Introduction

A SACRED PLACE

Walking into a village at the beginning of fieldwork is entering a world without cultural guideposts. The task of learning the values that others live by is never easy. The rigors of fieldwork involve listening and watching, learning a new language of speech and actions, and most of all, letting go of one's own cultural assumptions in order to understand the meanings others give to work, power, death, family, and friends. As my fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea was no exception, I wrestled doggedly with each of these problems. Doing research in the Trobriand Islands created one additional obstacle. I was working in the footsteps of a celebrated anthropological ancestor, Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski.

The Trobriand Islands are one of anthropology's most "sacred places," having attained scientific renown through Malinowski's seminal fieldwork. Anthropology was barely established as a formal discipline when, through unexpected circumstances, Malinowski first discovered its importance as a field of study. Malinowski was born in Kraców, Poland, in 1884, and he stayed in Kraców to pursue his undergraduate and graduate studies. At the university he did extensive work in the natural sciences, philosophy, and psychology and in 1908 received his doctorate with highest honors in philosophy of science. Ill health, however, forced him to postpone further research. During this respite he read Sir J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* with mounting excitement. In Frazer's work Malinowski found not only "solace" for his sickness but also a lifelong passion for the problems of ethnograhic research.[1] So committed did he become that in 1910 he enrolled in the London School of Economics to begin postgraduate studies in anthropology. In 1914, he departed for Australia with plans to carry out ethnographic fieldwork in the southeast part of mainland New Guinea, then called Papua.

At the time, few ethnographic field studies in that part of the world had

[1] Malinowski began his essay "Myth in Primitive Psychology" (1926a) with a dedication to Sir James Frazer in which he described himself as "a student leaving the medieval college buildings, obviously in some distress of mind, hugging, however, under his arm, as the only solace of his troubles, three green volumes . . . of *The Golden Bough* (1954:92).

been done. Although the Russian anthropologist Nickolai N. Miklouchо-Maclay had spent almost three years on the north coast of New Guinea in the 1870s, his work was largely unknown because he died shortly after he left New Guinea.[2] Except for the Cambridge University expedition to the Torres Straits, led by Alfred Cort Haddon in 1898, and C. G. Seligman's 1903–1904 ethnographic survey of the Massim (the coastal area and ring of islands off the eastern tip of Papua, which includes the Trobriands), most anthropological knowledge of Papua New Guinea societies was based on reports and diaries from missionaries, government officers, and explorers. The few anthropologists who did fieldwork there rarely stayed with any one group longer than several months. The major research objectives were to survey as many unstudied Papuan peoples as possible and record their customs before colonization and missionary efforts created vast cultural changes in their traditions.

Malinowski's original fieldwork reflects this survey approach, but his plans were further complicated by the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Malinowski was in Australia at the time and was preparing to work among the Mailu who live along the Papuan south coast. As a Pole of Austrian nationality, Malinowski was technically an enemy alien, and although his status was continually in review by the Australian authorities, he was permitted to proceed with his research. He spent a little less than three months with the Mailu and then returned to Australia, where he wrote up a substantial report on many of their customs.[3] Malinowski then made plans to work with several other Papuan groups about which little was known. He booked passage on a trading ship from Samarai bound for some of these more northern coastal villages and offshore islands. When the ship made a brief stop in the Trobriands, Malinowski stayed on, altering the course of his work and the direction of social anthropology.[4] (See Map 1.)

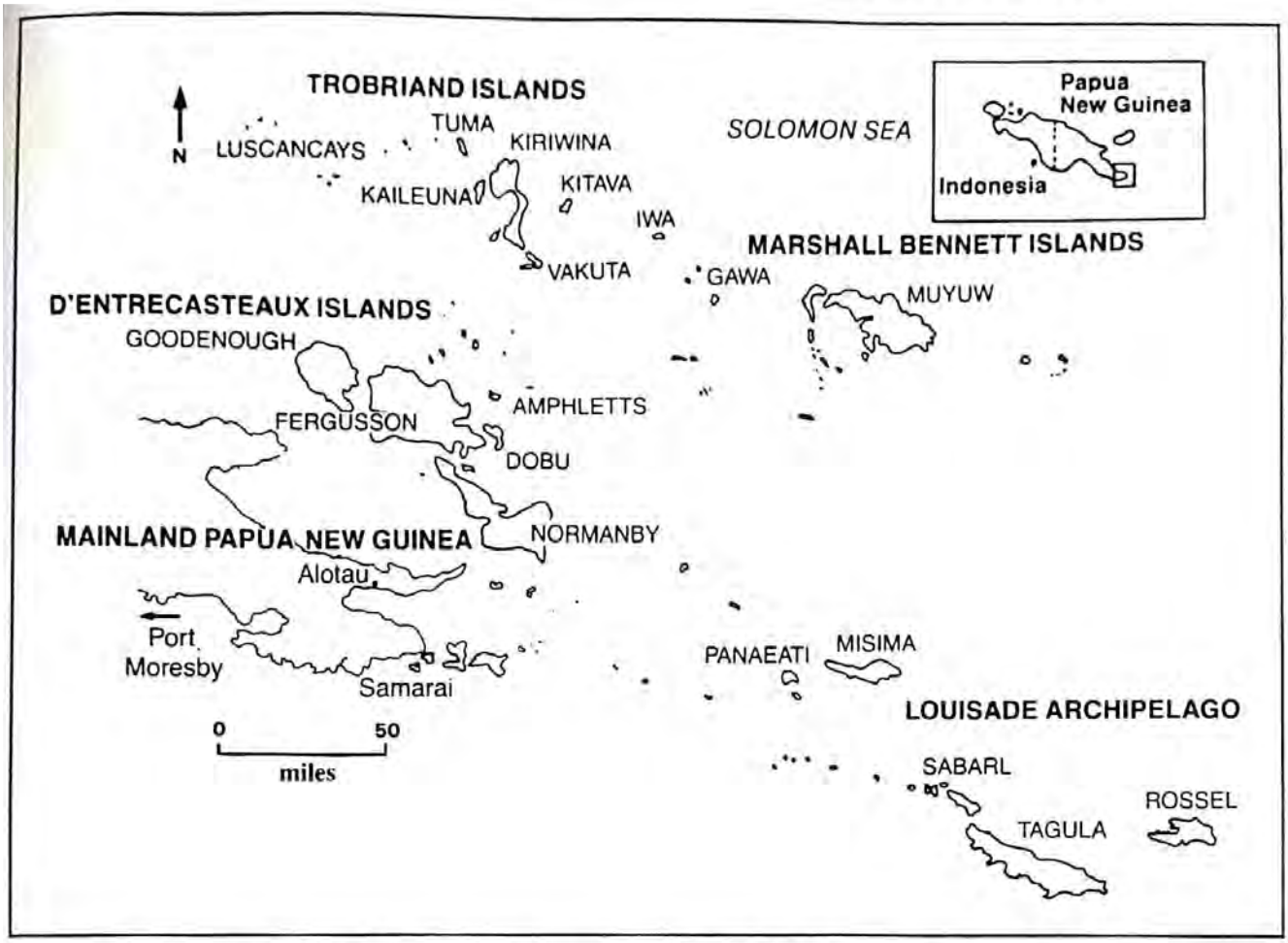
Although twelve years earlier, his mentor, C. G. Seligman, had visited the Trobriands as part of his ethnographic survey of the Massim,[5] Malinowski decided additional Trobriand research would produce important results that would justify his decision not to continue his survey of other, unrecorded populations. He was intrigued by the local renown of Trobrianders, especially because Trobriand society, unlike most other New Guinea societies, was organized around high-ranking chiefs. Instead of leaving the Trobriands after a month or two to explore the northern coast as he originally planned, Malinowski spent a total of two years in residence between 1915 and 1918. In his field diaries he wrote with a burst of bravado that he was accomplishing in the Trobriands what none of his well-known colleagues had done. He had recorded vast amounts of information and his observations were detailed over

[2] Some of his material has been published in Russian, and more recently, his field diaries have been translated and published in English (Miklouchо-Maclay 1975).

[3] See Malinowski (1915).

[4] See Young (1984) for a discussion of why Malinowski stayed in the Trobriands instead of following his original plans.

[5] See Seligman (1910).



Map 1. The islands and tip of mainland Papua New Guinea, called the Massim by C. G. Seligman. Politically, the area is known as Milne Bay Province, one of the districts into which all of Papua New Guinea is divided.

a long time period. No one in England, he was well aware, had done this kind of fieldwork before.[6]

Following his return to England, he steadily poured out books and articles on various aspects of Trobriand life. In writing about the Trobriands, Malinowski argued against earlier conceptions of "primitive" societies made by "armchair" anthropologists. His intensive study marks a watershed in British social anthropology, making ethnology come of age as a scientific discipline. Malinowski not only brought to the fore new theoretical assumptions about the way individuals and institutions functioned in "primitive" society but also radically changed the way ethnographers approach fieldwork.

In the Introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, his first monograph on the Trobriands, Malinowski wrote what became a classic treatise on doing ethnographic fieldwork. He argued for the importance of field studies that lasted for a year or more, cautioning the ethnographer to work in the local

[6] At this time, a few American anthropologists doing research among North American Indians had spent long periods in the field, for example, Franz Boas's (1888) year-long study, 1883–1884, among the Central Eskimo.

language and establish rapport with informants. The earlier methods of recording particular customs by questioning a few informants would no longer be acceptable. The ethnographer must understand the context of a people's behavior. An isolated outrigger canoe had no meaning without knowing who built it, who had the right to sail it, and who performed the necessary magical spells employed during its use. The cardinal field work rule, therefore, should be to see reality from "the natives' point of view."

A brilliant teacher, Malinowski conducted famed seminars at the London School of Economics, attracting students from many disciplines and training a generation of distinguished British social anthropologists in fieldwork methodology. His extensive writings on Trobriand society crossed the Atlantic to influence not only American anthropologists but psychologists and sociologists as well. Although he also studied and wrote on culture change in African societies and spent two summers doing fieldwork on peasant markets in Oaxaca, Mexico, Malinowski's lasting impact on anthropology came from his Trobriand ethnographic material.[7] In the late 1930s, he moved to the United States, where in 1942 he became professor of anthropology at Yale University. Tragically, in the same year, he suffered a fatal heart attack.

Malinowski's theoretical ideas about the functional relationship between basic human needs and social institutions have been displaced by other, more sophisticated theories.[8] Yet his reputation as an outstanding fieldworker prevailed, and his detailed Trobriand ethnographic corpus has a validity and timelessness that have not diminished. Malinowski used the Trobriand material to argue in general about economics, kinship, sexuality, religion, and myth, and in this way, the Trobriands became the classic example of a small-scale society. Long after his death, his Trobriand work stimulated new ideas as well as controversy.[9] Thus, the legacy of his Trobriand ethnography continues to play an unprecedented role in the history of anthropology.

ETHNOGRAPHIC COMPARISONS

In 1971, before my first trip to the Trobriands, I thought I understood many things about Trobriand customs and beliefs from having read Malinowski's exhaustive writings. Once there, however, I found that I had much more to discover about what I thought I already knew. For many months I worked with these discordant realities, always conscious of Malinowski's shadow, his words, his explanations. Although I found significant differences in areas of importance, I gradually came to understand how he reached certain conclu-

[7] Malinowski's (1945) essays on culture change in African societies were published posthumously, as were the preliminary results of his 1940 and 1941 summers of field work in Oaxaca, Mexico. See Malinowski and de la Fuente (1982).

[8] For more details about his approach see Malinowski (1944).

[9] See *Man and Culture*, edited by Raymond Firth (1957a), on Malinowski's most controversial and important contributions. The book was written by his students ten years after his death.

sions. The answers we both received from informants were not so dissimilar, and I could actually trace how Malinowski had analyzed what his informants told him in a way that made sense and was scientifically significant—given what anthropologists generally then recognized about such societies. Sixty years separate our fieldwork, and any comparison of our studies illustrates not so much Malinowski's mistaken interpretations but the developments in anthropological knowledge and inquiry from his time to mine.

This important point has been forgotten by those anthropologists who today argue that ethnographic writing can never be more than a kind of fictional account of an author's experiences.[10] Although Malinowski and I were in the Trobriands at vastly different historical moments and there also are many areas in which our analyses differ, a large part of what we learned in the field was similar. From the vantage point that time gives to me, I can illustrate how our differences, even those that are major, came to be. Taken together, our two studies profoundly exemplify the scientific basis that underlies the collection of ethnographic data. Like all such data, however, whether researched in a laboratory or a village, the more we learn about a subject, the more we can refine and revise earlier assumptions. This is the way all sciences create their own historical developments. Therefore, the lack of agreement between Malinowski's ethnography and mine must not be taken as an adversarial attack against an opponent. Nor should it be read as an example of the writing of ethnography as "fiction" or "partial truths." Each of our differences can be traced historically within the discipline of anthropology.

My most significant point of departure from Malinowski's analyses was the attention I gave to women's productive work. In my original research plans, women were not the central focus of study, but on the first day I took up residence in a village I was taken by them to watch a distribution of their own wealth—bundles of banana leaves and banana fiber skirts—which they exchanged with other women in commemoration of someone who had recently died. Watching that event forced me to take women's economic roles more seriously than I would have from reading Malinowski's studies. Although Malinowski noted the high status of Trobriand women, he attributed their importance to the fact that Trobrianders reckon descent through women, thereby giving them genealogical significance in a matrilineal society. Yet he never considered that this significance was underwritten by women's own wealth because he did not systematically investigate the women's productive activities. Although in his field notes he mentions Trobriand women making these seemingly useless banana bundles to be exchanged at a death, his published work only deals with men's wealth.

My taking seriously the importance of women's wealth not only brought women as the neglected half of society clearly into the ethnographic picture but also forced me to revise many of Malinowski's assumptions about Trobriand men. For example, Trobriand kinship as described by Malinowski has

[10] See, for example, Clifford and Marcus (1986).

always been a subject of debate among anthropologists. For Malinowski, the basic relationships within a Trobriand family were guided by the matrilineal principle of "mother-right" and "father-love." A father was called "stranger" and had little authority over his own children. A woman's brother was the commanding figure and exercised control over his sister's sons because they were members of his matrilineage rather than their father's matrilineage.

According to Malinowski, this matrilineal drama was played out biologically by Trobrianders' belief that a man has no role as genitor. A man's wife is thought to become pregnant when an ancestral spirit enters her body and causes conception. Even after a child is born, Malinowski reported, it is the mother's brother rather than the father who presents a harvest of yams to his sister so that her child will be fed with food from its own matrilineage, rather than its father's matrilineage. In this way, Malinowski conceptualized matrilineality as an institution in which the father of a child, as a member of a *different* matrilineage, was excluded not only from participating in procreation but also from giving any objects of lasting value to his children, thus provisioning them only with love.[11]

In my study of Trobriand women and men, a different configuration of matrilineal descent emerged. A Trobriand father is not a "stranger" in Malinowski's definition, nor is he a powerless figure as the third party to the relationship between a woman and her brother. The father is one of the most important persons in his child's life, and remains so even after his child grows up and marries. Even a father's procreative importance is incorporated into his child's growth and development. A Trobriand man gives his child many opportunities to gain things from his matrilineage, thereby adding to the available resources that he or she can draw upon. At the same time, this giving creates obligations on the part of a man's children toward him that last even beyond his death. Therefore, the roles that men and their children play in each other's lives are worked out through extensive cycles of exchanges, which define the strength of their relationships to each other and eventually benefit the other members of both their matrilineages. Central to these exchanges are women and their wealth.

To understand Trobriand kinship from this perspective has broader implications because kinship relations form the basis of chiefly power. Malinowski's studies never made clear whether Trobriand chiefs had supreme autonomy that made them "paramount" chiefs, as he called them, or whether, like most other societies in New Guinea, Trobrianders were more egalitarian in their relationships with each other and chiefs were merely first among equals. From my own and other recent research, we now know that of all the Trobriand Islands, only on Kiriwina are chiefs granted extensive authority and power; on Vakuta Island, to the south of Kiriwina, a chief has little advantage over anyone else; similarly, on Kaileuna Island, to the west, a chief is much less powerful than Kiriwina chiefs; and on Kitava Island, to the east, inherited

[11] Malinowski's analysis of Trobriand kinship sparked many long-standing controversies. See, for example, Fortes (1957); Homans and Schneider (1955); E. R. Leach (1958); Lounsbury (1965); Needham (1962); Weiner (1978b).

positions of chieftaincy are absent.[12] Malinowski did most of his fieldwork on Kiriwina, and therefore, he could not have known about these variations. But he also never recognized the profound extent to which Kiriwina women enter into the public world of politics. Only on the island of Kiriwina do exchanges of women's wealth reach such large proportions and involve men in such critical ways. For these reasons, exchanges of women's wealth establish stability in the exchange relationships between men, and the necessity for women's wealth each time someone dies requires the expenditure of certain kinds of men's resources. At the same time, the presence of women's wealth means that men are not totally dependent on their own shell and stone valuables at a death. These aspects of women's wealth, that is, stabilizing relationships and leveling some kinds of men's resources while keeping other kinds free, determine the level of hierarchy that chiefs are able to maintain, while alternatively showing the limitations chiefs face in gaining additional powers that would bring them greater autonomy.

That Malinowski never gave equal time to the women's side of things, given the deep significance of their role in social and political life, is not surprising. Only recently have anthropologists begun to understand the importance of taking women's work seriously. In some cultures, such as the Middle East or among Australian aborigines, it is extremely difficult for ethnographers to cross the culturally bounded ritual worlds that separate women from men. In the past, however, both women and men ethnographers generally analyzed the societies they studied from a male perspective. The "women's point of view" was largely ignored in the study of gender roles, since anthropologists generally perceived women as living in the shadows of men—occupying the private rather than the public sectors of society, rearing children rather than engaging in economic or political pursuits.

If Malinowski failed to set a precedent for women's studies that was far beyond his time, his visionary ideas about the nature of human societies put him in the forefront of his day. At the turn of the century, many scholars sincerely believed that "primitive peoples" exhibited nonrational, prelogical mentalities, and thus they placed such "savages" on the lowest rung of an evolutionary scale that in unilineal progression ended with "civilization." Malinowski's strongest arguments were leveled against those who drew a picture of "primitives" as mechanical beings without individual personalities, who as a group, merely followed the same customs without change.

Throughout his Trobriand writing, Malinowski exposed the ethnocentrism and even the racism behind these views. Yet his claims that rational behavior could be documented by finding the pragmatic function for each custom or institution prevented him from appreciating the complexity of meanings expressed through symbolic actions that illuminated social and political interaction. As Edmund Leach, one of Malinowski's most eminent students, pointed out, Malinowski, although a highly original thinker, remained in many ways

[12] Campbell (1983b: 203) on Vakuta; Hutchins (1980), J. W. Leach (1978), Powell (1960), and Weiner (1976) on Kiriwina; Montague (1974) on Kaileuna; Scoditti with J. W. Leach (1983:252) on Kitava. See also Brunton (1975) and Watson (1956).

tied to the very nineteenth-century philosophical ideas against which he fought.[13]

For example, the discovery that "primitive" peoples held strong beliefs in the power of magical practices was proof for many nineteenth-century scholars that such "false science" precluded any necessity for learning technical skills. To prove that "primitive" peoples could distinguish between fact and fiction, between technology and magic, Malinowski explained how complex were the technical skills for activities such as gardening, sailing, and fishing that Trobrianders controlled.[14] He then illustrated how carefully they discriminated between their reliance on magic spells and their use of technology. Malinowski's most quoted example involved the differences between fishing in the lagoon and on the open seas. According to Malinowski, when Trobrianders fish in the lagoon, the men never resort to fishing magic because the waters there are relatively calm. But when they take their canoes into the open seas, they turn to magic as protection from the hazards of strong winds and rainstorms. It is only when confronted by situations they cannot control, because their pragmatic skills are inoperable, that Trobrianders, out of psychological stress, turn from technology to magic.

My record of these events, and even those Malinowski reported in his early work, differ from this example.[15] There are times when men do use magic to fish in the lagoon, just as they may resort to magic spells when they fish without canoes along the reefs. They "turn" to magic, not out of psychological distress over a physical environment out of control, but when it is essential that they produce a large catch that must be used for an important exchange that has social and political consequences. To control the actions of the wind and the fish is ultimately proof of one's ability to control an exchange, thereby providing a measure of control over others. In this way, Trobriand magic is addressed to issues concerned with dominance and autonomy. To influence another person through successful giving is to establish proof of one's own potency. Trobriand magic *speaks* to the complexities inherent in social interaction. To influence and finally to dominate another person's thoughts and actions is a goal that most strive to attain. Since most Trobrianders feel they are impervious to the desires of others, such control is effected through magic. Even for chiefs, dominance depends on the power of magic.

Malinowski's functionalist theories obscured the subtleties and the significance of symbolic action. His interest was in the cause and effect of certain actions and activities rather than in the cultural meanings that Trobrianders give to the things and people around them. Although Malinowski in one respect showed that Trobrianders perceived their world through rational thought, such logic had definite limits. In all societies, including our own, logical

[13] E. R. Leach (1957:113–158).

[14] Malinowski's views on magic also influenced sociologists, especially Homans (1941). See also Nadel (1957) on Malinowski's problems and contributions to an understanding of magic and Tambiah (1968) and Weiner (1983a) on the power of Trobriand magic spells.

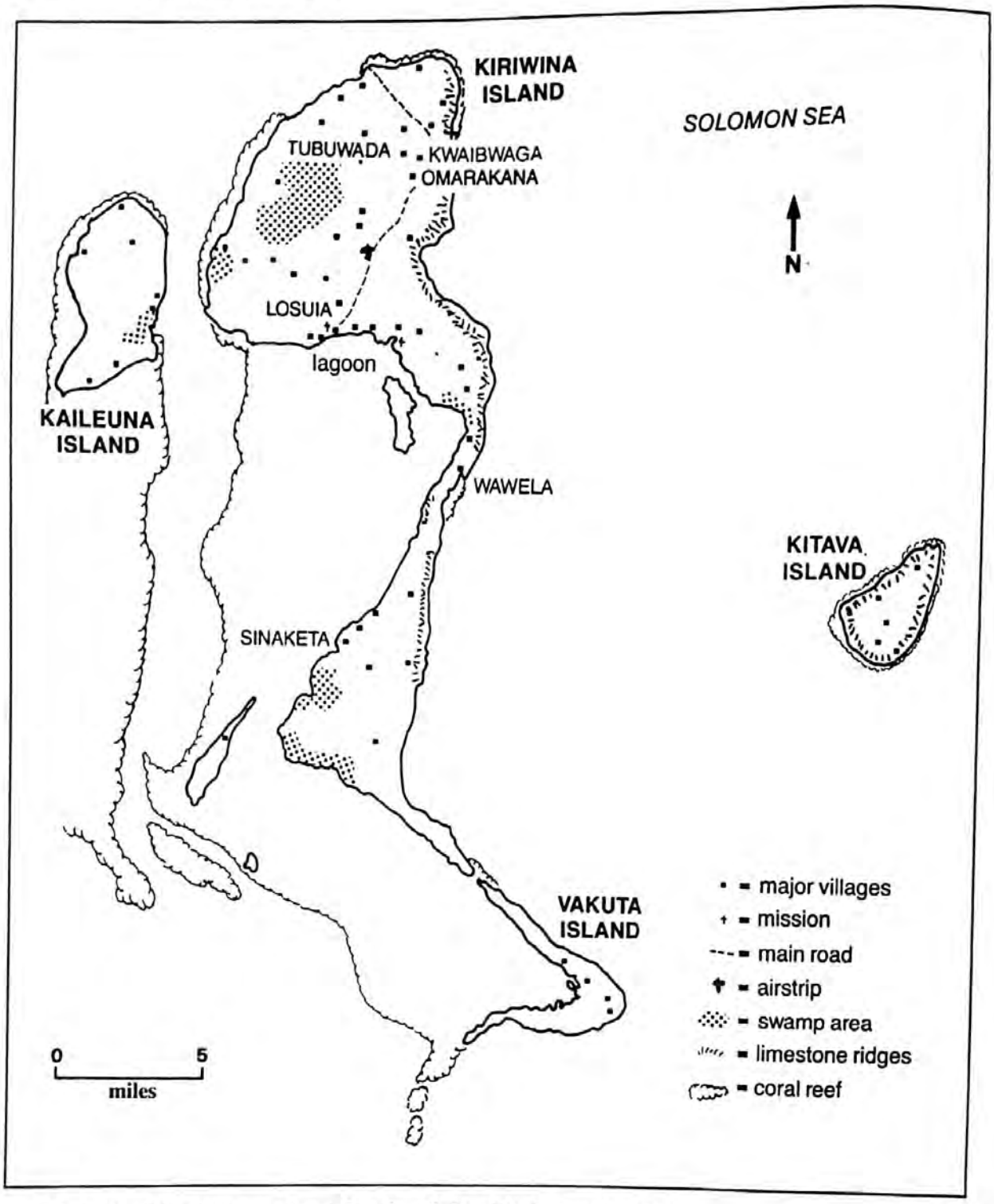
[15] Malinowski (1918:87–92); see also Malinowski (1922:368–371).

understanding of events and circumstances in the natural and social environment has limitations. Although Malinowski sometimes recognized the limits and dimensions of rational thought, he often ignored these ideas. At times, his explanations were as narrow as those he attacked. The problem is evident in his discussion of the function of magic, but it is most revealing in his views on Trobriand exchange.

For example, in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski devoted over five hundred pages to a description of *kula*, an overseas network of exchange relationships that link Trobrianders with people living on other islands in the Massim region.[16] Men, and in some Massim societies, women, travel by canoe to obtain highly valued armshells and shell necklaces from their exchange partners who live on other islands. The armshells always circulate in a counterclockwise direction, whereas the necklaces pass clockwise from island to island. Malinowski's description of *kula* transactions, with all the attendant ritual and magic that accompany each *kula* voyage, was the first full-scale account of "primitive" economics in action, and his examples still are cited in anthropology textbooks. But despite his detailed observations, Malinowski analyzed *kula* activities as if Trobrianders were driven only by custom to carry out their arduous sea voyages. *Argonauts* ends with his claim that Trobrianders exchange *kula* shells merely because they "give for the sake of giving."

From my research and the work of anthropologists who recently have worked on other Massim islands, we know that *kula* transactions are far more intricate and more beset with difficulties than Malinowski recognized. Trobrianders do not simply give up one shell for another because of the dictates of custom, nor does their psychological need to exchange underlie the meaning of *kula*. Rather, in *kula* transactions, Trobriand men create their own individual fame by circulating objects that accumulate the histories of their travels and the names of those who have possessed them. These histories give value to the shells by symbolizing success in influencing and even dominating others. Behind the search for fame and the reciprocal exchanges of one armshell for a necklace, there are other motives at work. Malinowski never noticed that some shells are individually owned, so that a man can use them for his personal economic needs. In following the circulation of these *kitomu* shells, as they are called, we find that some few men can make a "profit" in *kula* by exchanging their own *kitomu* shells with their partners through very long, complex sets of exchanges. Although not the economics of a Western market system, this is not giving for the sake of giving. Thus, looking at Trobriand ethnography today, we have a broader vision for exploring the history, beliefs, and values of Trobrianders. Going deeper into the things that Malinowski first observed, we find the opportunity to view ourselves and the history of anthropology as part of the process of studying others.

[16] See Firth (1957b) for an assessment of Malinowski's contributions and Uberoi (1962) for a reanalysis of Malinowski's findings; see also the essays in J. W. Leach and E. R. Leach (1983) based on recent field research on islands in the Massim region where *kula* takes place.



Map 2. The four major islands of the Trobriand group.

TROBRIAND HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY, AND LANGUAGE

Long before Malinowski first arrived in the Trobriands, many ships' captains made Kiriwina Island a port of call. As early as 1793, the area was sighted by the French explorer D'Entrecasteaux, who named the entire group after his first lieutenant, Denis de Trobriand. The group, as Map 2 indicates, includes the large, kite-shaped island of Kiriwina, flanked by the smaller islands of Kitava, Vakuta, and Kaileuna as well as over one hundred small