

The Trickster, or it takes more than fieldwork to become a culture-hero of anthropology

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© "It takes more than fieldwork to become a culture-hero of anthropology - the Story of Rafael Karsten." *Anthropos*, 90, 1995.

Pioneering in the field of anthropology has proved to have been a multifaceted work, as has been shown by the historical writings of Firth, Kuklick, Kuper, Ortner, Stocking, Urry and others. It is quite obvious that the history of our discipline, both theoretically and practically, is a very complex one, far more diverse than our basic teachings seem to imply. Therefore, one must ask why the work of some of our "forefathers" has become immortal, while most of the late nineteenth century or early twentieth century scholars has faded into obscurity. My intention is surely not to answer this important and complex question in full. This presentation of a comparison between two anthropologists making their major fieldwork at the same time, i.e. during the raging of World War I, is a rather a suggestion for a continuing research into the matter. One of these anthropologists situated himself in the South Sea Islands, while the other penetrated the wilds of Ecuador. The first one was destined to make himself a culture-hero of anthropology, while the undertakings of the other were soon to be forgotten. Yet, in the process of pioneering a new field of science they were doing more or less the same thing.

The how's, why's and about's concerning Bronislaw Malinowski's fieldwork, in New Guinea 1914-15 and the Trobriand Islands in 1915-16 and 1917-18, are so well-known that there is no point of repeating it here. His call from the wilds - *Grasp the native's point of view* - is as famous as Jack London's! Malinowski set up his claims for scientific field-work in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, in his own words making it "far above even the best amateur production" (1922/1953:17). Scientific labour in a field so far only prospected by the curiosity of amateurs, as Malinowski puts it, brings "Law and order into what seemed chaotic and freakish" (ibid:9). He continues:

Our considerations thus indicate that the goal of ethnographic field-work must be

approached through three avenues:

1. *The organisation of the tribe, and the anatomy of its culture* must be recorded in firm, clear outline. The method of *concrete, statistical documentation* is the means through which such an outline has to be given.
2. Within this frame, the *imponderabilia of actual life*, and the *type of behaviour* have to be filled in. They have to be collected through minute, detailed observations, in the form of some sort of ethnographic diary, made possible by close contact with native life.
3. A collection of ethnographic statements, characteristic narratives, typical utterances, items of folk-lore and magical formulae has to be given as a *corpus inscriptionum*, as documents of native mentality.

(ibid:24)

With these words Bronislaw Malinowski did not only promote his own fieldwork, but also set the standards for years to come.

A long time after Malinowski's death *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967) was published. Even with an apologizing introduction by Raymond Firth this diary of Malinowski threw shock-waves into the field of anthropology. At first it stirred up emotions, but soon it was integrated into a wider and constructive debate concerning the very basics of our discipline. Whether one was disillusioned by these revelations or regarded them as an important event in the history of anthropology, Malinowski was once more in the spotlight, making sure that his Trobriand studies will not fade away. Like the famous Trickster in Native American mythology, his right-doings will forever enrich our discipline, while his wrong-doings may serve as our point of departure.

Malinowski gained his fame and recognition through the many excellent examples of ethnographical writings, but also through his contributions to the method of field-work. (As a theoretician he was clearly overshadowed by his rival Radcliffe-Brown.) Adam Kuper introduces his portrait of Malinowski with the following statement: "Malinowski has a strong claim to being the founder of the profession of social anthropology in Britain, for he established its distinctive apprenticeship intensive fieldwork in an exotic community." Kuper also quotes one of Malinowski's "most distinguished students" who remarked that "he claimed to be the creator of an entirely new academic discipline" (1989:1). In an essay treating the emergence of British anthropology George W. Stocking says that Malinowski's work "...involved a shift in the primary locus of investigation, from the deck of the mission ship or the verandah of the mission station to the teeming center of the village, and a corresponding shift in the conception of the ethnographer's role, from that of inquirer to that of participant "in a way" in village life" (Stocking 1983:93). San-

jek and others put forward similar conclusions (Sanjek 1990).

Yet, any reviewing of the historical material at our disposal makes it clear that there had been a considerable shift towards participant-observations years before. "The demand for professional fieldwork was the motive force behind the Cambridge expedition to the Torres Straits in 1898-9, organized by Haddon and including Rivers, Seligman and Myers" (Kuper 1989:5-6). Haddon moved from armchair theorizing to field surveys, speaking of "the intensive studies of limited areas". Rivers coined the "genealogy and concrete method", leaving surveys behind in favour of intensive fieldwork. The shortcomings of Rivers and Haddon, however, were simply that they never really managed to leave the verandah. In addition, Rivers the investigator, was still more an inquirer than an observer (Stocking 1983:91). In addition, Rivers, Seligman and A. R. Brown (Radcliffe-Brown) carried out field expeditions to India, Sudan, Melanesia and other places during the first decade of the 20th Century (Kuper 1989:6). Although from different anthropological traditions we may also add such names as Frank Cushing, Franz Boas and Erland Nordenskiöld. In the United States, Cushing and Boas, some thirty years before Malinowski, had left the ship or verandah - Boas travelling in Inuit country and Cushing spending more than four years in Zuni pueblo. Both did participate and observe, Cushing learned to speak Zuni and even managed to be introduced into the secrecy of the tribe's Bow Priesthood. He "assumed a style of participant-observation far different from that of his Smithsonian colleagues..."(Sanjek 1990:189). Contributing as well to the new style of participant-observations was the Swedish pioneering ethnographer Erland Nordenskiöld. He certainly placed himself in the midst of the native village - observing the every-day life from the campfire, participated in drinking-parties, got tattooed by his Indian friends, etc. Nordenskiöld's failure as an important field-worker is due to the survey-character of his work, moving from tribe to tribe, and, of course, not learning the language of the people he was studying.

So far we have managed to establish that several researchers in the early days of anthropology contributed to the modern concept of field-research. None of them, however, was able to equal Bronislaw Malinowski for one reason or another. Either they spend only a limited time in the field, did not learn the language, did not really participate in the life of the natives, or failed to produce monographs of high quality. Now, let's turn our attention to a person who, like Malinowski, fulfilled these requirements. My heading states that it takes more than a fieldwork to become a culture-hero of anthropology, and I intend to devote the remaining part of this article to illustrate such a claim. However, before proceeding, I will like to point out that the following comparison is not in any way an attempt to disregard or devaluate Bronislaw Malinowski's contribution. Furthermore, I do not intend to present yet another account of the history of British anthropology, with all its diversity in a natural, legal and classic background. To follow is a piece of Finnish anthropology in a global context. As such, it is simply a call for a closer examination

and further understanding of our discipline's history.

George Stocking, in his discussion regarding the myth-history of British anthropology pays some attention to the "intensive study of limited areas", and observes the gathering of Malinowski, Charles Seligman and Anglo-Finnish sociologist Edward Westermarck at the London School of Economics. He also notes the presence of two young Finns: Gunnar Landtman and Rafael Karsten. Landtman executed fieldwork in New Guinea and Karsten is credited for an extensive and difficult fieldwork in South America by Stocking (1983:81-82). Both of them seems to taken farewell from the international arena as they went back to Finland to take up professional positions. From his solely british perspective, Kuper notes the influence of Seligman and Westermarck, but does not at all mention neither Karsten nor Landtman. This is also the case in major reference works, such as Marvin Harris' *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*. The failure of Karsten's and others in the group "is perhaps in part a reflection of biographical accident and institutional circumstance," Stocking concludes (ibid:84). As he does not pursue the case of Rafael Karsten any further, I would like to take his "perhaps in part" as a point of departure.

Rafael Karsten was born in 1879 at Kvelax in Österbotten, close to the city of Vasa in Finland. He drifted away from the family tradition of priesthood, which his parents so eagerly pursued him to follow - only to deal with religion from an opposite point of view. At the University of Helsinki, he began to study philosophy and did later turn to sociology. In 1905 he presented his doctoral dissertation, entitled *The Origin of Worship: A study in primitive Religion*. For some years he travelled around Europe, taking courses in Germany, England and France. In 1911 he went on his first fieldtrip, to the Gran Chaco area in the Bolivian-argentinean borderland. In 1916-19 he returned to South America, moving his area of studies to the amazonian region of eastern Ecuador. He made further trips in 1928-29, 1937, 1946 and 1951, all together amounting to some nine years in the field (Karsten 1953). His last journey to South America, took place at the age of seventy-two. Invited to the 400-year celebration of the San Marcos University in Lima, Karsten proceeded into the jungle of eastern Peru in order to study the Shipibo Indians. Five years later he

died of an heart attack, in the midst of writing a new comparative study pertaining to the religion of the South American Indians (Karsten-Sveander 1993; for a further description of the life and works of Rafael Karsten see *Acta Americana*, Vol 1, No 2, 1993).

In the following I will more or less concentrate the discussion to the fieldwork Karsten was undertaking in 1916-19, i.e. the beginning, and the most important part, of his Jivaro studies. He continued his field-research among the Jivaro in 1928-29, and again in 1946-47. The last period he was mainly cross-checking old information, and adding to his knowledge on Indian medicine and healing herbs (Karsten 1953). Conditions for doing fieldwork in South America were always quite troublesome and connected with hardship and danger, as already Nordenskiöld had noted. Before long, Karsten faced both infections and the danger of starvation (GEM RF/EN 5/8/17). In addition to the non-existence of roads, terrible floods, insects, difficulties in carrying supplies, etc., one has to understand that most parts of South America in that period were outlaw country. Everywhere, the lone anthropologist was taking the risk of being killed, either by hostile Indians or by white bandits. In fact, a companion of Nordenskiöld was murdered during his expedition in 1913-14. No such grave incident occurred this time, but indeed a bag containing field-notes and photos was stolen (GEM RF/EN 9/15/18). As Nordenskiöld previously had experienced, Karsten felt that the presence of a white man in an Indian village was met with suspicion. Pressing the Jivaro's "invitation" as much as possible, one was able to stay a little more than a week at the same place. Any occurrence of sickness or grave accident was surely to be blamed on the outsider.

Karsten managed to turn this problem into his own advantage by moving from one group of families to another, thus gaining the opportunity to crosscheck every piece of information he had gathered. Furthermore, the Indians were seldom as relaxed and outspoken as when they were sitting in the canoe or having a rest at a temporary camp. "Even when travelling I had thus good opportunity of studying Indian psychology and of making inquiries concerning native customs and beliefs" (Karsten 1935:17). From letters and journals we are able to follow his extensive travels throughout the interior parts of Ecuador, starting in August 1916 and continuing until August 1919. Of course, being constantly on the move, over widespread areas in a tropical forest, meant incredible hardships.

The linking of Bronislaw Malinowski with Rafael Karsten does not only spring from the fact that they were making fieldwork simultaneously - they also shared a theoretical and methodological background in Edward Westermarck's school of sociology. Stocking (1987), as well as Kuper (1989) outlines Durkheim's and Westermarck's theoretical influence on Malinowski. Thornton & Skalnik take this somewhat further by crediting the Finnish Sociological School with "improvement of the method as well as an extension of the point of view" (1993:259). On the other hand, Ragnar Numelin claims that the gatherings of Westermarck, Karsten, Landtman and Malinowski in the reading room of the British Library meant a great deal more. He labels Karsten as well as Malinowski as "Westermarck's pupils" (Numelin 1941:280). From a Finnish point of view, it were Westermarck's ethno-sociological studies in Morocco - spread over ten years and lasting for considerable periods - that set a new standard for fieldwork. Although Karsten later criticized some of the fundamental conceptions in Westermarck's "sociology of marriage", he clearly expressed his methodological indebtedness. As a matter of fact, Westermarck, and not Haddon, is in the Finnish tradition credited for the device of "intensive studies of limited areas".

Rafael Karsten made himself acquainted with fieldwork practice by going to Bolivia in 1911, an expedition lasting for almost two years (although actual fieldwork seems to have been of a much lesser period). During this initiation in fieldwork, he was in close contact with Erland Nordenskiöld, who considered Karsten's work in Gran Chaco a continuation of his own. An excited Nordenskiöld pointed out that we at last have a trained sociologist going to South America. And indeed, Karsten's work, *The Toba Indians of the Bolivian Gran Chaco*, became different from that of Nordenskiöld's, with its emphasis on social life, religious beliefs, concepts of the soul, etc. As a colleague of mine has remarked, Nordenskiöld was the great collector of ethnographical data, while Karsten turned out to be a keen interpreter of such data. A few years later, Nordenskiöld once more took a stand for Karsten's fieldwork - this time by giving him financial support. It was the beginning of his studies on Jivaroan culture, a task that stayed with him for the rest of his life.

The Jivaro, or actually the four more or less autonomous and distinct cultures of Shuar (Jivaro proper), Achuar, Aguaruna and Huambiza, occupies an area stretching from the lower eastern slopes of the Andes to the Amazonian lowlands (i.e. northern Peru and southeastern Ecuador). When Karsten arrived to the field in the summer of 1916, he had a clear vision of the work to be done. First of all, the aim of his studies was to encompass and get close contact with all the known groups belonging to the Jivaroan linguistic stock, including those groups who have had very hostile feelings towards white men. Establishing a base camp at the outskirts of a settled area, he made expeditions into the depths of the tropical forest for some four or five months, returning to base for a week or two, then getting out in the field again (GEM RF/EN 1/19/16). In addition, his

aim was to study the social organization together with customs and beliefs (Karsten 1935:18). "...I do not aim at giving merely a purely descriptive 'ethnographical' account of the customs of the Indians but an endeavouring, as far as possible, to get to the bottom of these customs - in other words, to explain the primitive line of thought upon which they are based" (1964:9). In his theoretical evolutionary framework, primitive beliefs were deeply connected with social structure. Due to his contract with Nordenskiöld and the Museum of Gothenburg, he also had to make ethnographical collections.

"I started learning the Jibaro language from the very beginning," he wrote. It was obvious to him that any thorough study of a foreign culture demanded knowledge of the language (1935:17). Although his presence sometimes was regarded with suspicion, he found the Jivaro "...as a rule excellent informants, very willing to tell almost everything I asked them about, and accurate even in small details" (ibid:17). As informants he usually chose elderly persons, both men and women. However, he considered direct observation more important than the information he gathered from informants, especially since he was trying to penetrate all the imaginary stories surrounding the head-hunting practices of the Jivaro. "Although I have been present at the most important feasts of the Jibaros and know much from personal experience, there are still of course certain customs which I have not witnessed with my own eyes but only know through the accounts of the Indians. In such cases I always tried to verify the statements of one informant by those made independently by another..." (ibid:17).

Including his return to Ecuador in 1928-1929, Karsten spent four years in western Amazonas, three of them in "close contact" with the Jivaro groups. His first major monograph appeared in 1920 - *Blodshämnd, krig och segerfester bland jibaroindianerna i östra Ecuador*, which in a more concentrated form was translated into "Blood Revenge, War and Victory Feasts among the Jibaro Indians of Eastern Ecuador" and published as bulletin 79 by the Bureau of American Ethnology. Other scientific reports included "Mitos de los Indios Jíbaros (Shuará) del Oriente del Ecuador" (1919), "La lengua de los Indios Jibaros del Oriente del Ecuador" (1921), and "The Religion of the Jibaro Indians of eastern Ecuador" (1922). For a larger audience, Karsten presented his South American experiences in *Bland indianer i Ecuadors urskogar* (1920) and *Huvudjägare och soldyrkare* (1929). Some of his Jivaro material did also appear in his major work on primitive religion, *The Civilization of the South-American Indians With Special Reference to Magic and Religion* (1926), making a case against the theories of animatism (R. R. Marett) and pre-animism (K. Th. Preuss).

The magnum opus of Karsten's writings, at least in the field of anthropology, is *The Head-hunters of Western Amazonas*, which was published in 1935. It was the first thorough study of the Jivaroan tribes, and indeed, it was also among the most complete monographs ever presented in

the field of South American anthropology. Karsten himself did realize that his participation in the tsantsa festival opened a whole new way to understand Jivaro society. In a letter from the field, he confessed that the given opportunity was a strike of pure luck - on the other hand, participation demanded that he subjected himself to the drinking habits of the natives. The festival lasted for two weeks with only few intervals for resting the body (GEM RF/EN 5/8/17).

Although covering most aspects of the every-day life of the Jivaro, including social and political organization, hunting, trade, agriculture, material culture and language, most of Karsten's writings centers around their head-hunting practices. No doubt, he found this form of ritual warfare so central in their universe that it affected every aspect of their life-way. It was manifested in intra-tribal as well as inter-tribal wars, and had resulted in blood feuds that were continually reproduced. Every single stage of the warfare procedure was ritually manifested. It started with *Enéma* - a dialogue between two warriors carried out with body and spear. The raid itself could be carried out by a larger group or a single man looking for blood revenge. The aim was killing of the enemy and the cutting of his head. Back in the village, a successful raid was followed by purification rites - *numbuimartinyu* - and the shrinking of the head, or tsantsa. Eventually, the circle was closed with the large tsantsa-feast, divided into *suamartinyu* (preliminary feast) and *einsupani* (the final feast), altogether lasting four days and nights. Besides outlining a very complex cosmology, Karsten did his best to arrive at a more pragmatic explanation. In addition to religious and moral questions, he found that the Jivaro were trying to uphold an extreme form of social liberty. Central was their conception of the human soul, as well as the notion of certain kinds of illnesses as the result of witchcraft. As Malinowski pointed out with regard to primitive societies in general, Jivaro warfare was not chaotic and freakish. The only way to prevent an enemy from harming you was to capture his soul - a power that was concentrated to his head and hair. With his shrunked head hanging on the breast, the Jivaro brave had captured the soul and ritually secured the existence of his own group.

One must ask why Rafael Karsten failed to establish himself as one of those who really have contributed to the methodological aspect of our science. The answer is of course complex, but at least three factors must be taken into consideration. First, Karsten did not promote his fieldwork in the same way as Malinowski. Secondly, we must pay attention to institutional circumstances. Last, but not least, Karsten managed to make himself known as a harsh opponent in theoretical disputes due to his, sometimes really severe, criticism of colleagues. Problematical were also the evolutionary principles that directed his research. It is important, however, not to regard Karsten as obviously peripheral - throughout his life he participated in the international debate. The voluminous correspondence to scholars in Britain, Germany, United States, France and elsewhere is a lasting proof for such a claim.

It is, however, difficult to treat these circumstances separately, as they constantly tend to overlap each other. We may start with the most outstanding characteristics in the personality of Rafael Karsten: honesty, outspokenness and temper. His daughter, Eva Karsten, admits that he could never hide his feelings: if he liked somebody he told him or her so, and if he disliked somebody he also put it forward in a straight way. His way of making such statements, often connected with an aggressive vocabulary, offended a number of his contemporary colleagues. As Ragnar Numelin points out, he was treating his scientific opponents harshly, but only because he demanded the same carefulness of others as he himself displayed (Numelin 1958:14). In addition he held a quite simplistic view of the absolute objectivity of science: "...its only aim is scientific truth" (Karsten 1954:32). In practice, this meant that he did not in any way promote his own work. He did not come up with some new and colourful expression like *grasp the natives point of view*, but hold on to Haddon's (or Westermarck's) old phrase, *the intensive studies of limited areas*. Karsten respected the writings of Malinowski as a "couple of good monographs" (Karsten 1945:166), but he could not understand his promotion strategies. All this talk about capturing a situation, he wrote, is just a method that is self-evident for every trained field-researcher. He felt that Malinowski's way of putting the title *Sexual Life of the Savages* on the cover, and first in the front-page admit that it was actually the sexual life of those savages living North-Western Melanesia, was a dubious way of mispresenting the facts. As a matter of fact, he considered it a grave misuse of the methodological norms that Malinowski was claiming reputation for. At a meeting in London, Karsten asked Malinowski why he had used such a misleading title. With his gentle smile Malinowski replied that one has to secure a selling title (Karsten 1946:368). We must indeed refute this "mania" of generalization, so common in the field of sociology, Karsten insisted

in his historical outline of the discipline (1945:167).

As Malinowski was doing everything right in order to establish his reputation, Karsten was heading in the opposite direction. He got involved in a number of unnecessary polemical debates with Nordenskiöld, Wassén, Rivet, Koppers, Heyerdahl, and others. In addition, he managed to stir up hostile feelings at home as well. Karsten retired from the University of Helsinki in 1948 (Runeberg 1976:60). Two years before his death an old and bitter Karsten sharpened his pen once more - this time in order to save his own work. In the major reference work *Handbook of South American Indians*, edited by Julian H. Steward and published as a bulletin of Bureau of American Ethnology, he considered his Jivaro studies as either ignored or made the subject of unjustified criticism. "In the beginning of this century, or until I started my own studies of these Indians, the Jibaros were one of the most unknown tribes of western Amazonas," Karsten wrote (ibid:7). "As the first and only white man I have, during the 400 years that the Jibaros have been known, been present at their famous victory feast (*Einsupani*) from the beginning to the end, studying the countless rites connected with it in every detail....The undertaking...was not without danger...it nearly cost my life" (ibid:14). Regarding the studies of Matthew Stirling, Karsten blamed them for being extremely superficial - this authority of the Jivaro tribes had acquired no knowledge whatever of the language spoken by the Indians (ibid:10). Karsten went as far as comparing a part of Stirling's discussion on shamanism with his own text - indirectly accusing the latter of copying his text. "No reference is made to my work and there is no indication whatever that Stirling's...[text] is almost word for word borrowed from it" (ibid:25). He was, of course, also disappointed as Alfred Kroeber ignored his studies in the chapters relating to the Argentine and Bolivian Chaco. "I stayed in this region nearly two years (1911-1913) devoting particularly attention to social organization and religion of the natives" (ibid:5).

Returning to the institutional factors involved in the remarkable success of Malinowski in comparison with Karsten, we face a situation that can be paralleled to a centre-periphery structure. The field of anthropology was institutionalized in the university curriculum in Great Britain - it even had a famous tradition with Tylor and Frazer. In the international hierarchy of universities, the Scandinavian institutions were not to be counted among the foremost. The institutional factors do, of course, also include means for securing financial support, anthropological associations, journals, etc. Malinowski was not only located in one of the university centers of Europe, he was also in the middle of the anthropological field. On the other hand, Karsten as well as Nordenskiöld, faced severe difficulties when trying to gain local recognition for their ethnographical studies as symbolic knowledge. Nordenskiöld, who secured his field of work within museums, did not obtain a university position until he had become internationally famous. Meeting the same kind of problems, Karsten struggled to expand the borders of Finnish sociology (sometimes by labelling his work ethno-sociology, etc.). While the formation of university disciplines in the

periphery sector frequently did seek inspiration from London, Paris and Berlin, the reverse was seldom the case. Of course, these relations of power did also contribute to the fact that the scientific reports from Scandinavian universities did not really enter the international arena. In his remarks regarding *Handbook of South American Indians*, Karsten criticized the tendency to ignore sources of peripheral origin: "...I have remarked that several important publications of mine and the result of my investigations have been ignored in the handbook...The tendency, appearing not only in the U.S.A. but also elsewhere, to mention, in anthropological works, preferably publications of own country-men and to ignore works of 'outsiders', independent of their scientific value, is to be severely censured. Science is international, its only aim is scientific truth. The nationality of the author is of no importance" (ibid:31-32). The immanent structure of power was immediately striking back - even before his criticism had been published. Several scholars in the Finnish Academy of Science, deeply concerned with what they perceived as an offense against the Smithsonian Institution, did their best to prevent "Some critical remarks on Ethnological Field-research in South America" from ever reaching the press. Karsten's replied by turning in his resignation from the society on October 5th, 1954 (manuscript 1954).

Finally, we have the obvious factor of the ambition to secure the continuation of one's scientific contribution - the establishment of a 'school'. Here Malinowski succeeded, while Karsten once more failed. "The medium of transmission for Malinowski's fieldwork practice was his LSE seminar, which began in 1924. Here the reading aloud of Malinowski's writing projects, as well as his pontifications on methods and fieldnote analysis, set standards his students would attempt to meet, and surpass" (Sanjek 1990:232). Malinowski was followed by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Raymond Firth, Gregory Bateson, Edmund Leach, and others....

A number of daring researchers has been totally overshadowed by the greatness of men like Bronislaw Malinowski - scholars that deserves an important place in the history of our discipline. Rafael Karsten is only one of many.

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