

IVAN STRENSKI

Malinowski and the Work of Myth



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**MALINOWSKI AND
THE WORK OF MYTH**



**MALINOWSKI AND
THE WORK OF MYTH**

*Selected and Introduced
by Ivan Strenski*

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FRONTISPIECE AND COVER DETAIL. PAUL GAUGUIN, *WHERE DO WE COME FROM?*

WHAT ARE WE? WHERE ARE WE GOING? (D'OÙ VENONS-NOUS?

QUE SOMMES-NOUS? OÙ ALLONS-NOUS), 1897. TOMPKINS COLLECTION

COURTESY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Ninian Smart
“Dullabho purisājañño,
na so sabbattha jāyati”
(*Dhammapada*: 193.)

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My thanks above all to Robert Segal, stalwart colleague, cherished friend.

INTRODUCTION: MALINOWSKI AND MYTH

Why Read Malinowski on Myth?

NEARLY SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS have passed since Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) first wrote about myth. Can Malinowski still teach us anything important about myth today? Since Malinowski's time, much work has been done on the theory of myth by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and many others. Did Malinowski say anything that these theorists did not say better? Why should we still read Malinowski at all?

The best reason for continuing to read Malinowski on myth is simply that many of his insights remain important. These fall into four categories: function and practice, context and meaning, anthropology and psychoanalysis, and conceptual marking.

First, Malinowski articulated as never before, or since, a program of seeing myths as part of the functional, pragmatic, or *performed* dimension of culture—that is, as part of activities which *do* certain tasks for particular human communities.¹ Second, he created sensitivity for the critical role of context in interpreting the meaning of myths. Myths do not have intrinsic meaning; their meaning is given by their home context of situation. Myths are thus not primarily texts, or isolated pieces of literature; they are texts merged with contexts. Third, Malinowski was a pioneer in applying the lessons of psychoanalysis to the study of culture. At the same time, he usefully attempted to correct the generalizations of psychoanalysis with the cross-cultural researches of ethnology. Fourth, he showed exemplary conceptual self-awareness about the epistemological status of the category of myth. He knew that to call something a 'myth' is to *mark* it as special, to separate it off from things considered to be of a different nature. To do so means taking responsibility for the categories of inquiry, and not to imagine that we could excuse our theoretical moves by appealing to some objective and given nature of myth.

A final reason to read Malinowski on myth is for the sheer interest and pleasure of it. Malinowski was a remarkably catholic thinker whose mind explored many fields and whose ideas enriched just as many. His own original training was done in Poland in physics and mathematics, with a

¹ Contemporary practitioners of approaches to culture that emphasize performance, practice, and function number S. J. Tambiah, "The Magical Power of Words," *Man* 3 (1968): 175–208; Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

strong component of philosophy, at the University of Krakow. There, Malinowski took a Ph.D. (1906) with a *rigorosum* (a form of academic distinction) in both physics and philosophy.² Then followed a year of studies with the experimental psychologist and philosopher Wilhelm Wundt and economist Karl Bücher at the University of Leipzig, where Malinowski's father had studied. But these interests in the hard sciences in part gave way to a growing professional preoccupation with so-called primitive cultures, perhaps encouraged by Wundt's development of a *Völkerpsychologie*. Malinowski moved to London in 1910 to pursue a program of study in anthropology at the London School of Economics under the direction of Charles Seligman and Edward Westermarck. Shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, Malinowski set out for Australia, and from there on his now famous field studies in New Guinea (1914–1918). These years of field study became the basis of Malinowski's extensive writings on myth.

The work that Malinowski produced as a result of his field studies revealed a man who was much more than a fact-finding ethnographer. He was a genuine intellectual. Beyond his training in ethnology, his writings on myth ventured into debates within the fields of folklore, literary criticism, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, religion, and sexuality studies. Malinowski took his place in the intellectual world of interwar London, moving in the fashionable circles frequented by figures ranging from Bertrand Russell to Havelock Ellis. He held forth at the London School of Economics for nearly two decades, leaving England only a year or so before his death to accept a post at Yale. Having lived through two personally disruptive world wars and the rapid transformation of the western world during the early twentieth century, Malinowski was passionate about applying the lessons of anthropology to contemporary social problems—war, aggression, sexual mores, crime and punishment. Malinowski was thus an exciting and provocative thinker, one who tried to combine scientific styles of thinking with the big issues of life and death, our so-called existential human problems. So for these reasons, we can make a case for giving Malinowski's theory of myth another good hard look. This introduction will concentrate on the lasting value of Ma-

² "Bronislaw Malinowski's Cracow Doctorate," Andrzej Flis, ed., *Malinowski between Two Worlds. The Polish Roots of an Anthropological Tradition*, Roy Ellen, Ernest Gellner, Grazyna Kubica, and Janusz Mucha, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 195. See also Andrzej K. Paluch, "Introduction: Bronislaw Malinowski and Cracow Anthropology," *Malinowski between Two Worlds*, pp. 1–11 for a general discussion of Malinowski's academic biography. For relations between the thought of Ernst Mach and Malinowski, see Ernest Gellner, "'Zeno of Cracow' or 'Revolution at Nemi' or 'The Polish Revenge: A Drama in Three Acts,'" *Malinowski between Two Worlds*, pp. 164–94.

linowski's views about myth—on what *has* survived and what *ought* to survive.

What Should Survive of Malinowski's Theory of Myth?

Their "Lili'u" Is Really Our "Myth"

Malinowski did what every myth theorist ought to do but which few, if any, have done. He understood that using the word "myth" is to mark a category of story.³ "Myth" is not just the name of any story. The term "myth" singles out a class of story, just as the terms "art" or "literature" do the same for their referents. Thus, using the word "myth" is a way of evaluating stories, or of describing them as special or important stories.

In addition to myth theorists' general obliviousness to the marking process, the main problem in the development of a theory of myth has been that myth theorists broadly disagree about at least two things: First, what should make up the content, function, or structure of the marked category "myth"? For example, do myths have to contain some reference to gods, heroes, creation, origins, spirits, and so on? Or must they *function* religiously, to evoke mystery and to create existential realizations, or socially, to charter institutions? Second, to which particular stories should we apply this term "myth"? Is the story of Adam and Eve myth or is it revelation? Are the gospel stories of the life of Jesus myth or are they history, legend, or an heroic tale?

What makes something a work of art or literature? Is art distinctive because of what it *depicts* (e.g., satyrs and nymphs, rather than humble peasants), or the way it *functions* (e.g., to create the feeling of the sublime)? But having agreed, for the sake of demonstration, that art must create the feeling of the sublime, we might disagree that a certain *depiction* in a portrait or landscape does so. The Naturalist painters created precisely this kind of dilemma by trying to create a sense of the sublime while depicting objects not previously thought capable of creating intense emotional reactions. For this reason, a good myth theorist, like a theorist of art or literature in a comparable situation, will have to defend why they think a certain story should be called myth. Myth theorists have to take responsibility for their concept of myth by recognizing that in calling something a myth, they are marking that something off as a distinct category.

Malinowski operates with some awareness that he is involved in a

³ See especially Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), pp. 299 (pp. 10–11 this volume), 301–3, and "Myth in Primitive Psychology," *Magic, Science and Religion*, Robert Redfield, ed., p. 107f (p. 86ff this volume), and "The Foundations of Faith and Morals," *Sex, Culture and Myth*, p. 304f (pp. 140–41 this volume).

marking process when he deals with "myths." In "Myth in Primitive Psychology" Malinowski writes that "the most important point of the thesis which I am urging" is that "I maintain that there exists a class of stories"⁴ that he calls myths.

How did Malinowski determine what a myth was? How did he decide what fit the category? What did "myth" mean for him, even before he arrived in the Trobriand Islands?

We might begin by recognizing that the term "myth" had a rich and controversial history in Malinowski's Europe. In this context, myth primarily meant a radiant and important story. The Romantic culture which Malinowski inherited in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Polish society had to some degree overcome the Enlightenment's disparagement of myths as simpleminded false stories.

As a recent Polish study of Malinowski's romantic background concludes: "Even Malinowski's biography turned out to be a model biography of Polish romanticism."⁵ Even more, Malinowski's sensibilities were shaped specifically by a local Polish version of the European "modernist" or neoromantic movement.⁶ The original British and German romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did much to collect and popularize the stories of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as those of the northern peoples, the Scandinavian Eddas or the German stories collected by the brothers Grimm or those put into epic operatic form in the Ring Cycle of Richard Wagner. In like manner, the Polish neoromantics expressed their sensibilities in scientific, ethnographic, and folklorist work. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Malinowski's own linguist father and his academic friends formed a loosely connected intellectual circle in Krakow devoted to such interests as local ethnology and Polish folk culture.⁷ High on the list of things that interested these neoromantic intellectuals of Malinowski's milieu were stories; these stories were routinely called "myths."

Malinowski was drawn to stories in part because, like all anthropologists who harbored empirical and "scientific" aspirations, he needed data. Now, stories are relatively easy to convert into data. In large part, they are publicly available for recording in the notebook of the anthropologist. This distinguishes them from many of our cultural beliefs, which often are presumed, but not explicitly available to consciousness. Further, sto-

⁴ Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology," p. 108 (p. 87 this volume).

⁵ Jan Jerschina, "Polish Culture of Modernism and Malinowski's Personality," *Malinowski between Two Worlds*, p. 136.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 128-48, esp. 128, 130, 136. Ivan Strenski, "Malinowski. Second Positivism, Second Romanticism," *Man* 17 (1982): 766-71.

⁷ Paluch, "Malinowski and Cracow Anthropology," p. 5, and Grazyna Kubica, "Malinowski's Years in Poland," pp. 88-89, 94 in *Malinowski between Two Worlds*.

ries are "portable" and their removal does not really make much of an impact upon the cultural environment of the society in question, compared with the legion of problems—even in the heyday of imperialism when Malinowski flourished—in collecting so-called "primitive art," and the problems of making it "data." In many cases, statues or masks are not portable simply because of their size, but equally they often cannot be taken away (secretly or openly) for display and discussion because of cultural restrictions. They are holy objects, the removal of which would be inconvenient or conspicuous, and moreover a grave wrong to the people being studied. While it is true that many stories are sacred in this sense, many are not subject to restrictions (nor even the possibility of enforcing them) against retelling them or writing them down.

Malinowski was drawn to the stories his hosts in the southwestern Pacific told among themselves and, sometimes, to him. But why call these stories "myth" rather than "literature" or "art"? These stories were different from each other and had many indigenous names (but none of these names was of course "myth"). The Trobrianders had what Malinowski just called "stories."⁸ But they also had their "*lil'u*," "*libogwo*," "*ku-kwanebu*," "*wosi*," "*vinavina*," "*megwa*," and "*yopa*."⁹ How should Malinowski talk about these classes of stories? Should he just use these raw terms unfamiliar to his readers, or should he try to invent equivalents in Western culture, and then translate the names of the different kinds of native stories into terms his readers might better understand? And which native story, if any, was equivalent to our notion of "myth" which Malinowski and others took for granted as a result of their European romantic nurture?

In trying to answer this question, Malinowski assumes what most of our theorists of myth assume as well, yet in ways that show a somewhat higher degree of self-awareness about what he was doing. What makes Malinowski somewhat admirable, and thus what should contribute to the survival of his approach to myth, is that he chose deliberately to try to convey the sense of the unfamiliar by the familiar, the new by the old, by having recourse to the *marking process*. He knew that in labeling a story a "myth," he was marking it in a particular way—just as surely as when we call a painting "art," or a novel "literature." This is one reason it is instructive to read Malinowski on myth, and to look at his effort to render native stories intelligible to Western readers.

As a Romantic, Malinowski assumed that the stories he should study and feature as "myths" were those stories especially marked as "sacred" among the Trobrianders. In doing this, rightly or wrongly, he imported

⁸ Malinowski, *Argonauts*, pp. 291–95 (pp. 3–6 this volume).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 299 (pp. 10–11 this volume).

fundamental assumptions from Western culture which almost all theorists of myth do as well. We have given importance to certain stories, such as the Greek myths, the Bible stories, the folktales of northern Europe; we have tended to call them all "myths," and have linked them with religion. They are the "sacred" narratives, even when "myth" is taken pejoratively to mean "false story."¹⁰ In this case, typically its falsity is itself important. Attempts to debunk biblical narrative as merely mythical are so fervent partly because critics believe that these stories have done real damage in leading people astray. Malinowski assumed that the Trobrianders mark off some stories for special religious reasons, and that they would name them as well.

This then leads Malinowski to seek out a class of stories for special treatment among the Trobrianders. He chose the Trobriand "*lili'u*," and equated them straightaway with our (originally Greek) term, "myth." Why? Malinowski says that the *lili'u* are the "most important class" of stories—adding that this is "reproducing *prima facie* the natives' own classification and nomenclature."¹¹ Identifying it with "myth," Malinowski notes that the *lili'u* is "true, venerable and sacred," and plays a "highly important cultural part."¹² Thus it is because both are the important or sacred stories of a given society, that we can speak of their "*lili'u*" as equivalent to our "myth."

I am not uncritically celebrating this equating of terms from different cultures in the way Malinowski does. In many ways, his approach could be indicted for engaging in a massive imperialist projection of Western romantic notions upon the Trobrianders. Our word, "myth," henceforth swallows up their word, "*lili'u*," without any sense that "*lili'u*" might contain different non-Western features. More than that, from here on, Malinowski assumes both that stories have an equally special value in all societies, and that "myth" swallows up all non-Western "important narratives."

Nevertheless, Malinowski is to be commended for being as explicit as he was about the marking process. His example, rightly read, enables us to see that all talk about "myth" across cultures involves the kinds of conceptual marking of choice features of the cultures of others. Since there is no accepted definition of "myth" and since "myth" is our word—not theirs—whenever we want to talk about another culture, we will inevitably need to work out acceptable ways of using terms familiar to our readers. Malinowski was very far from perfect in this regard, but he at least opens the door a crack, allowing us to see further.

¹⁰ Malinowski, "The Foundations of Faith and Morals," p. 312 (p. 148 this volume).

¹¹ Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology," p. 107 (p. 86 this volume).

¹² Ibid., p. 107 (p. 86 this volume).

Functionalism: Myth Is as Myth Does

If any word is always associated with Malinowski, it is "functionalism." Despite many critical attacks on Malinowski's functional theory, it continues to hold many adherents. But what is functionalism in respect to myth? How can we understand why it has managed to retain the interest and devotion of students of myth and religion? An inquiry into Malinowski's functionalism is doubly important, because he held different functionalist positions at different times in his life. Let us start simply by asking what central claims are embedded in Malinowski's functionalism.

First, there is generic or "broad" functionalism. To be this kind of functionalist means little more than to view society as an interdependent organic whole.¹³ This generic functionalism calls attention to the ways culture or society coheres, hangs together, works—how it *functions*. Here Malinowski does not differ significantly from Durkheim or even Aristotle. On this view, such functionalists view myth as a part of the social or cultural whole, a piece of the mechanism of society performing its tasks in maintaining the whole. In particular, Malinowski says that the job of myth is "a warrant, a charter, and even a practical guide to the activities with which it is connected." Myths are not actually meant to be read as explanations, but are active parts of culture like commands, deeds, or guarantees, certifying that some sort of social arrangement is legitimate; they are the "backbone of primitive culture."¹⁴ They maintain the legitimacy of our social arrangements. The story of Adam and Eve, for example, may or may not be literally true, but its literal truth is irrelevant to its *function*. The story has functioned in the past, among other things, to charter the institutions of wearing clothes, bearing children in pain, or working by the "sweat of our brows."

But a second, riskier, and more interesting, sense of functionalism can also be found in Malinowski.¹⁵ It has two parts as well. Malinowski asserts, first, that myth functions *unconsciously* as far as the actors in question are concerned. Second, myth functions as "an indispensable ingredient of all culture";¹⁶ it fulfills objective, even biological, needs essential to the survival of the culture in question.

What distinguishes Malinowski's second pragmatic sense of functionalism from the first broad or generic variety is the idea that *all* the elements of a cultural whole serve a *necessary* practical function for the survival of the institution. *Everything* in society functions to fulfill basic

¹³ Malinowski, "The Foundations of Faith and Morals," p. 324 (p. 160 this volume).

¹⁴ Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology," p. 108 (p. 87 this volume).

¹⁵ A. Pierce, "Durkheim and Functionalism," in K. Wolff, ed., *Essays on Sociology and Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 154.

¹⁶ Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology," p. 146 (p. 115 this volume).

needs. And when Malinowski speaks of the "basic needs," he has biology in mind—so much so that he speaks of the "biological utility" of culturally functioning institutions.¹⁷ This extreme biological functionalist interpretation of human culture developed gradually for Malinowski. Early in his career, Malinowski argued that only so-called "primitive" culture was exclusively pragmatic. Thus at one point Malinowski believed that even language was used in exclusively pragmatic ways: "primitive" cultures simply had no other choice, since they lived precarious existences and needed to make everything in their culture count. As Malinowski says, "language in its primitive function and original form has an essentially pragmatic character . . . [It is] a mode of behavior, an indispensable element of concerted human action."¹⁸

Myth thus follows the lead of language. The so-called "primitive" is "an eager actor, playing his part for his own benefit, trying to use all the means in his power towards the attainment of his various needs and desires. . . . He is interested in all things which subserve these ends and are thus immediately useful. Round these he develops not only his magic . . . but also his myths."¹⁹

This assertion occurred in the context of Malinowski's point that "primitive" folk were not idle and ignorant.²⁰ Their cultures showed admirably that they worked with a hardheaded practicality. But to some extent Malinowski also disparaged practicality—native or otherwise—as sign of a certain lack of refinement or aristocratic cultivation. At the same time as he was saying that primitive language was essentially pragmatic, he believed that Western scientific language rose above practicality and moved in realms of pure thought.

But later in *Coral Gardens* (1935) Malinowski changed his mind. He extended his pragmatic reading of "primitive" culture to "us" "moderns" as well. "Even literary and scientific language" is subject to the same pragmatic interpretation as primitive language:

in one of my previous writings [above], I opposed civilized and scientific to primitive speech, and argued as if the theoretical uses of words in modern philosophic and scientific writings were completely detached from their pragmatic sources. This was an error, and a serious one at that. Between the savage use of words and the most abstract and theoretical one, there is only

¹⁷ Bronislaw Malinowski, "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages," Special Appendix to C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench and Trubner, 1923), p. 332.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

¹⁹ Bronislaw Malinowski, "On Sir James Frazer," *Sex, Culture and Myth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p. 272.

²⁰ Malinowski, *Argonauts*, p. 166.

a difference of degree. Ultimately all the meaning of all the words is derived from bodily experience.²¹

Pragmatism is everywhere.

As for myth, it is here in this fundamental, biological, and universal human pragmatism, that we find the origins of myth. Myth for Malinowski is "indispensable" and "vital"²²—something a society needs—and without which it cannot materially persist. Tradition here takes a special role in this indispensable job which myth performs for culture: "Myth expresses, enhances and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of men . . . a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom."²³ Myth is thus a "hard-worked active force," covering the "whole pragmatic reaction of man towards disease and death" and expressing "his emotions, his foreboding."²⁴ For Malinowski, myth is practically linked with our basic biological needs.

As if this pragmatic biological sense of functionalism were not radical enough, Malinowski also claimed that the actors in question were *unconsciously* serving these functions.²⁵ Myths work on us subrationally, below our threshold of awareness. We may be moved by stories of the return of a dead loved one such as in the play *Blithe Spirit*. Malinowski would say that this is not because we consciously recognize the truth of these accounts, and rationally conclude that they are so. Rather, the promise of neverending life and the desire to avoid death, which are embodied in such a play, speak directly to us, straight to our organism as Malinowski might say. Our will to believe myths of life beyond the grave testify to the natural built-in drives and instincts of our animal nature. These visceral reactions translate into emotions which overwhelm our rational critical calculating mind, and thus make believers out of every one of us—all without our being necessarily aware of it. "There are no atheists in foxholes," the saying goes. Thus Malinowski can earnestly assert that myth is "born from the innermost and emotional reaction to the most formidable and haunting idea"²⁶—death.

Whatever doubts we may have about Malinowski's viewpoint, there is power in this position—the power of the "bottom line." Malinowski forces us to measure myths by what they can really seem able to

²¹ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935), vol. 2, p. 58, quoted by D. T. Langendoen, *London School of Linguistics* (Cambridge: MIT, 1968), p. 34.

²² Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology," p. 101 (p. 82 this volume).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 101 (p. 82 this volume).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132 (p. 105 this volume).

²⁵ Pierce, "Durkheim and Functionalism," p. 157.

²⁶ Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology," p. 110 (p. 89 this volume).

achieve—by their observable effects. Thus at one level, myths may provide access to the stated beliefs of people. They are “founts of ethnographic information,”²⁷ as Malinowski calls them. But if we take them literally, we will soon become baffled. For example, what are we to make of tales of miracles, ghosts, or persons surviving death to live in another world? If we take the storytellers at their literal word, we would have to conclude either that they knew about the mysterious technology of living forever or, since people die and do not seem to live forever, that they were not telling the truth. Either way, we arrive at a dead end. The technology of life eternal would probably transcend our understanding, leaving us dumbfounded and unable to make intelligent comments or, if untrue, such a narrative simply shuts us out.

Malinowski’s answer to this difficulty is to say that what people really mean in relating such narratives was not what they literally (or symbolically) said. Rather, what they meant could be discovered in what the stories did for them. Telling myths about life everlasting does not really give a report about life in another state; rather, these stories are about how they affect an audience—how they demonstrably make people feel better about their inevitable fates. The bottom line about such a myth is what it *does*—it boosts our morale. Malinowski’s perspective turns attention to the behavioral consequences of certain stories, rather than their literal meaning: if we really want to understand myths, look at what myths *do*, not what they *say*.

A lie? Maybe. But in Malinowski’s view it was a noble lie—one which does some good for people in a situation in which there may really be nothing to be done. Speaking of his informants in the Trobriands, Malinowski reports that

in his actual emotional attitude towards death, whether his own or that of his loved ones, the native is not completely guided by his belief and mythological ideas. His intense fear of death, his strong desire to postpone it and his deep sorrow at the departure of beloved relatives belie the optimistic creed . . . inherent in native customs, ideas and rituals. . . . But again the same people would clutch at the hope given to them by their beliefs. They would screen, with the vivid texture of their myths, stories and beliefs about the spirit world, the vast emotional void gaping beyond them.²⁸

Speaking for himself and his own times, Malinowski tells the audience of his 1936 Riddell lectures much the same thing. “The rationalist and agnostic must admit that even if he himself cannot accept these truths

²⁷ Bronislaw Malinowski, “Baloma,” *Magic, Science and Religion*, p. 239, and *Argonauts*, p. 317 (p. 25 this volume).

²⁸ Malinowski, “Myth in Primitive Psychology,” p. 138 (pp. 108–9 this volume), my emphasis.

[myth and religion], he must at least admit them as indispensable pragmatic figments without which civilization cannot exist."²⁹ And so we must keep up appearances, so to speak, and leave myth undisturbed in modern society. Without myth, the practical job which it does would not be fulfilled, and without the fulfillment of these vital functions, society would fall into chaos. Society is better off if people believe what myths like *Blithe Spirit* portray—even if false—than if people had no hope in reunion with lost loved ones. Such myths keep alive human hope, and with it human society. To the extent that Malinowski's paternal viewpoint is true, so long as people actually do need the noble lies which he equates with myths, so long as people live through self-deception—and the success of a play like *Blithe Spirit* suggests that many of us do—then so long must we take his words to heart.

Context Holds the Key to the Real Meaning of Myths

Sensitivity to the context of situation is a third reason why Malinowski's theory of myth can be recommended to today's readers.

There are two parts to Malinowski's appreciation of context that are worth considering. First, Malinowski breaks the monopoly of the text. Questions about myths may need to go beyond the literary level of a myth, beyond the text, to the situation and *intentions* of their collective or individual creation. For Malinowski, myths are not mere "texts"; they are at least texts in contexts. Myths are narratives which occur within a society, a culture; they cannot therefore fully be appreciated unless we have access to that living culture which gives them birth and in which they are current. Says Malinowski, "To understand [a particular society's] myth, you must have a good knowledge of their sociology, religion, customs, and outlook. *Then, and only then*, can you appreciate what this story means to the natives and how it can live in their life."³⁰ Second, this leads naturally to the idea that questions of meaning, function, and the like can now be answered not simply in terms of the intentions of the mythmaker, but also in terms of the varieties of context—the differences in the audiences in which myths *perform*. Accordingly, Malinowski calls for the study of myth within its "context of living faith, social organization . . . morals . . . and customs."³¹

Taken together these two points give the fieldworking anthropologist a unique advantage over any deskbound literary student of myth. Having

²⁹ P. K. Feyerabend, "Explanation, Reduction and Empiricism," in H. Feigl and G. Maxwell, eds., *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1962), p. 29.

³⁰ Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology," p. 113 (p. 90 this volume), my emphasis.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100 (p. 82 this volume).