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Q6(a)

Critically discuss the controversies related to fieldwork of Bronislaw-Malinowski and Margaret Mead.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 1 · 20 marks · Functionalism (Malinowski)

(c) Functionalism (Malinowski); Structural-Functionalism (Radcliffe-Brown)

Core demand of the question

- Critically discuss the controversies related to fieldwork of Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead
- Write at 20-mark length

Revision summary

Malinowski's Trobriand fieldwork founded participant observation and the kula monograph.

The 1967 diaries exposed racist and sexual private speech, prompting reflexivity, not a simple cancellation of Argonauts.

Mead's Samoa argued that adolescence is culturally shaped.

Freeman's 1983 attack overstated hoax and ignored time and sample.

Shankman and others restored a more careful Mead.

Both controversies teach positioned method, not the death of ethnography.

Introduction

Malinowski and Mead made fieldwork the public face of anthropology, and both were later put on trial. The controversies are about honesty, power, and whether an ethnography can be trusted, not about deleting the Trobriands or Samoa from the syllabus.

Body**Malinowski: the Trobriand achievement**

- From 1915-18 **Bronislaw Malinowski** lived in the Trobriand Islands and wrote *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), which made participant observation, the kula, and the imponderabilia of daily life the method of the discipline.
- Crime and Custom, The Sexual Life of Savages, and coral-garden functionalism showed a working society rather than a list of survivals.
- That achievement is the baseline against which the later files must be read.

Malinowski: the diary controversy

- His private diaries, published in 1967 with a preface by **Raymond Firth**, used racist abuse, sexual frustration, and contempt for Trobrianders beside the published empathy.
- Critics said the functionalist whole was a literary mask; defenders said a diary is not the ethnography, and that kula, canoe magic, and matriliney still stand as public facts.

- **The lasting critical yield is reflexivity:** the ethnographer's body, race, and desire are part of the field, as later writers from **James Clifford** to feminist ethnography insisted.
- Colonial permit and a white man's freedom of movement also structured the famous tent, which **Talal Asad** and colonial critiques of anthropology placed on the table.

Mead: Samoa

- **Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928)**, under **Franz Boas**, argued that Samoan adolescence was easier than the American storm-and-stress, so culture, not biology, shaped youth and sex.
- The book became a public charter of cultural relativism and of Boasian anti-racism.

Mead: the Freeman controversy

- **Derek Freeman** in 1983 charged that Mead was hoaxed by joking girls, that Samoa was puritan and violent, and that she had found what Boas wanted.
- Later assessments, including **Paul Shankman**, showed that Freeman over-claimed a hoax, mixed decades, and ignored that Mead's sample was a particular place and time.
- **The controversy still teaches method:** short fieldwork, language skill, the sex of the ethnographer, and the danger of one-island laws of human nature.

What to keep

- Malinowski remains the charter of long residence and synchronic holism; the diary remains a warning about the hidden transcript of the fieldworker.
- Mead remains a charter of culture against biological fatalism; Samoa remains a warning against over-generalising youth from one study.
- Neither controversy proves that ethnography is fiction. Both prove that ethnography is a positioned, revisable account.

Flow diagram

Malinowski -> Kula holism
 Malinowski -> Diary 1967
 Mead -> Samoa 1928
 Mead -> Freeman 1983
 Diary 1967 -> Reflexivity
 Freeman 1983 -> Reflexivity

Conclusion

Malinowski's tent and Mead's Samoa made modern fieldwork, and the diary and Freeman files made its ethics public. Keep the kula and the culture argument, and keep the critique of race, sex, and over-claim.

Facts & figures

Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922)

Malinowski's Trobriand kula monograph that made long-term participant observation the disciplinary model.

A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term (1967)

Malinowski's private field diaries, published posthumously, which contradicted the public tone of empathy.

Coming of Age in Samoa (1928)

Mead's Boasian argument that Samoan youth contradicted a universal storm-and-stress adolescence.

Derek Freeman (1983)

Published a late attack claiming Mead was misled and that Samoan culture was harsher than she wrote.

Paul Shankman

A principal later referee of the Mead-Freeman debate, arguing that Freeman overreached.

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