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## Revealing the Rationality of Myth: Contribution of Bronislaw Malinowski

### Abstract:

The article is focused on the intellectual significance of the theory of myth developed by prominent Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski within his anthropological approach known as functionalism. The author argues that Malinowski already in the first half of the 20th century anticipated the main trend within the later studies on myth. Like many influential myth-theorists of the next generations, Malinowski recognized the elements of rationality within mythical thinking. Both his emphasis on the integrity of culture as well as his opposition to diffusionism and evolutionism resonate with the perspective of structuralists in the second half of the 20th century. According to Malinowski, myth and science as the parts of culture serve mainly for the basic biological needs of the human body. The more elaborated vision of the functionality of myth has been proposed later in the philosophy of mythology of German poststructuralist Hans Blumenberg. Despite that, Malinowski's attention to the function of myth reflected and formed the general tendency of contemporary science of myth. This tendency presupposes the "de-archaization" of myth in contrast to the progressivist vision of myth as entirely "irrational" or "paralogical" thinking. The author also analyses how the intellectual heritage of Malinowski is used in the recent studies made by contemporary Polish and Ukrainian scholars.

**Keywords:** myth, rationality, Malinowski, functionalism, culture, anthropology.

The recent change in the theory of myth (second half of the 19th – early 21st century) which followed Bronislaw Malinowski's (1884-1942) works justifies the significance of the research of his studies in modern times. There is a certain number of tendencies in the philosophy of mythology of the latest decades that can be determined.

Firstly, structuralists contributed to the rational methodological approach in myth theory. The complex schemes of myth elements that distinguish binary oppositions in Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>1</sup> methodology and linguistical perception of myth by Roland Barthes<sup>2</sup> reflect this tendency.

Secondly, the function of myth came to the foreground. It was crucial to study the function in order to trace back the origins of myth and how the mythical itself was preserved throughout time. The emphasis on function therefore led to the increase of rationality in the perception of myth and through this also reduced the opposition of the “mythical” and the “rational” in modern approaches. Hans Blumenberg<sup>3</sup>, a poststructuralist, stated that mythical and scientific thinking have always been interconnected. The idea of the rational functionality of myth and its role in forming significances for societies, both regarding abstract and specific things, has been studied by Chiara Bottici<sup>4</sup> and William Doty<sup>5</sup>.

Thirdly, the source material in the field of myth theory has expanded considerably, mostly due to the ethnographic expeditions conducted in the 20th century that continued to contribute to our understanding of indigenous peoples all around the world. Moreover, the striking use of imaginary narrative by the Nazi drew public attention to the modern political manifestation of the mythical.

All these tendencies grew stronger and became more distinctive after Malinowski's death. Reference to Malinowski's heritage is beneficial due to the fact that he already combines all the above listed features of modern studies. He was an ethnographer and anthropologist himself, and his field research of indigenous peoples brought him recognition. Moreover, he developed a method of classification of culture elements with a help of complex tables. His work laid

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<sup>1</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, Librairie Plon, Paris 1958, p. 227-255.

<sup>2</sup> R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1957, p. 179-233.

<sup>3</sup> H. Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1979.

<sup>4</sup> C. Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, Cambridge University Press, NY 2007.

<sup>5</sup> W. G. Doty, *Mythography. The Study of Myths and Rituals*, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa and London 2000.

the foundation for a functionalist direction in anthropology that proclaimed the primary rationality of archaic societies in general and the utilitarian functions of myth in particular. Malinowski was one of the first researchers to view the Nazi phenomenon through a lens of anthropology, going as far as calling it “modern magic”<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, Malinowski’s approach resembled the next-generation perspective on myth much more than it reflected the theories of many of his contemporaries, for example, the theories of the proponent of the irrationality of mythical (paralogical) thinking Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939)<sup>7</sup>. The current article aims to determine the key aspects of Malinowski’s functional approach in the context of the philosophy of mythology and to compare the reception of his contribution in modern Poland and Ukraine.

In his studies, Malinowski followed another prominent anthropologist’s work “The Golden Bough” by a British scholar James George Frazer (1854–1941). This work became an inspiration for the young researcher to study anthropology himself.<sup>8</sup> He appreciated Frazer’s ideas throughout his whole life even though their ideas were in theoretical opposition. For example, as opposed to Frazer, Malinowski denied the enlightenment’s view on myth as a primitive pre-scientific stage of spiritual life evolutionally transformed into rational thinking.

In addition, his anthropology model features the clearly articulated theoretical opposition in regard to contemporary theories of his time, namely the very influential ones, diffusionism and evolutionism.<sup>9</sup> He strongly disagreed with the idea that cultural practices in societies emerge as a result of historical borrowing

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<sup>6</sup> B. Malinowski, *Freedom and Civilization*, Roy Publishers, New York 1944.

<sup>7</sup> L. Lévy-Bruhl, *La mythologie primitive: le monde mythique des australiens et des papous* (Nouv. éd.), Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1963.

<sup>8</sup> B. Malinowski, *Myth in primitive psychology* [in:] *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, ed. R. Redfield, The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois 1948, p. 72-73.

<sup>9</sup> A. I. Richards, *The Concept of Culture in Malinowski’s Work* [in:] *Man and Culture. An Evaluation of the Work of Malinowski*, ed. R. Firth, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1960, p. 15-32.

or mark a certain basic stage in the process of evolution. On the contrary, he was interested in the cause of the cultural element's interconnection with different elements, their functions and how they formed a whole. When an observer is deeply involved in cultural context, according to Malinowski, it turns out that the ritual which may appear senseless at first sight and seemingly illogical myth have specific pragmatic functions in the life of society. This perspective resonates with the structuralism approach which takes over in humanitarian studies several decades later. Thus, back in the 1920s, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown<sup>10</sup> introduced a perspective that revolutionized the perception of culture itself, representing its whole through the functioning balance of its compounds. Although, it was partially a result of the influence of structural functionalistic ideas of Emile Durkheim.

The fundamental idea of Malinowski's work is viewing culture as an integrated whole. By 'whole' he understands a complex of means of production, as well as means of consumption, the rules of interpersonal interactions and the common social practices like reproduction of ideas, beliefs and customs. As Malinowski wrote:

Whether we consider a very simple or primitive culture or an extremely complex and developed one, we are confronted by a vast apparatus, partly material, partly human and partly spiritual, by which man is able to cope with the concrete, specific problems that face him. These problems arise out of the fact that man has a body subject to various organic needs, and that he lives in an environment which is his best friend, in that it provides the raw materials of man's handiwork, and also his dangerous enemy, in that it harbors many hostile forces.<sup>11</sup>

Subsequently, Malinowski suggests that primarily culture emerges from the basic biological needs of a human being such as warmth, food, reproduction, hygiene, health, safety etc. An artificial environment,

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<sup>10</sup> A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders*, The University Press, Cambridge 1922.

<sup>11</sup> B. Malinowski, *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Others Essays*, Oxford University Press, New York 1960, p. 36.

in other words, culture, has to be built in order to satisfy these needs. As the researcher underlines, this “secondary, or artificial environment, has to be permanently reproduced, maintained, and managed”<sup>12</sup>. Malinowski, therefore, determines that new restrictions and needs emerge inside the culture itself. He names this process a “secondary type of determinism”. Malinowski distinguishes between instrumental and integral imperatives. The instrumental imperatives emerge out of economic, normative, educational and political types of activity, while integral ones include knowledge, religion and magic. In fact, Malinowski terms as functional the analysis that defines the relationship between cultural performance and a human need, basic or derived.

In this case, the need that was conveniently satisfied within the system serves as a foundation for culture itself, and not, in any case, the bare fact of a certain historical intervention or innovation that might have happened. Malinowski puts a spotlight on the satisfied need and proves that it is this need that causes those cultural changes that set the assimilation process of a certain historical innovation into motion. The scholar also connects the phenomenon of cultural diversity to the regional specifics of the needs which may be transformed in correlation to the universal and the fundamental manifestations of humanity.<sup>13</sup>

Science and myth thus both serve the same purpose: the satisfaction of integral imperatives. Malinowski suggests a simple understanding of science as an attempt to utilize past experiences in order to achieve certain results in the future, to implement the theory into practice and to make use of it bending reality to one’s will. Science, due to the researcher, in that sense had been long present in primitive technology, economic and social structures since the very beginning of humanity’s intellectual journey as “homo sapiens, homo faber and homo politicus”<sup>14</sup>. Malinowski assumes that the disappearance

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 38-41.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

of science for at least one generation would push back the primitive society to its animal origins or, more likely, such a society would cease to exist at all.<sup>15</sup>

Myth fulfils the overall social pragmatism function. Malinowski's anthropological field studies prove that it is unproductive to view myths as merely articulated and written narratives, they should be determined according to their manifestation, in other words, according to the way different societies experience them.

The fundamental functionality of myth is manifested through vital cultural practices in social, ritual and ethical aspects. Thus, this distinguishes myth from science and philosophical allegories. Myth does not explain something and does not inform about the past historical events or express the boldness of human imagination. Indigenous peoples use other narratives and means of communication like scientific knowledge, folktales, legends, which Malinowski also attentively analyses. Myth, if considered as a part of a culture, is no longer a tale but reality. It determines the way of life, strengthens and encodes beliefs, justifies the ritual, represents the social code and moral principles.<sup>16</sup>

Besides the rituals, customs and social structures themselves include the myth references and are regarded as results of some mythical events. Malinowski emphasizes that "the cultural fact is a monument in which the myth is embodied"<sup>17</sup>. Hence, in scholar's opinion, the myths determine and exert control over many cultural features and form the "dogmatic backbone of primitive civilization". In this regard, there is no difference between primitive and modern societies. Much to Malinowski's surprise, the determinative role of myth in social subordination, rituals, moral codes and institutions that has remained unchanged till the present day went unnoticed

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> B. Malinowski, *Myth in primitive psychology* [in:] *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, ed. R. Redfield, The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois 1948, p. 74-89.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

by anthropologists of the West, even though Christianity has always shared common traits with indigenous myth systems.<sup>18</sup>

However, the biological factor is the basis for Malinowski's functionalist theory. The need that transfer the mythical to the real is a secondary one and only has a purpose to maintain the kind of culture that is able to satisfy the basic human needs. In this case, the specific features of a human become vague and culture itself is regarded merely as a complicated and long way (in comparison to the animal instincts) of achieving the aforementioned biological goals. Blumenberg was the one to humanize the functionalism of myth. In his opinion, myths are the only guiding lights in the world where there is a lack of instincts and the abyss of reality appears incomprehensible. Notably, Malinowski also defined myth as a reference point that determines the significance of things.

The Ukrainian scientific discourse has long acknowledged Malinowski's work as a classic. His work is regarded as the foundation of functionalism, however, is rarely deeply analysed. The limited available bibliography sources currently leave us with two perspectives of reception of Malinowski's works in Ukraine: 1) a brief summary of the key aspects of his studies<sup>19</sup>, particularly in regard to myth<sup>20</sup>; 2) the partial implementation of his ideas for more extensive research.

It has to be expected that more insightful studies of Malinowski's work emerge in Poland, his motherland even though the scholar's career is most tightly associated with foreign countries. He spent a few years at the University of Leipzig and went on to head the Department of Anthropology of the London School of Economics (1927). From the beginning of World War II until his death in 1942, he lived in the United States, where he taught at Cornell and Yale

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<sup>18</sup> B. Malinowski, *Myth as a Dramatic Development of Dogma* [in:] *Malinowski and the Work of Myth*, ed. I. Strenski, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 2014, p. 117-128.

<sup>19</sup> O. Hinda, *Skarbnytsia svitovoi antropohichnoi dumky: teoretychni postulaty Bronislava Malinovskoho*, „Pedahohichna dumka”, nr 1, 2010, s. 74-76.

<sup>20</sup> I. Frys, *Mifolohichni kontseptsii XX st.: ohliad problemy*, „Kyivski polonistychni studii”, t. 19, 2012, s. 377-382.

universities. However, the future outstanding anthropologist was born in 1884 in Krakow. It was there that he received his education (first at the Jan Sobieski Secondary School, later at the University of Krakow) and his first doctorate (for research in physics and mathematics, in 1908; Malinowski received his second doctorate in anthropology in London in 1916).<sup>21</sup>

A big step towards increasing the visibility of Malinowski's studies was made when the book "Malinowski between Two Worlds: the Polish Roots of the Anthropological Tradition"<sup>22</sup> was published. The book was dedicated to the celebration of 100 years since the researcher's birth and was the result of the collaboration between Polish and British anthropologists. The introduction was written by Malinowski's daughter Helena Wayne. For the first time, the Polish period of the researcher's life was described in detail revealing the origins of his intellectual journey. Krzysztof J. Brozi<sup>23</sup> from Maria Curie-Skłodowska University also refers to the processes that took place at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in academic circles in Krakow in his work on the origins of the teachings of B. Malinowski. Brozi notes that in the days of Malinowski's youth there was a variety of philosophical ideas, from positivism, empiriocriticism, neo-Kantianism, Darwinism, Hegelianism, Aristotelianism up to the philosophical teachings of the Far East. Stefan Pawlicki, a historian of philosophy, who was interested in the culture of the ancient East and cognitive theories, the influential representative of empiriocriticism Wladyslaw Heinrich, and the positivist Maurycy Straszewski, can be considered Malinowski's mentors. According to Brozi, the theoretical framework of these researchers

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<sup>21</sup> R. Firth, *Introduction: Malinowski as Scientist and as Man* [in:] *Man and Culture. An Evaluation of the Work of Malinowski*, ed. R. Firth, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1960, p. 1-15.

<sup>22</sup> R. Ellen, E. Gellner, G. Kubica, and J. Mucha, eds, *Malinowski between Two Worlds: The Polish Roots of an Anthropological Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1988.

<sup>23</sup> K. Brozi, *Philosophical Premises of Functional Anthropology*, "Philosophy of the Social Sciences", nr 22(3), 1992, p. 357-369.

specifically influenced the development of Malinowski's ideas. In a collective monograph on the concept of law by Malinowski<sup>24</sup>, the first part is also devoted to justifying the influence exerted on his views by such Polish intellectuals as Stanislaw Estreicher and Dragun Latur.

While working at Jagiellonian University, Petr Skalnik<sup>25</sup> researched the role of philosophy in Malinowski's intellectual biography. He came to the conclusion that religion, ethics, politics and, above all, cultural aspects of Malinowski's ideas have their origins in philosophical theories. At the same time, B. Malinowski defended a certain autonomy of anthropology from philosophy. In contrast to philosophy, anthropology, in his opinion, was meant to adhere to the empirical data collected in field research.

In the context of mythology studies, the most attention is paid to Malinowski's view of myth as a living cultural force<sup>26</sup>, including his critique of the textual analysis of the perception of magic by the indigenous people, without taking into account their own cultural practices.<sup>27</sup> Malinowski's concept of the function of myth is considered to be one of the central points of his functionalism.<sup>28</sup> In particular, his remark about the correlation between the role of myth in the life of indigenous people and the role of the Bible in Christian culture is further observed.<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that Malinowski's

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<sup>24</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski's *Concept of Law*, ed. M. Stępień, Springer, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> P. Skalnik, *Malinowski and Philosophy* [in:] *Philosophy and Anthropology. Border Crossing and Transformation*, ed. A. K. Giri, J. R. Clammer, Anthem Press, London/New York 2013, p. 167-183.

<sup>26</sup> M. Ples, *Świadomość mityczna jako problem filozoficzny*, „IDEA – Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych”, XXIV, 2012, s. 5-18.

<sup>27</sup> M. Rakoczy, *Słowo magiczne jako działanie – o kilku walorach koncepcji Bronisława Malinowskiego*, „Poznańskie studia slawistyczne”, nr 4, 2013, s. 151-163.

<sup>28</sup> M. Mazurkiewicz, *The Types, Interpretations and Functions of Myth*, „Respectus Philologicus”, nr 22(27), 2012, p. 45-56.

<sup>29</sup> M. M. Boużyk, *Dlaczego mit? Kilka uwag w świetle filozofii klasycznej* [w:] *Tożsamość w ezoterycznych nurtach kultury*, red. A. Świerżowska, I. Trzcińska, LIBRON, Kraków 2016, s. 9-25.

contribution is implemented in further studies of Melanesian myths<sup>30</sup>, within which he lived and carried out most of his fieldwork.

The way that modern researchers utilize Malinowski's ideas to strengthen their own positions in discussions on several current issues is of particular interest. For example, his idea of myth as an integral part of culture serves as a starting point of a chapter in research on mythological elements in the narratives of the transgender transition.<sup>31</sup> The rehabilitation of non-European cultural traditions proposed by Malinowski and his thesis on cultural equality proved to be useful in the context of combating xenophobia during the European migration crisis, which also affected Poland.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, Malinowski's emphasis on the idea of cultural integrity, as well as his critique of the integration of the indigenous people, were used as an argument in favour of homogeneous Polish nation-building.<sup>33</sup> The critique of economical rationality in the perception of human proposed by Malinowski in his analysis of the non-utilitarian symbolic ritual exchange among indigenous people proved to be effective in the unmasking of modern mythology<sup>34</sup>, in particular the myths of the consumer society<sup>35</sup>. It is also noteworthy that in the study on

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<sup>30</sup> F. M. Rosiński, *Funkcja mitu, opowiadania i bajki w kulturze krajowców Melanezji*, „Colloquia Anthropologica et Communicativa: Mit, prawda, imaginacja”, t. 3, 2011, s. 61-78.

<sup>31</sup> A. M. Klonowska, S. Bonvissuto, *Personal and Collective Trans-Mythologies: Creative Attitudes to Gender Incongruence Among Transgender Individuals*, “Creativity Studies”, 2019, nr 12(1), p. 61-74.

<sup>32</sup> D. Baumgarten-Szczyrska, K. Milewska, D. Obalek, *Spotkanie z innym jako przykład edukacji globalnej w przestrzeni muzeum*, „Muzealnictwo”, nr 58, 2017, s. 227-239.

<sup>33</sup> J. Szacki, *Polish Sociology and Problems of Nation Building* [in:] *National Survival in Dependent Societies: Social Change in Canada and Poland*, ed. R. Breton, G. Houle et al, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 1990, p. 71-82.

<sup>34</sup> M. Napiórkowski, *Mitologia współczesna*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2013.

<sup>35</sup> R. Rogoziński, *Konsumpcja jako mit społeczeństwa postindustrialnego. O Baudrillardowskim pojęciu konsumpcji*, „Przegląd Socjologiczny”, t. 64, nr 3, 2015, s. 27-51.

mythological narratives formed around the death of John Paul II the views on myth proposed by Malinowski are also present.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, Poland is characterized by a comprehensive study of Malinowski's ideas with a remarkable emphasis on his intellectual origins. Therefore, he is widely referred to and acknowledged in different modern discourses. However, it seems that there is a gap in understanding of his heritage as a step into general revealing the rationality of myth in philosophical trends of the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>37</sup>

There were countless attempts to draw attention to the reason in myth made by different scholars before Malinowski, for instance in the large-scale system of the philosophy of mythology introduced by Friedrich Schelling<sup>38</sup>, which was later developed by Ernst Cassirer in his "Philosophy of Symbolic Forms"<sup>39</sup>. However, Malinowski seems to become the first researcher who managed, having experienced the role of myth in the everyday life of indigenous societies, to deeply grasp the idea of myth as a rational way of exploring the world. His work changed the way we perceived the archaic societies and proved their way of thinking, which seemed irrational and "paralogical" to us before, to be completely rational. In this regard, Malinowski went a step further than his authoritative teacher Fraser.

In 1951, Willard Quine, one of the prominent representatives of analytical philosophy, came to a stunning conclusion in one of his most famous works "Two Dogmas of Empiricism". He revealed that the physical objects are comparable, epistemologically, to the Homeric gods and "both enter our conception only as cultural

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<sup>36</sup> M. Hodalska, *Śmierć Papieża, narodziny mitu*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2010.

<sup>37</sup> See more elaboration on the extension of limits of the rationality in the philosophy of mythology of the 19th and 20th centuries: O. Siedin, *Shchodo reabilitatsii mifu ta rozshyrennia mezh rozumnoho u filozofskii dumtsi XIX-XX st.*, „Naukovi zapysky NaUKMA. Filosofia ta relihiieznavstvo”, t. 3, 2019, s. 76-84.

<sup>38</sup> F. W. Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, Cotta, Stuttgart 1859.

<sup>39</sup> E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen. Zweiter Teil: Das mythische Denken*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1994.

posits”<sup>40</sup>. So, they act as convenient mediators between thinking and experience. Quine also noted that he, being a “qua lay physicist”, believed in physical objects, and not in Homeric gods, for the reason only that the former reflects the material of experience more effectively. However, Quine qualitatively equated the mythical and scientific worldview. Thus, the opposition between mythical and rational thinking was further reduced in analytical tradition as well. In the modern philosophy of mythology, the ideas about the rational functionality of myth are successfully developed and an inclusive research horizon is formed, which is based on the methodology developed by various scientific disciplines and takes a variety of manifestations of the mythical into account.<sup>41</sup> Malinowski is of great interest nowadays, as he made a unique anthropological contribution to the general tendency of rehabilitation of myth and its inclusion in the rational (on the contrary to the progressive-educational guidelines that prevailed in the science of myth of the 19th century).

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<sup>40</sup> W. V. O. Quine, *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, “The Philosophical Review”, vol. 60, no 1, 1951, p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> See more about inclusive approach to the definition of myth.: O. Siedin, *Definiitsiia mifu: u poshukakh inkluzywnoho pidkhodu*, „Naukovi zapysky NaUKMA. Filozofia ta relihiieznavstvo”, t. 4, 2019, s. 58-66.

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