

# Refuting the "primitive economic man" model in argonauts of the western pacific



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In the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski refutes the notion of "Primitive Economic Man" through his early 20th century studies at the Trobriand Islands. The Trobrianders were considered primitive because of their isolation from modern society, belief in supernatural forces, and difference in skin color. "Primitive Economic Man" denotes the idea of an "imaginary, primitive man, or savage, prompted in all his actions by a rationalistic conception of self-interest, and achieving his aims directly and with the minimum of effort" (Malinowski 1984: 60).

Malinowski disagrees with this characterization, and believes that man even in the most basic culture has complex social systems and traditions. He portrays the Trobrianders as self-sufficient and hard working. They employ a complex political system, earn a livelihood involving gardening, and have the socio-economic tradition of the Kula, a long voyage, which involves trading and reciprocity. Rejecting the notion of "Primitive Economic Man," Malinowski reveals how the Trobrianders base their life on community and kinship through politics, work, and social traditions in order to make his readers understand this unique culture.

Malinowski portrays the complex political system of the Trobrianders as one that is based on kinship, rank, and communal duties. Four clans live on the Trobriand Islands and those divide into smaller sub-clans. In these sub-clans, "members claim common ancestry" in a matrilineal succession (1984: 70). The Trobrianders have obligations and duties "which establishes a very close and important relation between" specific members of the family, such as a boy and a mother's brother (1984: 71). The relationship between the chief and his clan highlights close ties in the community. The chief or

headman has a large amount of authority, and when he needs allies or men to do his work, he can rely on them. Although the chief emerges as powerful and can be looked on as self-interested, he has to use his power and wealth for the betterment of the village. He pays for feasts and arranges tribal gatherings and expeditions (1984: 64). The Trobrianders are also close and acknowledge their chief or headman while having their own interests. But they do not follow the definition of " Primitive Economic Man," because in times of trouble, the district, tribe, or community stick together and deal with their problems together. The political system with a chief and underlings show how they value working together and supporting each other as a community.

Malinowski also portrays kinship and community through their livelihood, gardening. Trobriand gardens largely consist of a variety of different foods such as yams, taro, sugar cane, wild fruits, and roots. The Trobrianders value yams that they trade with their kin and the village. They prefer to keep the yams in storehouses or display them rather than use them for nourishment, revealing that they do not indulge or commit gluttony. The size of the garden and amount of work that Trobrianders perform helps them to gain social status and recognition from their kin. They split up the work in the garden into various tasks such as trimming the plants, cultivating, building fences, and keeping the area tidy (1984: 58). " Three quarters of a man's crops go partly as tribute to the chief, partly as his due to this sister's (or mother's) husband and family" (1984: 61). Although it appears that the Trobrianders garden for their own self-interest and fulfillment to better their social status, Malinowski shows that they focus on their gardens in order to have a

stronger connection to their village as well as nature. They actually “ receive no personal benefit in the utilitarian sense from his harvest” (1984: 61). They cannot be characterized by the term “ Primitive Economic Man” because they perform hard work in the garden as well as exchange yams for their village all for their village and family. Through gardening, Malinowski wants his readers to understand that the Trobrianders work hard for their family, instead of fulfilling their own needs.

Socially, Malinowski represents the Trobriander life as largely governed by an extremely meaningful and important exchange called the Kula, which also signifies the importance and ties between communities rather than self-interest. The Kula is a form of public trade where by Trobriand communities undergo a long circular journey governed by rules and traditions (1984: 81). They spend months preparing for this voyage by readying their canoes, food and gifts for their exchange. In the clockwise direction of their circular journey, Trobrianders trade white armshells (mwali) and in the counter clockwise direction they trade red necklaces (soulava). This circular journey never stops. Every gift continually moves in one direction and will come back in a few years to be traded again. Every man who participates has to give up an item and take an item. They cannot keep an object for more than a few years, otherwise they will be deemed as rude or selfish. The Kula brings a partnership between two men across different islands based on rank and they maintain that relationship for life. Although Malinowski states that the Trobrianders have little knowledge of the size of the Kula or understand the big picture, he believes in the importance of constructing “ the picture of the big institution, very much as the physicist constructs his theory from

experimental data" (1984: 84). The Trobrianders know their motives and might seem to be fulfilling their own needs, but they form relationships that last for years. Malinowski states that a man who owns an object " is expected to share it, to distribute it, to be its trustee and dispenser" (1984: 97). The necklaces and arm shells should not be thought of as objects of innate desire, but as objects that define their bond with each other. Malinowski shares this complex socio-economic system of the Kula to highlight the Trobrianders reciprocity, sharing and community values in order to show that the Kula satisfies their emotional needs rather than animalistic desires.

Malinowski depicts the political system, livelihood and the Kula in relation to kin and community in order to show that the Trobrianders should not be viewed as primitive. He describes their capacity to live on their own as a type of devotion to their people and their value in social interactions. They are not simple minded and do not work, trade, or interact with others only to better themselves. Malinowski wants the reader to gain a new outlook on these people and transfer this positive portrayal of them onto other unique cultures that might be seen as savage and self-interested.

Malinowski set the stage for modern anthropology. Instead of making false judgments about other cultures, he interacted with the Trobrianders in their native land and saw that they were not alien creatures but different in their humanity. He values participant observation rather than armchair assumptions as a way to understand the perspectives and relationships of other cultures. Malinowski states " we cannot possibly reach the final

Socratic wisdom of knowing ourself if we never leave the narrow  
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confinement the customs, beliefs and prejudices into which every man is born" (1984: 518). In short, Malinowski's emphasis on kinship and community in the Trobriand Islands helps his readers realize the importance of maintaining a cultural relativistic mindset.

#### Works Consulted

Malinowski, Bronislaw

2103[1922]. Argonauts of the Western Pacific: an account of native and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea. Enhanced ed. Long Grove: Waveland Press, INC.