

MALINOWSKI AND THE IMPONDERABILIA OF ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY

I was very interested to read Jeremy Coote's comments on Malinowski's photography (*JASO*, Vol. XXIV, no. 1, pp. 66-9). I agree that any full account of Malinowski's preoccupation with photography in his fieldwork should include an examination of the influence of Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz. In fact, in a recent, as yet unpublished paper (Wright 1992) I have proposed that early contact with the Witkiewicz family could well account for Malinowski's photographic vision and powers of observation. Furthermore, his acquisition of these visual skills was to play a major part in the development of his fieldwork method of participant observation. Malinowski did not just take a camera to the field, he evolved his own photographic working methods during his fieldwork. I have described in these pages his photographic experiments with Billy Hancock (*JASO*, Vol. XXI, no. 1, pp. 41-58) and, as Coote suggests, photographic experimentation was not new to Malinowski, for he had participated in Witkiewicz's early experiments with natural light photography. Indeed, a good example is a photograph of Malinowski from around 1912 which displays a strong 'Rembrandt lighting' effect (reproduced in Micińska 1990: 96).

I believe that the success of Malinowski's fieldwork photography was due to both his visual awareness and his emphasis on observation and detail. At the same time, a combination of these characteristics can be seen to have been evolving into his methodology of participant observation. For Malinowski, the minute detailed observations recorded by the camera (which perhaps went unnoticed at the time) had special significance. These 'imponderabilia' had an important role in his post-fieldwork analysis where, he wrote, 'the control of my field notes by means of photographs has led me to reformulate my statements on innumerable points' (1935: 461). Similarly, participant observation paid particular regard to such incidental elements: the 'imponderable yet all important facts of everyday life are part of the real substance of the social fabric' (Malinowski 1922: 19). In Leach's words (1957: 120), 'Malinowski trained his fieldworkers to observe the apparently unimportant minute detail.... It is in the quality of the observation rather than in the interpretation that the merit of "Malinowskianism" lies'. I suggest that Malinowski's development of participant observation was informed by and indebted to his first-hand knowledge of the characteristics of photography.

In summary, we can perceive a gradual transition in Malinowski's fieldwork methods, determined by a variety of social and cultural factors, as well as personal influences, which brought about a new kind of visual enquiry. From the evidence of the Trobriand photographs, we can propose that Malinowski was not only the father of ethnographic fieldwork, but that his photographic innovations deserve wider recognition in the history of photography.

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