an understanding of his ancestor's career, his work and significance as an anthropologist, but above all his place as 'the great man of the family' in his own genealogy. His father, aunt and uncle, the children of Bronislaw's eldest daughter Jozefa testify to the ways

that Malinowski was 'a huge looming presence' in their lives, but one that was negative, distant and disconnected from them. Apparently Jozefa rarely spoke of him and, given the girls' fragmented relationship with their father, her silence speaks to the painful memories that must have been associated with his fame and his absence from their lives. In this empty space, Malinowski's prestige and his image as an ambitious academic who sacrificed his family for intellectual renown has flourished. His grandchildren are unfamiliar with his anthropological writing—his granddaughter having read only the published diary. This undoubtedly confirmed the worst aspects of his character and personality as they had been gleaned from the family stories. And it is these personal characteristics that they believe have been transmitted as 'the Malinowski curse'.

Most people seek and find family resemblances in temperament or appearance when they search their ancestry. Jozefa's children insist, only half-jokingly, that they have been cursed with their grandfather's 'know-it-all' manner. His great-grandson elaborates, describing this as a condition, whereby they are possessed of 'great intelligence and no common-sense' and present themselves with 'unearned, condescending grandiosity' and arrogance. He maintains that this is superimposed upon 'a crippling insecurity'. Presumably, these characteristics are ones that Jozefa attributed to her father.

On the basis of the conversations filmed, I found it difficult to accept the 'curse' thesis, not only because of my scepticism about the biological transmission of such qualities, but because the Stuarts emerge as so relaxed and American, so at ease with their interlocutor and so eloquent in their musings about their forebears. While Malinowski's diaries and letters display a capacity for self-scrutiny and the expression of his emotional states (especially to the women in his life), they also reveal a solipsism that excluded empathetic responses or

contemplation of his effect on others. Zachary Stuart, as narrator, observes that his twin brother seems most like Malinowski, and perhaps his self-absorption and immersion in another culture support this, but his whimsical and ironic comments belie the comparison.

Malinowski's neglect and abandonment of his invalid wife and his daughters cannot be attributed simply to the uncompromising pursuit of academic success—the 'family vs. career' dilemma was not even considered a problem during his lifetime. Rather, I would argue on the basis of reading Michael Young's biography and Malinowski's letters that his actions are explicable only in terms of his extraordinary narcissism. For it is not the case that he led the life of a monastic scholar and was overburdened with academic responsibilities. He was immensely gregarious and enjoyed the social and cultural activities of London life, while his wife slowly succumbed to multiple sclerosis in Oberbozen. The interview with his youngest daughter, Helena, gives a glimpse of the emotional damage he inflicted on her when, reading her parent's letters, she realized that her father's abandonment of them was both cruel and unfeeling—an instance of his pure selfishness.

The interviews with anthropologists (myself included) emphasize Malinowski's role in the development of the discipline of anthropology and his intellectual legacy, while providing some commentary on their views of him as a person. His greatness and his fame derive from his rich ethnographies and his influence within Anthropology—and in that realm his feet of clay, moral failures and paternal inadequacies are largely irrelevant. But the gap between his ethnographic characterizations of Trobrianders as intelligent, resourceful and creative and those of his diary entries, which are redolent of the most xenophobic, colonialist caricatures of 'natives', remains troubling. I suspect most anthropologists would sympathize with the bouts of loneliness, the feelings of alienation and irritation that surface during fieldwork—but there is something very disturbing about the visceral antagonism, expressed in racist language, of many diary entries.

Zachary Stuart's exploration of Malinowski's life also involves a pilgrimage to the Trobriand Islands where he observes the ways that the life and culture of people there has changed in the intervening years. His grandfather's legacy there is more far-reaching in some respects, and interviewees are aware that Malinowski spread their fame internationally. Linus Digimrina, a Trobriand anthropologist who now teaches at the University of Papua New Guinea, is his guide and translator. He alone expresses reservations about the orientalism and colonial assumptions that pervade Malinowski's writings. Others are generous in their judgements—not on the basis of much familiarity with the texts, but on the grounds that as he had a chief as his major informant, his books must contain truths about their cultural history.

The juxtaposing of stills and films taken during Malinowski's fieldwork with sequences of contemporary life—a mortuary ceremony, Christian worship, people in Western clothing explaining the abandonment of the magic and customs so painstakingly described by Malinowski—serves to emphasise the passage of time. These sequences perhaps would be of most interest to anthropologists and could provide interesting material for teaching. Certainly, they illustrate the changing social context of anthropology in Melanesia and document the shifts in the 'native point of view' after over a century of conversion to Christianity.

*Savage Memory* will undoubtedly be of interest to anthropologists for what it has to say about their 'ancestor'. But kinship and connection to the past, and the myths and fragmentary knowledge that we draw on to construct our selves are the themes that dominate. As such it is of great anthropological interest—an absorbing film about the notions of inheritance and personal links to forebears that are part of contemporary western culture.

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