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# UNIT 22 CONCEPT OF CULTURE AND FUNCTION - MALINOWSKI

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Concept of Culture and  
Function-Malinowski

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## 22.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit, you should be able to

- discuss evolutionist and diffusionist approaches to the study of human institutions
- outline the early twentieth century sociologists' concern with the collection of first-hand information about society and its institutions
- describe Malinowski's concept of culture and techniques of studying the various aspects of culture
- define the concept of needs, types of needs as explained by Malinowski
- discuss the term 'function' and its application by Malinowski to analyse his field data from the Trobriand Islands.

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## 22.1 INTRODUCTION

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After going through the growth of classical sociology in earlier blocks of this course, we have now come to the point when in the early twentieth

century sociology entered the phase of contemporary development. This phase began with the emergence of the functionalist school.

Explaining the concept of functionalism in simple terms, we can say that even early sociologists, like Comte and Spencer, spoke about a functional relation between political, economic, religious, and moral phenomena. They argued that changes in any one of these spheres would bring out corresponding changes in other spheres. They asserted that discovering these correspondences or interrelationships between the various social phenomena was the aim of sociology. Later, Durkheim in France and many other writers (specially the Victorian anthropologists of the nineteenth century Britain) wrote voluminous books. These books claimed to show the laws of origin and function of social institutions. This idea of studying social phenomena in terms of their functions was transmitted to modern sociology through early developments in British social anthropology during the 1920s and 1930s. Bronislaw Malinowski, a brilliant Polish scientist turned anthropologist, founded the functionalist school in Britain. This marked a turning point in the history of sociology because under Malinowski's leadership, functionalism was firmly grounded into the directly observable and scientifically collected information (also referred to as empirical reality) about society and its institutions.

This block mainly deals with the way early twentieth century sociologists used the idea of function to assign meaning to a wide range of social phenomena. Its first unit is concerned with contributions of Bronislaw Malinowski. He studied primitive societies as socio-cultural wholes and explained each aspect of culture in terms of its functions.

To explain the setting in which Malinowski's functionalist approach took roots, the unit begins with a discussion of precursors of Malinowski and a gradual appreciation of the significance of collecting data about society and its institutions. Then, the unit describes Malinowski's concept of culture, needs, institutions. Lastly, it examines his theory of functionalism, which helped him to 'hang together' his data collected during his superbly conducted field work in New Guinea.

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## **22.2 PRECURSORS OF MALINOWSKI**

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Malinowski's work was largely a product of the ideas of his predecessors. Leach (1957: 137) concluded his essay on Malinowski by saying that "Malinowski... was 'in bondage' to his predecessors; he resented their existence because he was so much indebted to them". In a way this can be said about any thinker who has advanced the thought of his or her times. Let us examine here the case of Malinowski.

The eighteenth century scholars, like David Hume, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson in Britain, Montesquieu and Condorcet in France, were interested in finding out the origins of human institutions (see Box 22.1). They thought that by examining primitive societies they could know about the origins of their own social institutions. They deduced theories about primitive societies without ever collecting any evidence about them. Inevitably their theories were based on principles prevailing in their own times and cultures. But

what is significant about them is that these scholars considered human societies as an important subject of study. They thought that, as in the natural sciences, universal laws of society could be discovered by studying human social institutions. This is the reason why we think of these eighteenth century scholars as forerunners of twentieth century sociology. Their successors in the nineteenth century, known as evolutionists, were also interested in social **evolution** and the progress of human culture.

### Box 22.1 Interest in the Origin of Human Societies

The eighteenth century scholars in Europe were concerned with the origins of human society. Among them, the best known are the Scottish **moral philosophers**, David Hume (1711-1776) and Adam Smith (1723-1790). They considered that the origin of human society is to be found in human nature. Rejecting the idea of a social contract, developed by Hobbes, they spoke about natural religion, natural law, natural morality and so on. They wanted to find out general principles of human nature. This they did in terms of stages of development. They believed that by arranging all known social groups on a scale of developed it was possible to reconstruct human history. Similarly, Adam Ferguson wrote in 1767 a book *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, in which he discussed such themes as the manner of subsistence, the principles of population growth, social division and so forth. Because these scholars were concerned with general principles about societies, we refer to their ideas, even though we do not as such read their books.

In France, Montesquieu (1689-1755), who was a lawyer and political philosopher, wrote in 1748 a book *The Spirit of the Laws* on social political philosophy. The aim of this book was to find out the interrelations between all aspects of society. He thought that everything in society is related, in a functional sense, to everything else. So to understand for example constitutional, criminal and civil law one had to study them in relation to each other and also in relation to the economy, beliefs, and customs etc. of a people. Condorcet (1743-1794) was a French Philosopher and political scientist. He too was in pursuit of the origin of human societies.

### 22.2.0 Evolutionists

The evolutionists argued that because some societies were more 'advanced' than others, all societies had to pass through certain stages of development. Theories of Charles Darwin about the evolution of human species strengthened the idea that the progress of human history could also be studied in terms of an evolutionary process.

For example, Bachofen in Europe, Maine and McLennan in Britain and Morgan in America postulated various stages of social evolution.

During the period between 1861 and 1871 came out publications, which are today regarded as theoretical classics. Among them, the best known are:

- Maine's *Ancient Law (1861) and Village - Communities in the East and West (1871)*

- Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht (The Mother - right)* (1861)
- McLennan's *Primitive Marriage* (1865)
- Tylor's *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* (1865) and *Primitive Culture* (1871)
- Morgan's *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1871).

All these books do not primarily deal with primitive societies. Maine's books are about Roman institutions and the Indo-European communities. Bachofen wrote about traditions and myths of Greek and Roman period. But McLennan, Tylor and Morgan were mainly interested in primitive cultures as a subject of study. They collected information about primitive peoples from widely scattered sources and systematised this information.

All these scholars were keen to do away with speculative theories, which had no basis in reality. Their predecessors (the eighteenth century moral philosophers) relied on introspection about their own societies and had no access to observation of societies other than their own. The nineteenth century scholars were keen to study interrelations of parts of society by the method of correlative variations. They argued that for complex social phenomena one could not isolate simple variables. For establishing the laws of origin and development of social institutions they wrote bulky books. For example, they traced development of monogamy from promiscuity, of industry from nomadism, of monotheism from animism and so on. Take the case of Sir Henry Maine (1822-1888), a Scottish lawyer, who wrote that the original and world-wide form of social life was the patriarchal family, with the absolute authority of the patriarch. Interestingly, Bachofen, a Swiss jurist had other, rather opposite, ideas about the family. He wrote that promiscuity was the original form of family. Then came a matrilineal and matriarchal form, which was followed by a patrilineal and patriarchal form.

One more jurist and a Scot, J.F. McLennan (1827-1881) also worked out the laws of social development. He thought that promiscuity must have been the original and universal form of social life. Then must have come the stage of matrilineal and totemic groups, followed by **polyandry** and finally by a patrilineal system (see Key-words for these terms).

Finally, L.H. Morgan (1834-1881), an American lawyer, identified fifteen stages of development of marriage and family. Only Sir Edward Tylor (1832-1917) did not write about stages of human development, but focused on religious beliefs. He showed that primitive peoples' mistaken inference about dreams, visions, disease, sleeping, life and death etc. gave rise to all religious beliefs and cults.

Even now you may come across some people who believe that human societies pass through evolutionary stages. But the idea looks far less convincing to us who have access to contemporary research and writing on human societies. This was not so for the nineteenth century scholars who were primarily interested in finding out the origins of human institutions. It was only later when more information about contemporary

human societies became available that the theories of the nineteenth century evolutionists were tested against the newly available evidence. It was then argued that their theories were only conjectural, without a basis in empirical reality. For the evolutionists the idea of basing their theories on systematically collected evidence about the people they wrote about was unthinkable. They could not even imagine that primitive societies had anything to offer for their enlightenment. You might like to hear the story about a famous, late nineteenth century scholar, Sir James Frazer. He wrote many books including *The Golden Bough* (see Box 22.2), about primitive peoples. When asked if he ever met one of such people, he exclaimed, 'God Forbid'. This attitude reflects that arm-chair anthropologists like Frazer considered their own society as the most advanced. In this way their findings assumed an evolutionary character, reflecting the nineteenth century scholars' obsession with the idea of progress of human society. They maintained that their society and culture were epitome of progress.

**Box 22.2: *The Golden Bough* by J.G.Frazer**

It is said (see Kuper 1975:23) that after being told that owing to ill health he could not continue his career in science, Malinowski diverted himself with the English classic *The Golden Bough* Sir James George Frazer (1854-1940). *The Golden Bough* was first published in 1890 and re-printed in twelve volumes between 1907 and 1915. In 1922 it appeared in an abridged edition. This classic is a study of ancient cult and folklore and refers to a wide range of anthropological research.

In this book, Frazer reconstructed the evolution of human thought through the successive stages of Magic, Science and Religion. According to Frazer (1922: 55), at first magic dominated social life and the magician believed in laws of nature. These were not real, but imaginary laws. Gradually the more intelligent people came to realise the fallacy and faced the trauma of disillusionment. In that state they imagined of spiritual powers which could control nature, This was, for Frazer, the stage of religion. In course of time, even this stage proved to be an illusion, and led to the final stage of science.

We may not agree with the theory of Frazer's sociological laws but we need to give him enough credit for trying to account for similarities in societies across time and space. This required a great deal of ability, learning and scholarship. This is what had impressed Malinowski and inspired him to devote much of this scholarship to dealing with Frazerian problem of magic science and religion. About this you will read in Unit 23.

By the end of the nineteenth century scholars were reacting against the evolutionist approach to explaining human societies by reconstructing the past. Scholars, like Steinmetz (1894), Nieboer (1900), Westermarck (1906) and Hobbouse (1906) can be counted among the last of those thinkers who carried on the tradition of recasting and representing the ideas of the single-direction or unilinear development of human societies, from primitive to modern scientific stage.

Though the evolutionist approach came to be challenged, few disputed that inquiry into the origins of human institutions was the aim of sociological research. This is the reason why we find that even Malinowski who criticised the evolutionists, almost with a passion, remained at heart an evolutionist. The evolutionists were being discredited more for the conjectural and evaluatory nature of their findings. In this they were found to be little different from their eighteenth century precursors. You can say that the difference between them was that the eighteenth century moral philosophers constructed their theories without a care for providing any evidence and the nineteenth century scholars felt that they had to support their theories with some factual information. The evolutionists therefore amassed a wealth of published material, haphazardly recorded by explorers, travellers, missionaries, government functionaries and migrants. This material was used to build lofty theories regarding the remote past of human societies. The early twentieth century scholars questioned the validity of such evidence.

The attack on evolutionary theories came from two kinds of sociologists. One kind was known as the diffusionists and the other was labelled the functionalists. Both regarded the study of primitive cultures necessary for explaining the progress of human cultures. Both questioned the validity of unsystematically collected facts about primitive societies. Both gave importance to scientific collection of data about primitive people. But each evolved its own techniques of data collection and more importantly developed different theoretical frameworks to assign meaning to the data thus collected for explaining human cultures. Here, we will first discuss the diffusionists, their method of data-collection and their theories about human cultures. We will then examine the functionalists, their techniques of data collection and their theories for analysing human societies and culture. As the study of primitive cultures was common to both the diffusionists and the functionalists, the following discussion will relate to their writings on primitive groups. It is now time to complete Activity 1.

### **Activity 1**

Do you believe that human societies pass through successive stages of development? Would you say that the whole phase of evolutionist thinking, as discussed here, does not include the Indian writings on society? If so, how would you explain this fact?

### **22.2.1 Diffusionists**

The diffusionists were struck by the plain evidence of the spread of elements of culture from one human group to another. They asked the question: If a cultural trait in group A is similar to a trait in group B, is there a diffusion and hence a link of some sort between the two groups? While answering this question, the diffusionists became involved in showing affinities, which accounted for similarities of beliefs, customs, technology, art and so on. The theory of the spread of elements of culture from one ethnic group to another came to be known as 'diffusionism'. Extreme diffusionists tried to trace the complex process of dispersal of entire human culture. They wanted to find out the origins of cultural traits. For example, Father Wilhelm

Schmidt (1868-1954) considered it very important to identify survivals of the earliest stages of humankind in the study of the conditions prevalent among the primitive peoples. In England, G.E. Smith and W.J. Perry also took an extreme position of identifying a single source of the spread of human civilisation (see Lowie 1937). In their search for the source of human civilisation they reached the conclusion that civilisation in ancient Egypt was the source from where all civilisations in the world had spread. This Egypt-based diffusionism of Elliot Smith and Perry was a much talked about theory in the 1920s, but it did not find much favour in academic circles. Bronislaw Malinowski was an ardent critic of this theory.

Most diffusionists reconstructed the history of human societies on the basis of items of cultures being transmitted from one culture to another. They evolved a geographical approach to study the growth of human society. They focused on groups from culture - specific areas, comparisons across cultures and described evolutionary processes of human civilisation. They examined the patterns of links among cultural traits across time and space. They were also known as ethnologists. Ethnologists deal with the division of humankind into races, their origin, distribution, relations and cultural traits. The ethnological tradition of studying cultural traits stimulated the growth of cultural anthropology in the United States of America, with Franz Boas as its leader. The ethnological studies are generally contrasted with ethnographic studies. We may say that the difference between the two is that ethnological studies deal with the comparison of cultural elements in a range of societies while ethnographic studies describe the way of life of a particular society. You can easily say that the very nature of ethnological studies (dealing with the comparison of cultural elements across cultures) would make ethnologists to depend on ethnographic studies for their basic data.

### **22.2.2 Birth of Social Anthropology**

Enthusiasm of ethnographers, in the early twentieth century, for making detailed studies of particular societies resulted in the publication of several ethnographic monographs (see Box 22.3). These studies created the space for a new discipline - Social Anthropology - in Britain. Social anthropology and sociology are closely related subjects. The findings of social anthropology, largely derived from the studies of non-Western societies, are of general relevance to the study of all types of societies. This is the reason why the growth of social anthropology in the 1920s and 1930s contributed to significant advances in sociological thought. Social anthropology's emphasis, under the leadership of Bronislaw Malinowski, on studying societies on the basis of first hand observation became a turning point in the development of sociological theory. It was so because social anthropologists insisted that ethnographic account must be based on the study of a chosen society through personal visits, lasting a year or more. In addition, they claimed that societies ought to be studied for their own sake and they criticised those who studied primitive cultures only to reconstruct the history of humankind.

### Box 22.3 Ethnographic Monographs

Ethnographers of the early twentieth century tried to explain the social phenomena in terms of the societies studied. Publications arising out of these efforts came to be known as ethnographic monographs. As an early example of this approach we can cite H. Junod's *The Life of a South African Tribe*, published in 1912-13. Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, published in 1922, is considered to be the supreme example of the scientific study of a primitive society. This book analyses the kula system of exchange of gifts among the Trobrianders. To know more about this book, you are advised to listen to the audio-programme on Argonauts of the Western Pacific.

Professional research in Africa was initiated by the visit of Seligman and his wife to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in 1909-10. Later, intensive field-studies of tribal societies in Africa were made by, for example, I. A. Schapera among the Bechuana, by Meyer Fortes among the Tallensi of the Gold Coast, by S.F. Nadel among the Nupe of Nigeria, by Hilda Kuper among the Swazi and by Evans-Pritchard among the Nuer of Southern Sudan. All these studies were among the small-scale political groups. All the ethnographic studies mentioned here entailed the field study of a primitive society for about a year and a half. This period was generally broken into two visits with a break of few months in between the visits. After this intensive fieldwork it took a scholar about five years to publish the results of his or her research. Most works took as long as ten years to come out.

Dominant among the ethnographers during the early twentieth century were those who followed the Malinowskian tradition of collecting first-hand information about primitive societies. Malinowski, as their leader, opposed both the evolutionists and the diffusionists and went ahead with the task of establishing social anthropology as an alternative way of studying human societies.

Let us now discuss how the new found interest in collecting data based on first-hand observation paved the way for the development of new ways of studying human societies. Later the method of data collection came to be known as participant observation by living among the people to be studied. Early practitioners of this method chose to study primitive societies by focussing on all aspects of a particular tribe. At this point it is better to complete Check Your Progress 1 for gaining confidence of knowing what you have so far read in this unit.

#### Check Your Progress 1

- i) State, in four lines, the difference between the approaches of the eighteenth century moral philosophers and the nineteenth century evolutionists.

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- ii) Distinguish between **ethnology** and **ethnography**. Use three lines for your answer.

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### 22.3 CONCERN WITH DATA COLLECTION

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Many scholars engaged in the study of human cultures during the early twentieth century felt that both the evolutionists and the diffusionists were involved in reconstructions of the human past on the basis of less convincing evidence. You will be surprised to know that till the end of the nineteenth century, with the solitary exception of L.H. Morgan (1818-1881), no anthropologist or sociologist carried out a field-study and collected first-hand data about the people he or she had selected to study. Evans-Pritchard (1954: 72) has attributed this to the fact that the nineteenth century scholars, interested in the study of human cultures, were all from non-science background. Further he shows that the scholars who began studying human societies in the early twentieth century were mostly natural scientists (see Box 22.4).

They had been trained to test their theories on the basis of their own observations. So they were committed to collect first-hand information about prevailing socio-cultural conditions in different parts of the world.

**Box 23.4: Twentieth Century Natural Scientists' Interest in the Study of Society**

Evans-Pritchard (1954: 72) has mentioned that among the earlier scholars, writing on social institutions, Maine, McLennan and Bachofen were lawyers. Herbert Spencer was a philosopher, Edward Tylor was a foreign languages clerk and Frazer was a classical scholar. In contrast, the early twentieth century scholars, who became interested in the study of society were mostly from the natural sciences. For example, Boas was a physicist and geographer. A.C. Haddon was a marine zoologist. Rivers a physiologist, Seligman a pathologist. Elliot Smith was an anatomist and Malinowski was a physicist. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown was trained in experimental psychology. These scholars were used to testing their statements against observations and experiments. So they obviously stressed upon the need for making one's own observations of the phenomena they wanted to study.

Secondly, it occurred to scholars that systematically collected information about human cultures can be used for more purposes than just for illustrating one's ideas about earlier stages of society. As pointed out by Beattie (1964: 91) even practical considerations gave an impetus to the attempts to

understand socio-cultural behaviour in primitive societies. Colonial administrators and missionaries found it useful to collect ethnographic material on the people they were to administer/convert. In fact, some of the early records of primitive peoples were prepared by them (colonial administrators and missionaries). Appreciation of the value of such material gave stimulus to systematic and professional collection of first-hand information about human communities. Gradually, information collection replaced the interest of scholars in reconstructing the history of human institutions, and led to inquiries into living communities.

Expeditions to collect information began first in America. Here, Morgan (1851) had collected information among the **Iroquois Indians**. He lived with and was later adopted by the Iroquois tribe. In 1883-84, Franz Boas made a field-study among the **Eskimos** and later studied the American Indians of the North-West coast (British Columbia, Canada). He gave special importance to learning the language of the people to be studied.

In England, anthropological field visits for collecting first-hand information were introduced by A.C. Haddon of Cambridge University. He led in 1878-79 the famous expedition to the **Torres Straits** region of the Pacific. The purpose behind this expedition was to train scholars in conducting professional fieldwork. In his team of fieldworkers, Haddon included specialists in various academic areas. After spending four weeks in the Western islands and four months in the Eastern islands, the team collected information in **pidgin-English** (see Keywords) or with the help of interpreters. Special interests of the scholars were reflected in the publication of the expedition's reports. For example, W.H.R. Rivers wrote the chapters on personal names, genealogies, kinship and marriage. C.G. Seligman was responsible for the chapters on customs related to birth and childhood and women's puberty. A.C. Haddon wrote on trade, warfare, magic, religion and the ordering of public life. The team made an effort to cover all aspects of the native way of life. It gave a clear account of the conditions of fieldwork and the qualifications of those natives who provided information. For individual scholars, this expedition set on a firm basis the value of fieldwork experience. Two members, W.H.R. Rivers and C.G. Seligman carried out more fieldwork on their own. C.G. Seligman worked in Melanesia in 1904 and among the Vedda of Sri Lanka in 1907-8. Again in 1909-12 and 1921-22, he conducted fieldwork in Sudan and provided a descriptive account of a cultural and linguistic area. W.H.R. Rivers carried out fieldwork among the Toda of Nilgiri, India, in 1901. The Todas, by Rivers (1906), gave a precise account of fieldwork conditions and its main text described beliefs and customs among the Toda, followed by a separate section on interpretation of the field material.

The expedition to Torres Straits in 1898-99 became a landmark in the history of anthropological studies of society. Now onwards, anthropology became a full-time professional interest of scholars and secondly, gaining of fieldwork experience became an integral part of the training of anthropologists. Another important landmark in collecting ethnographic material was the expedition of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown to the Andaman Islands, India, in 1906-8. About this fieldwork and its results published in 1922, we will discuss in Units 24 and 25.

Here we will take the much discussed tradition of fieldwork initiated by Bromslaw Malinowski, who made three field visits to New Guinea. C G Seligman, who was Malinowski's teacher, had suggested that Malinowski should go to New Guinea for his first field-experience. In his first visit to New Guinea, Malinowski lived among the Mailu of Toulon Island, a West Papuo-Melanesian group. This visit was made during September 1914 to March 1915. In June 1915 Malinowski went to the Trobriand islands (see Map) and stayed there until May 1916. Again he went to these islands in October 1917 and lived there for one year

**Map 22.1: i) The Geographical Location of Trobriand Islands and ii) Detailed Map of Trobriand Islands**

Malinowski first conversed with the Trobrianders in pidgin-English but soon in a matter of three months, he could make his inquiries in the native dialect. Of the two years of fieldwork among the Trobriand islanders, he spent only six weeks in the company of Europeans. He had pitched his tent right among the huts of the natives. This gave him an ideal position to observe the way of life of the Trobrianders. His story of the 'tribulations' of fieldwork is quoted as 'one of the most human documents in ethnographical writing' (Kaberry 1957: 77). For a glimpse into his field diaries see Kuper (1975: 27-32)

Furthermore, Malinowski was not just a passive observer and collector of facts about a society. He collected them by employing certain techniques. He was the first professionally trained anthropologist to conduct fieldwork in a primitive community. He evolved a range of techniques of fieldwork (see sub-section 22.4.1).

Application of these techniques was, according to Malinowski, dependent on one's training in theory relating to the study of human cultures. The rich ethnography that Malinowski had at his command prompted him to evolve a theoretical approach for presenting the results of his research. His ethnographic monographs (see the list of references at the end of this block) are not mere examples of pure ethnography nor just a record of the patterns of behaviour and belief of the Trobrianders. They show principles of organisation of the society and their interconnections. You can now easily make out that the concern for collecting data about society and its institutions was geared to finding alternative ways of studying and analysing human cultures. In the next section, we will discuss Malinowski's concept of culture. From his idea about culture emanated his theory of functionalism which gave him and his students a methodology to analyse human cultures.

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## **22.4 CULTURE AS A FUNCTIONING AND INTEGRATED WHOLE**

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Malinowski had a set of ideas, which he used to guide his approach to cultural behaviour. Malinowski (1944: 36) used culture in an encyclopaedic way to include in it implements and consumer goods,....constitutional charters for the various social groupings,....human ideas and crafts, beliefs and customs'. Be it a simple or primitive culture or a complex and developed

one, for Malinowski (1944: 35) it was a vast apparatus, partly material, partly human and partly spiritual by which man is able to cope with concrete specific problems that face him'. These statements show that Malinowski's concept of culture included (i) material culture, (ii) concrete categories of human activity and (iii) constitutional charters for social groups, and beliefs.

- i) The first category, i.e., material-culture includes implements and consumer goods. These were artefacts or physical objects. They were the products of human actions and were instrumental in satisfying human needs.
- ii) The second component, i.e., concrete categories of human activity, is covered by the term custom, which included elements of social organisation.
- iii) The third component, i.e., constitutional charters for social groups and beliefs, included cultural objects and also some aspects of social organisation.

The above description shows that Malinowski treated culture as almost everything that concerned human life and action and that it was not a part of human organism as a physiological system. For Malinowski, culture was that form of behaviour which individuals learnt and held in common and passed on to other individuals. It included also the material culture linked with such learned patterns of behaviour.

Here, we find that Malinowski drew a line of distinction between material objects on the one hand and customs, beliefs and social groupings on the other. Material objects functioned as implements and consumer goods. Customs, beliefs and social groupings were properties of those individuals who were involved in socio-cultural behaviour. Malinowski in a way used 'culture' as equivalent to society or social system. Let us examine Malinowski's definition of culture in relation to Tylor's definition of the same term.

#### **22.4.0 Malinowski's and Tylor's Definitions of Culture**

Malinowski's definition of the term culture was given in 1931 in the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (1931:621-46). He wrote, "...culture comprises inherited artifacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits and values". For Malinowski, social organisation is clearly a part of culture. In this respect, you will find that his definition of culture is quite similar to Tylor's (1881) definition. We have often referred to Tylor's definition of culture in our elective courses. Once again we repeat it. Tylor said that culture is 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'. A comparison between the two definitions shows that Tylor stressed the complexity aspect while Malinowski emphasised the wholeness aspect of culture.

Malinowski used the term culture as a functioning whole and developed the idea of studying the 'use' or 'function' of the beliefs, practices, customs and institutions which together made the 'whole' of a culture. He viewed

different aspects of culture as a scheme for empirical research, which could be verified by observation. In this sense, we can say that Malinowski became an architect of what is known as the fieldwork method in anthropology/sociology. In developing his perspective on field research he brought about the functionalist revolution and wrote, 'The magnificent title of the Functionalist School of Anthropology has been bestowed by myself, in a way on myself. This was no boasting. Malinowski published the results of his painstaking fieldwork in 1922 in his famous monograph, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Here, he used the concept of culture as a balanced system of many parts. He explained that the function of a custom or institution was to be understood in the way it helped to maintain the culture as a whole. Malinowski (1931: 621-46) instructed that a culture had to be studied in its own right... as a self-contained reality'.

We should look at these emphases by Malinowski in the light of prevalent approaches of his time. At that time, evolutionists and diffusionists related the cultures 'in time to an evolutionary scale or related them in space upon some diffusionist map' (Pocock 1961: 52). Objecting to these approaches, Malinowski stressed the need for finding the interrelatedness of different aspects of culture. In this way, he argued for viewing culture as an integrated whole. This 'whole' had to be studied in terms of the function of each custom.

#### 22.4.1 Techniques for Studying Culture

For this purpose Malinowski developed techniques or field methods for studying the functioning whole of culture. Because of his insistence on field-methods his brand of functionalism almost revolutionised the discipline of anthropology. He brought about a radical reevaluation of terms used in his days for describing and analysing culture. Let us briefly examine the three broad kinds of material which, according to Malinowski, required special techniques of data-collection.

- i) He advanced 'the method of statistic documentation by concrete evidence' for outlining the institutions and customs of a culture. He wanted the fieldworker to understand elements of an activity and links between its separate aspects from opinions, descriptions elicited from people, from observation of actual cases.
- ii) Social action of everyday life was to be observed and minutely recorded in a special ethnographic diary. Malinowski wrote,

In working out the rules and regularities of native custom, and in obtaining a precise formula for them from the collection of data and native statements, we find that this very precision is foreign to real life, which never adhere rigidly to any rules. It must be supplemented by the observations of the manner in which a given custom is carried out, of the behaviour of the natives in obeying the rules so exactly formulated by the ethnographer, of the very exceptions which in sociological phenomena almost always occur.

- iii) He asked the field worker to collect 'ethnographic statements, characteristic narratives, typical utterances, items of folklore and magical formulae' to document native mentality,

Malinowski wanted to understand the complexity of divergences between what people say about what they do (no. i of the above), what they actually do (no. ii of the above) and what they think (no. iii). A gifted field worker, like Malinowski himself, was to achieve personal identification with the people he or she wanted to study. Malinowski referred to the concept of function as use. He said that cultures were integrated wholes because they were functioning unit. For him all aspects of culture carried a meaning for members of a social group. In a way, they were a means for satisfying people's needs. This was, so to say, the rationale for their being together. Explanation of culture in terms of needs took Malinowski into the area of psychology. We will discuss this in section 22.5.

### **Activity 2**

Kuper (1975: 37-8) has commented that though Malinowski insisted upon interrelations between the various aspects of culture, he was unable to produce a coherent depiction of Trobriand culture. According to Kuper this was so because Malinowski 'lacked the notion of a system'. This means that he simply described each part and tried to show its relation to another part of culture, yet he could not perceive the essence of their culture. For example, you may describe each part of the body. You may say that arms are connected to shoulders and shoulders are connected to the neck and so on. But this description cannot give you a theory of anatomy. Well, this is one example of the failure of Malinowskian ethnography. After critically reading section 22.4, can you think of any other failure of Malinowskian description of primitive culture?

## **22.5 THEORY OF NEEDS**

Malinowski's search for concepts to analyse primitive culture led to a particular approach to explanation of social facts. This approach is known as his 'theory of needs'. It was presented in *A Scientific Theory of Culture* by Malinowski. According to him the 'needs' were two-fold, namely, the needs of the individual and the needs of the society. Malinowski (1944: 90) defined the term need, as follows.

By need, then, I understand the system of conditions in the human organism, in the cultural setting, and in relation of both to the natural environment, which are sufficient and necessary for the survival of group and organism. A need, therefore, is the limiting set of facts. Habits and their motivations, the learned responses and the foundations of organisation, must be so arranged as to allow the basic needs to be satisfied.

The first part of this definition speaks of the system of conditions in the human organism. It refers to biological impulses which need to be satisfied.

### **22.5.0 Biological Impulses**

Malinowski (1944: 77) provided a table of 'permanent vital sequences' incorporated in all cultures. These sequences refer to the satisfaction of impulses of an individual. These are

A) Impulse, leading to	B) Act, leading	C) Satisfaction
1) drive to breathe	intake of Oxygen	Elimination of carbondioxide in tissues
2) hunger	ingestion of food	satiation
3) thirst	absorption of liquid	quenching
4) sex appetite	conjugation	detumescence (subsidence of swelling)
5) fatigue	rest	restoration of muscular and nervous energy
6) restlessness (sleepiness)	activity	satisfaction of fatigue
7) somnolence	sleep	awakening with restored energy
8) bladder pressure	micturition (urination)	removal of tension
9) colon pressure	defecation	abdominal relaxation
10) fright	escape form danger	relaxation
11) pain	avoidance by effective act	return to normal state

This table refers merely to the satisfaction of the impulses of an individual. In this and the following list, Malinowski used unfamiliar words. Their meanings have been provided in parentheses.

### 22.5.1 Types of Needs

Malinowski (1944: 91) added the concept of individual and group survival to that of individual impulse. He constructed a model of types of needs. It comprised three types, namely, basic, derived and integrative needs.

#### i) Basic Needs

The basic needs focussed on the conditions essential to both individual and group survival. The table of basic needs is as follows:

Basic Needs	Cultural Responses
Metabolism	Commissariat (food supplies)
Reproduction	Kinship
Bodily comforts	Shelter
Safety	Protection
Movement	Activities
Growth	Training
Health	Hygiene

Culture, in terms of the table of 'basic needs', has the value of biological survival. This may be described as 'primary determinism'.

## ii) **Derived Needs**

The human being's life as a social creature brings about a 'secondary determinism'. You can also say that for the satisfaction of basic needs culture creates its own needs. These are, according to Malinowski (1944: 125), 'derived needs' or imperatives, which relate to

Need	Response
a) requirements of maintenance of cultural apparatus	economics
b) regulation of human behaviour	social control
c) socialisation	education
d) exercise of authority	political organisation

These derived needs or imperatives do not however include all imperatives established among human beings. The young of many animals can also be taught these rules. But none, except human beings, have the ability to transmit them to their young. No doubt, apes are able to 'teach' their young how to behave and in this sense they have rules. But it is hard to imagine the mother chimpanzee commenting on another mother-baby set as observing no rules. This happens only when habit changes into custom

## iii) **Integrative Needs**

Human social life is characterised by what Malinowski (1944: 125) calls the 'integrative imperatives'. Through integrative imperatives, habit is converted into custom, care of children into the training of the next generation and impulses into values. The phenomena such as tradition, normative standards or values, religion, art, language and other forms of symbolism belong, according to Malinowski, to the sphere of integrative imperatives. In other words, we find that for Malinowski the essence of human culture is contained in symbolism or in values.

This shows that Malinowski's theory of needs recognises the biological bases of cultural activities and therefore it can be applied to explain and compare cultural behaviour from different parts of the world. He considers social structure as one of the cultural means to satisfy primary, derived and integrative needs of human beings. This conceptual scheme gave Malinowski an explanatory tool to prepare field records of a high order. Malinowski's (1929) study of *The Sexual Life of Savages in N W Melanesia* and his student Audrey Richard's (1932) *Hunger and work in a Savage Tribe* amply demonstrate that different cultures not only satisfy but also regulate and limit biological impulses (see sub-section 22.5.0)

Ralph Piddmgton (1957: 49) considered the theory of needs as a potential contribution to co-operation between psychologists and anthropologists. To summarise we can say that Malinowski's theory of needs is a general idea about the biological and cultural factors of human behaviour. His quest for concepts, which were not purely speculative and which were also not



so concrete as to make generalisations difficult, remained an ongoing activity. In the process, we find his idea of describing societies as well-balanced cultural wholes was later overtaken by his emphasis on the study of institutions. An institution for Malinowski was a component or part of culture. He began to look for the relationship between different institutions of a society. This enabled him to link the political with the religious or the political with the economic or technological. He thought institutions to be different from each other as much as they were organised around different functions. What did he mean by the term function? Let us first Check Your Progress 2 and then read section 22.6 for finding the answer to this question.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) Write, in three lines, the difference between basic needs and derived needs.

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.....  
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- ii) Was Malinowski able to account for the phenomena such as religion and art in his theory of needs? If yes, explain how he perceived the essence of human culture in symbolism? Use three lines for your answer.

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.....

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## 22.6 THE CONCEPT OF FUNCTION AS DEVELOPED BY MALINOWSKI

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You have already learnt that the cardinal point in the conceptual framework of Malinowski was the idea of culture. It was taken by him as an instrument for the satisfaction of human needs. Culture's function in terms of needs helped Malinowski to systematically record and analyse the rich ethnographic material he collected in the Trobriand islands.

Some scholars consider Malinowski's ethnography 'as a matter of theoretical insight' (Leach 1957: 119). And such theoretical insights have today become an integral part of sociological research. According to Leach, the anthropological greatness of Malinowski lies in his theoretical assumption that all field data must fit and form a total picture, just like in a jigsaw puzzle. It must not only fit but also make sense. This assumption made it necessary for a Malinowskian to pay great attention to minute details of socio-cultural situations. This attitude brought significant results in terms of vivid and lively ethnographic accounts of primitive peoples and explanations of their behaviour (for an example see Box 22.5). Malinowski's insistence on collection of first-hand data itself became a

source of theoretical advance because it necessitated that the analysis of the data must remain grounded in empirical reality.

**Box 22.5: Malinowski's Essay on *Baloma***

This is an excerpt from Malinowski's essay on *Baloma: The Spirit of the dead in the Trobriand* (1948:191-3). Malinowski spent about ten months at Omarakana and the neighbouring village of Kiriwina (Trobriand Islands). There he lived among the natives in a tent and within five months of his stay in the village he was able to converse in Kiriwinian language. This excerpt shows the role of magic in the tribal life of the Kiriwinians. Note Malinowski's ease in bringing the Trobrianders right before our eyes.

Magic is so widespread that, living among the natives, I used to come across magical performances, very often quite unexpectedly, apart from the cases where I arranged to be present at a ceremony. The hut of Bagido'u, the garden magician of Omarakana, was not fifty meters from my tent, and I remember hearing his chant on one of the very first days after my arrival, when I hardly knew of the existence of garden magic. Later on I was allowed to assist at his chanting over magical herbs; in fact, I could enjoy the privilege as often as I liked, and I used it several times. In many garden ceremonies part of the ingredients are chanted over in the village, in the magician's own house, and, again, before being used in the garden. On the morning of such a day the magician goes alone into the bush, sometimes far away, to fetch the necessary herbs. In one charm as many as ten varieties of ingredients, practically herbs have to be brought. Some are to be found on the sea beach only, some must be fetched from the raiboag (the stony coral woodland), others are brought from the odila, the low scrub. The magician has to set out before daybreak and obtain all his material before the sun is up. The herbs remain in the house, and somewhere about noon he proceeds to chant over them a mat is spread on the bedstead, and on this mat another is laid. The herbs are placed on one half of the second mat, the other half being folded over them. Into this opening the magician chants his spell.

His share is very much appreciated by the community; indeed, it would be difficult to imagine any work done in the gardens without the co-operation of the towosi (garden magician).

Malinowski was sceptical of 'abstract theory' (Leach 1957: 134). This attitude drove him to insist on minutely recording the empirical facts about society. But he was not to be drowned in the sea of empirical details. He too, like other sociologists, had to make sense of these details. For this purpose he needed to develop a theoretical framework. Biased against 'abstract theory', he was determined to overcome deficiencies of the nineteenth century speculative theory. As a result he was engaged in a constant search for concepts of middle-range, concepts which were not too abstract as to become speculative and concepts which were not too concrete as to leave no scope for generalisations. And in the process, Malinowski confined himself to establishing culture as a tool, to serve

functional roles. Secondly, in showing the functional role of culture, he emphasised the satisfaction of needs of the individual. His theory of functionalism did not proceed beyond this.

Functionalism could not be developed by Malinowski as a methodological concept. In the words of Evans-Pritchard (1954: 54), for Malinowski functional method was 'a literary device for integrating his observations for descriptive purposes'. It is not out of place to mention here that it was Malinowski's contemporary Radcliffe-Brown who later developed the functional or organismic theory of society. You will read about it in Unit 25. Let us now complete Check Your Progress 3.

### Check Your Progress 3

- i) If Malinowski failed to develop functionalism as a methodological concept, what was his special contribution to sociological research? Use two lines for your answer.

.....  
.....

- ii) What helped Malinowski to explain his theory of culture as a functional tool? Use two lines for your answer.

.....  
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## 22.7 LET US SUM UP

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Having discussed at length Malinowski's concept of culture, needs and function, it is easy to make out that the concept of function was not fully developed by him. As far as his concept of culture was concerned, he wanted to evolve a grand design and in the process he made his job too difficult and unwieldy. All the same he is recognised to be a valiant fighter who opposed widely accepted theories of his times. Not only this, he made his major contribution to sociological thought by combining into one the roles of an ethnographer and a theoretician. He showed how ethnographic facts were without meaning in the absence of theoretical interpretations. Over fifteen years he evolved a theoretical framework which, being grounded in empirical reality, was extensively used by his followers. In this way he became a legend and a great name in anthropology.

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## 22.8 KEYWORDS

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<b>Diffusionism</b>	The theory of the spread of elements of culture from one ethnic group to another
<b>Empiricism</b>	The practice of relying on observation and experiment or a theory that all knowledge originates in experience

<b>Eskimo</b>	A group of people of Northern Canada, Greenland, Alaska and eastern Siberia
<b>Ethnography</b>	It refers to a descriptive account of the way of life of a particular society
<b>Ethnology</b>	It is the comparative study of the elements of culture in many societies
<b>Evolution</b>	This concept refers to change and progress. When it is applied to organisms, it implies the changes in genes of given populations by processes like mutation and natural selection. Applied to the development of human society, the concept refers to successive stages of development through which societies are supposed to pass.
<b>Fieldwork</b>	The anthropological practice of carrying out research by going to the area of the people one wants to study and collecting facts which are guided by systematic theory of society
<b>Iroquois Indian</b>	An Amerindian confederacy of New York that consisted of the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca and later included Tuscarora tribals
<b>Matriliny</b>	The system of tracing relationship to kin exclusively through females
<b>Matriarchy</b>	Social organisation in which mother is head of family
<b>Moral Philosopher</b>	Those who make the study of human conduct and values
<b>Patriliney</b>	The system of tracing relationship to kin exclusively through males
<b>Patriarchy</b>	System of society in which father or oldest living male is head of family
<b>Pidgin-English</b>	An English-based speech used for communication between people with different languages
<b>Polyandry</b>	The practice of marriage of one woman to two or more men
<b>Torres Straits</b>	A strait 80 meter wide between island of New Guinea and northern tip of Cape York peninsula, Australia

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## 22.9 FURTHER READING

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Kuper, Adam, 1975, Anthropologists and Anthropology: The British School 1922-72. Penguin Books: London

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## 22.10 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) The eighteenth century moral philosophers did not feel any need to provide evidence regarding their theories of human institutions. The nineteenth century evolutionists felt such a need and provided evidence on the basis of haphazardly collected material.
- ii) Ethnography provides a descriptive account of the way of life of a particular society while ethnology refers to the comparative study of the various aspects of culture in many societies.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) The basic needs relate to the conditions, which are necessary for the survival of both the individual and the group. Derived needs, on the other hand, are those needs, which are created by culture to satisfy the basic needs.
- ii) Malinowski's idea of integrative needs accounts for symbolism. He said that when a habit becomes a custom, learnt behaviour is converted into a value, it is recognised as an integrative need.

### Check Your Progress 3

- i) The insistence on collection of first-hand data is Malinowski's special contribution to sociological research.
- ii) Malinowski developed a theory of needs for explaining the concept of culture as a functional tool.

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## UNIT 23 MAGIC, SCIENCE AND RELIGION — MALINOWSKI

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### Structure

- 23.0 Objectives
- 23.1 Introduction
- 23.2 The Debate on Magic, Science and Religion
  - 23.2.0 Tylor on Religion
  - 23.2.1 Frazer on Magic, Science and Religion
  - 23.2.2 Frazer and Durkheim on Totemism
  - 23.2.3 Malinowski's Approach: The Universal in the Particular
- 23.3 The Domain of the Profane
  - 23.3.0 Gardening among the Trobriand Islanders
  - 23.3.1 Canoe-Building among the Trobriand Islanders
  - 23.3.2 Is Primitive Knowledge akin to Science?
- 23.4 The Domain of the Sacred-Religion
  - 23.4.0 Initiation Ceremonies
  - 23.4.1 Rites Related to Death
  - 23.4.2 Some Other Examples of Religious Behaviour
  - 23.4.3 A Summary of Malinowski's View of Religion
- 23.5 The Domain of the Sacred-Magic
  - 23.5.0 The Tradition of Magic
  - 23.5.1 *Mana* and Magic
  - 23.5.2 Magic and Experience
- 23.6 Similarities and Differences
  - 23.6.0 Magic and Science
  - 23.6.1 Magic and Religion
- 23.7 The Function of Magic, Science and Religion
- 23.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 23.9 Keywords
- 23.10 Further Reading
- 23.11 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 23.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit, you should be able to

- discuss the views of Tylor, Frazer and Durkheim on magic, science and religion
- narrate Malinowski's examples of religious and magical behaviour
- distinguish between science and magic and between magic and religion.

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## 23.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous unit, you learnt about Malinowski's conceptual framework for understanding human culture. The present unit relates his theories to his way of looking at universal aspects of culture through his study of a particular people. As an apt illustration of Malinowskian approach, we have selected his essay, '*Magic, Science and Religion*'. It compares and contrasts these aspects of primitive culture in a most lucid manner (see Robert Redfield's Introduction to the book, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, published in 1948). A close look at the content of this essay will enable you to evaluate Malinowski's talent for seeing the universal elements of human culture through the particular case of the Trobriand Islanders, whom he had observed and studied. Secondly, we find that Malinowski does not confine himself, in this essay, to any one perspective of religion, science and magic. In a characteristic and representative manner of his approach, he has discussed the various views on religion, advanced by Tylor, Frazer, Marett and Durkheim. This provides us with a useful commentary on the then prevailing debate on these issues. We have tried to present in this unit a gist of Malinowski's ideas, as he viewed them. In passing we have also mentioned apparent inadequacies and inconsistencies in his arguments.

The unit begins with the prevailing views on magic, science and religion, in Malinowski's time. This is followed by a discussion of the area, which is considered by Malinowski as non-sacred or profane. It refers to the area of science or the human beings' rational control of their environment. Malinowski shows that the primitive people have a vast range of knowledge, based on experience and reason. This helps them to carry out their daily activities for survival and in addition also maintain the continuity of their group's existence in a difficult to control environment.

Secondly, we discuss the areas of magic and religion, which are included by Malinowski in the domain of the sacred. According to Malinowski, the primitive people observe a clear distinction between the world of science and the world of magic and religion. We will see how the two domains (**the profane** and **the sacred**) are separated from each other and further how religion is separated from magic. In this way, you will learn about Malinowski's simple theory, which deals with (i) the nature of and differences among scientific, magical and religious behaviour and (ii) how the three aspects satisfy the human needs and thereby maintain the society.

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## 23.2 THE DEBATE ON MAGIC, SCIENCE AND RELIGION

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In this section, we will briefly discuss the views on magic, science and religion, prevailing in Malinowski's time. He has discussed them in the first part of his essay and then has taken up some points for elaboration in its later parts. Here we follow Malinowski's approach by beginning with Tylor's view of religion.

### 23.2.0 Tylor on Religion

According to Malinowski we can describe Edward Tylor as the founder of an anthropological study of religion. For Tylor, **animism**, i.e., the belief in spiritual beings, is the essence of primitive religion. Tylor maintains that primitive people's reflections on dreams, hallucinations and visions lead them to see a separation between the human soul and the body. The soul survives after death because it appears in dreams, memories and visions. So comes the belief in ghosts, the spirits of ancestors and a world after death. According to Tylor, human beings in general and primitives in particular have an inclination to form the idea of the world after death in the image of the world they live in. Secondly, animals, plants and other objects, which help or obstruct man's activities, are also regarded to possess souls or spirits.

Malinowski does not agree with Tylor's view of primitive man as a reflecting being. Malinowski who has the authority of specialists' knowledge of primitive societies, maintains that the primitives are more preoccupied with fishing, gardening and tribal get-togethers and do not spend time 'brooding over dreams and visions'. Criticising Tylor in this fashion, Malinowski moves over to Sir James Frazer's writings.

#### 23.2.1 Frazer on Magic, Science and Religion

Frazer's works are mainly concerned with the problem of magic and its relation to science and religion. They also include a consideration of totemism and fertility cults.

Frazer's famous book, *The Golden Bough*, brings out that besides animism, primitive religion has many more beliefs and animism cannot be described as a dominating belief in primitive culture. For Frazer, the efforts to control the nature for day-to-day survival lead the early man to resort to magical practices. It is only after finding out the inefficiency of magical rites and spells that the early man is driven to making appeals to higher supernatural being like demons, ancestor-spirits and gods. Frazer draws a clear distinction between religion and magic. For controlling nature, propitiation of superior powers is religion while direct control by way of spells and rites is magic. Frazer says that magical practices imply that man has the confidence of controlling nature directly. This attitude makes magical rites akin to scientific procedures. In addition, Frazer argues that religion implies man's acceptance of his inability to control nature directly and in this fashion religion takes man above magic. Not only this, he maintains that religion exists side by side with science.

These views of Frazer were the take-off points for many European scholars like Preuss in Germany, Marett in England, Hubert and Mauss in France. These scholars criticised Frazer and pointed out that science and magic may appear to be similar but they are quite apart from each other. For example, science is, based on reason and develops on the basis of observations and experiments while magic is born of tradition and is surrounded by mysticism. It cannot be verified by observations and experiments. Secondly, scientific knowledge is open to anyone who would like to learn it while magical formulas are kept secret and taught only to a selected few. Thirdly, science has its basis in the idea of natural forces,



while magic arises from the idea of a mystical power, which is differently named in different tribal societies. Melanesians call it *mana*, some Australian tribes call it *arungquiltha*, many American Indian groups name it as *wakan*, *orenda*, *manitu*. So, the belief in such a supernatural force is established as the essence of pre-animistic religion and it is shown to be completely different from science.

Malinowski posed many questions about this *mana* type of belief in a supernatural force. He asked, is it a fundamental idea, an innate category of the primitive mind or can it be explained by still simpler and more fundamental elements of human psychology or of the reality in which primitive people live? Before proceeding to answer these questions, Malinowski discusses the problem of the religious belief of totemism and Frazer's and Durkheim's views on this matter. Before turning to these views let us complete Check Your Progress 1.

### Check Your Progress 1

i) Define animism, in one line.

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ii) Give Frazer's arguments for the emergence of magic and religion among primitive people. Use three lines for your answer.

.....

.....

.....

### 23.2.2 Frazer and Durkheim on Totemism

Frazer defined totemism as the relation between a group of people and a species of natural or artificial objects. The objects are known as the totems of the groups of people. You can say that totemism is both - a religious system and a way of forming social groups. As a religious system it reflects primitive peoples' preoccupation with their desire to forge a link with such important objects as animals, vegetable species etc. Killing or destruction of these objects is tabooed to the group of people, which holds them as totems. Rather, the groups hold rites and ceremonies for multiplication of their totem objects. As a way of forming social groups, the totem objects are made a basis of the subdivision of the group into smaller units. This has thrown open an altogether new aspect of sociological significance of a religious belief. It has led Robertson Smith (1889), a pioneer of anthropology of religion, to say that primitive religion is 'essentially an affair of the community rather than of individuals'.

Durkheim's study of religion shows that he considers totemism to be the earliest form of religion. Like Robertson Smith, he too finds a very close link between religion and society. He believes the totemic principles to be similar to *mana* or the supernatural force. Durkheim (1976: 206) maintains that society is to its members 'what a God is to its worshippers'. He looks at religion as permeating all aspects of society and lays special emphasis on the public or collective aspects of religious practices.

Malinowski has many problems with Durkheim's formulations. He cannot imagine religion to be 'so entirely devoid of the inspiration of solitude'. According to Malinowski (1948: 56), the belief in immortality arises from the individual and it has little to do with the social or collective. Secondly, morals in a society are enforced by personal responsibility and conscience rather than by fear of social punishment. Lastly, Malinowski concedes the importance of social forces and agrees to consider both the individual and the social while studying religious behaviour of primitive people. In addition he argues that white religious ceremonies are held in open view of public, religious revelations appear in solitude. He also points out that not all collective enterprises in a society can be described as religious activities and therefore we cannot equate society with religion. He gives the examples of a battle or a sailing regatta or a village brawl — all these are collective actions but they have nothing to do with religion. So, according to Malinowski, the collective and religious may overlap but are not synonyms. Further, he argues that society includes both the religious and non-religious or profane aspects of life and therefore cannot be equated with religious or sacred aspects alone. With all these arguments, Malinowski rejects Durkheim's sociological theory of religion.

Now, in the background of these criticisms, made by Malinowski, you would naturally like to learn about what Malinowski has to say on these issues. Before we go on to the summary of his views of magic, science and religion, let us also look at the levels on which his thought moves. The following section makes a very brief point about Malinowski's concern with the particular and the universal for understanding the problems of magic, science and religion.

### **23.2.3 Malinowski's Approach: The Universal in the Particular**

Malinowski belongs to a borderline area, where one half lies in older preoccupations with universally valid principles of human behaviour and the other half lies in the newly found concern with empirical research in a particular society. You can easily bracket him with those nineteenth century scholars whose ideas deal with the nature and origin of religion and magic. He can be described as the last scholar of that era to provide ultimate explanations and universally applicable principles of religion and magic. But we must also recognise the fact that Malinowski is the initiator of a new phase, which held in high esteem the collection of carefully observed data from a particular society. So he is a scholar asking older questions and answering them in a new fashion.

This resulted in two clearly marked levels on which his ideas about magic, science and religion were formed and presented in the essay, which we are going to summarise in this unit. One is the level of the particular society, the Trobriand islanders. He considers the islanders as a supreme example of Humanity and used the material collected during the field research among them as a supporting evidence for his generalised views on the nature and function of magic and religion. For him the link between one's observations of social life and one's understanding of universally valid ideas is quite simple and smooth. In this essay he combines the two levels in a simplistic

manner and provides answers to questions pertaining to sociological significance of magic, science religion. Further he generalises at the level of Humanity on the basis of his knowledge of one particular case the Trobriand islanders. He tries also to prove the legitimacy of these elements. While reading his views of these three important aspects of human behaviour, it is useful to keep in mind the two levels on which his ideas are crystallised in this essay.

He visualises new ways of looking at these three aspects of social life. He has introduced a new system of reasoning in studying these phenomena. To him, all the three have to make sense. Let us see how he tries to find sense in their existence. According to Nadel (1957: 208), if his way of making sense is too simplistic and naive, it is still a novel method of studying science, religion and magic. Without this guidance, one cannot see how his successors would have made the progress that they made in the times to come. This perspective helps students of the history and development of sociological thought to learn how Malinowski introduced the logic of rationality in studies of science, magic and religion.

The American anthropologist, Robert Redfield (1948: 9), says that Malinowski's essay, *Magic, Science and Religion*, reflects the special quality of its author. The quality is of being able 'to see and declare the universal in the particular'. Malinowski's ways of demonstrating the meaning and function of religion and magic shows his deep sense of human interest in social situations. This kind of reasoning, according to Robert Redfield, enables Malinowski to turn the science of anthropology into an art. At the same time, it enables him to fuse 'the warm reality of human-living and the cool abstractions of science'. You must be, by now, very keen to learn what Malinowski actually said. So the next section gives you a summary of what he described as the primitive knowledge and its application for practical concerns of life. He calls this the domain of the profane, i.e., non-religious. Before turning to the next section, let us complete Activity 1.

#### Activity 1

**In Indian mythology we find several references to totem-taboos. Write a one-page note, listing some of them and their significance for the particular people.**

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### 23.3 THE DOMAIN OF THE PROFANE

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Malinowski begins with the question: Do the primitive people have 'any rational outlook, any rational mastery' of their surroundings? Rejecting Levy-Bruhl's (1926) idea that primitive people have a definite aversion to reasoning (see Box 23.1), Malinowski answers the question by showing that 'every primitive community is in possession of a considerable store of knowledge, based on experience and fashioned by reason'. To provide evidence he gives examples of behaviour related to the arts, crafts and economic activities of the Trobriand islanders. The behaviour related to these activities is clearly separate from magic and religion and it is 'based

on empirical knowledge and on the confidence in logic'. Malinowski calls this the profane side of life, i.e., the side, which is not religious or magical. He shows that the natives themselves keep the area of the profane apart from religion and magic. Here, for our discussion of the domain of the profane we select two from the many examples, given by Malinowski, as an evidence of his views on the existence of scientific knowledge among the primitives

#### **Box 23.1 L. Levy-Bruhl**

Lucien Levy-Bruhl was born in 1857 and died in 1939. He was a French sociologist and ethnologist and a colleague of Durkheim. Among his best known books are *How Natives Think* (1926) and *Primitive Mentality* (1923). Both the books were translated from French by Lilian A. Clare. Their French editions were published in 1912 and 1922, respectively. In both these books, Levy-Bruhl studied the common set of values, beliefs and practices, which individuals conform to and later pass on to the next generation. He took it for granted that the myths, beliefs and other ideas of primitive people reflect their social structure. He argued that these ideas differ from one group to the other. Then he showed how they could be seen as systems or the logical principles. He held that, the spiritual background of the primitive society was not the same as that of modern society. He considered the thought structures of primitive people as pre-logical as they did not understand the process of natural causation. It is important to distinguish that Levy-Bruhl focused on an analysis of the ideas, which were associated with social activities while Durkheim was confined to the study of social activities themselves.

#### **23.3.0 Gardening among the Trobriand Islanders**

The Trobriand islanders subsist mainly on products of gardening. They are also fishermen and traders of goods manufactured by them. For gardening they use such implements as a pointed digging stick and a small axe. These help them to grow crops enough to feed the population. They are also able to get a surplus yield. Their wide-ranging knowledge of the types of the soil, the plants and the interaction between the two is the main cause of their success in agriculture. This is coupled with their hard work at accurate points of time and place. In selecting the soil and seedlings they make use of their knowledge which is acquired through observation and experience. For clearing the plot, burning the bushes and planting, weeding and arranging the **yam** vines upwards, they need to possess both the ability to work hard and apply their labour at appropriate time and place. Their knowledge of weather and seasons of different types of plants and pests has not only to be fairly dependable but they need to have confidence on the reliability of their knowledge. Then only they can successfully carry out the operations of agriculture at regular intervals. Based on these arguments, Malinowski shows that the natives possess a rational outlook to their surroundings and command a fair degree of control over it. This is what enables them to grow crops for subsistence and for obtaining a surplus.

Having concluded in this fashion, Malinowski speaks of a close relationship between practical operations of gardening and an annual series of rites relating to gardening. Here, he warns us that they may be closely related but are certainly not mixed up. They are not one and the same thing because their results are clearly distinguished by the natives. The performance of annual magical rites is an absolute necessity for successful gardening and despite several decades of European influence, the Trobrianders have not changed their traditional practices. Indeed the Granada Television of England (GD 1990: 8) confirms that many of the ritual activities relating to yam cultivation in 1989 were found to be the same as described by Malinowski in 1915. The Trobrianders believe that ignoring the magical rites would endanger their agriculture with such problems as blight, drought, floods, pests, and wild animals. Malinowski argues that holding of magical rites for the well being of their gardens does not however imply that the Trobrianders attribute all success in gardening to magic. He writes,

If you were to suggest to a native that he should make his garden mainly by magic and scamp his work, he would simply smile on your simplicity. He knows as well as you do that there are natural conditions and causes, and by his observations he knows that he is able to control these natural forces by mental and physical effort. His knowledge is limited, no doubt, but as far as it goes it is sound and proof against mysticism. If the fences are broken down, if the seed is destroyed or has been dried or washed away, he will have recourse not to magic, but to work, guided by knowledge or reason.

Malinowski concludes that the native knows that despite all hardwork on his part, at one time or the other his crops do also fail. Rain or sun may not appear at the right time, locusts may eat away the crop. So 'to control these influences and these only' the Trobrianders take recourse to magic. In other words, one can say that the known set of conditions about weather, soil, plants, pests, sowing, weeding and fencing etc. are handled by the natives on the basis of the rational knowledge of their surroundings. The unknown and unaccountable set of conditions are coped by them with the help of magic.

In addition, Malinowski shows that the sphere of work and the sphere of ritual are also set apart from each other. Every magical rite associated with gardening has a specific name. The time and place of its performance are clearly specified and separated from the scheme of day-to-day operations of gardening. Work is prohibited at the time of a magical performance. All magical rites are performed in full knowledge of the people and are mostly attended by all members of the public.

Secondly, although the magician who conducts magical ceremonies is also the person who leads all agricultural operations, his two roles are clearly separated. They are not allowed to overlap or interfere with each other. In his role as a leader of agricultural activities, he fixes the date for starting the gardening work. He scolds a lazy or careless gardener. But he does not, at any time, mix this role with that of the magician. We will now turn to the second example about canoe-building.

### 23.3.1 Canoe-building among the Trobriand Islanders

Canoe is a kind of long light narrow boat with both ends sharp. Its sides are curved and it is usually propelled by hand-driven paddles. In building their canoes the Trobrianders separate the activities relating to work from those relating to magic. For building a canoe one must have the extensive knowledge of the material and the principles of stability and hydrodynamics (science dealing with the motion of water and the forces acting on solid bodies in water). Besides, they know that for greater stability one has to widen the span of the outrigger {a beam with a log at the end attached to a canoe to maintain the balance). But they also know that doing this would mean less resistance against strain. They can also give the reasons for keeping a certain width in terms of fractions of the length of their canoes. They are fully aware of the mechanics of boat making and about what one should do in the event of a storm or why one should keep the outrigger always on the weather side. Malinowski (1948: 30) tells us that the terminology about sailing, used by the Trobrianders, is as rich and complex as the one used by modern sailors. It has to be so because otherwise they cannot sail under dangerous conditions in their fragile canoes.

Just as with the activities related to yam-cultivation, those related to canoe-building amply demonstrate that the Trobrianders have an extensive knowledge of what is required for successful sailing. But here again, Malinowski points out, the Trobrianders are still faced with unaccountable conditions of sudden gales and powerful tides. This is the point at which magic enters the scene. Magical rites are performed at the time of constructing canoes, again at the beginning and during the course of sea-expeditions. Comparing the Trobrianders with modern sailors, Malinowski (1948: 30) writes,

If the modern seaman, entrenched in science and reason, provided with all sorts of safety appliances, sailing on steel-built steamers, if even he has a singular tendency to superstition — which does not rob him of knowledge or reason, nor make him altogether prelogical — can we wonder that his savage colleague, under much more precarious conditions, holds fast to the safety and comfort of magic?

You can make out that Malinowski has given recognition to both the rational outlook to one's surroundings and performance of magical rites for controlling the unaccountable and unforeseen forces of nature. In the essay on magic, science and religion, he goes on to provide further examples of activities related to fishing, warfare, health and death. In each case he shows that the primitive people make systematic observations and possess systems of logically coherent knowledge. He also mentions the native's ability 'to draw diagrammatic maps in sand or dust'. This indicates that they have the ability to codify knowledge in formulaic form. For example, they are aware of various seasons, movements of stars, lunar calendar and on that basis they can plan sea-expedition or warfare. They can even draw diagrams to explain their plans. It is now time for us to complete Check Your Progress 2.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- i) What is signified by setting apart the sphere of work from the sphere of ritual among the ‘Trobriand Islanders? Use four lines for your answer.

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- ii) Does a rational outlook to one’s surroundings imply the absence of faith in magical rites? Use three lines for your positive or negative answer.

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**23.3.2 Is Primitive Knowledge akin to Science?**

Malinowski (1948: 34) raises the question: “Can we regard primitive knowledge, which as we found, is both empirical and rational, as a rudimentary stage of science, or is it not at all related to it?” To this he provides a straight answer that if we consider science to be a system of knowledge based on experience and reasoning then the primitive people should be considered to possess rudimentary forms of science.

Secondly, if we take science to be a matter of attitude, then according to Malinowski, the natives are not totally unscientific in their attitudes. They may not have an abiding thirst for knowledge. They may find quite boring the topics, which Europeans may feel very interested in. This is because their whole interest is determined by their cultural traditions. They are immensely interested in their surroundings — events related to animal life, marine life and forests. At this stage in his essay, Malinowski decides to leave aside the questions related to the nature and basis of primitive knowledge. Rather he is interested in finding out if the primitives have one amalgamated area of reality in which magic, science and religion are all one and the same or they treat the three aspects of life as separate areas of social phenomena. He has, so far, shown that the world of practical activities and rational attitudes related to them form one world for the Trobrianders. Further, this world is separate from the world of magical and religious practices. We will now discuss this other area, i.e. the domain of the sacred which includes religion and magic. Complete Activity 2 and discover our own practices pertaining to magic and religion.

**Activity 2**

Write a note of four pages, giving some examples from our day-to-day behaviour in which we resort to both magical and religious practices.

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## 23.4 THE DOMAIN OF THE SACRED - RELIGION

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In this section of the essay, Malinowski (1948: 36) is mainly concerned with (i) putting some order into the facts (by this time you would have realised that this was Malinowski's constant preoccupation), (ii) determining 'more precisely the character of the domain of the Sacred and mark it off from that of the Profane' and (iii) stating the relation between magic and religion. He begins with the last point and says that a prima facie distinction between magic and religion is that magical rites have a clear-cut aim and refer to their results in terms of subsequent events. In religious ceremonies there is no forethought of an outcome in terms of a specific purpose and event. Malinowski's discussion of the nature of religious beliefs and practices among the primitive people is based on this primary distinction (later we will learn more about similarities and differences between religion and magic). He gives the example of initiation ceremonies to explain the nature of religious behaviour and its function among the primitives. To follow Malinowski's view of religion, we will go into details of this particular example.

### 23.4.0 Initiation Ceremonies

Malinowski (1948: 38) gives the following general features of initiation ceremonies.

- i) The novices (persons to be initiated) go through a period of seclusion and prepare themselves for the ceremony.
- ii) During the ceremony proper, the youth pass through many ordeals. These include acts of bodily mutilation. Sometimes these are only mimetic or imitative and not real.
- iii) These ordeals signify the idea of ritual death and then rebirth of the initiated person.
- iv) The above features represent the dramatic aspects of ceremonies. But the more important part is related to 'the systematic instruction of the youth in sacred myth and tradition, the gradual unveiling of tribal mysteries and the exhibition of sacred objects'.
- v) Both the ordeal and instruction parts of ceremonies are considered to be brought about by ancestors or culture-heroes or a person or superhuman power. It is thought that by going through the ceremonies a novice is able to form a relationship with these superior powers.

The question that Malinowski repeatedly asks about all the three aspects is about their sociological significance. Here again, he asks, what part do the initiation ceremonies play in the maintenance and development of primitive culture? According to Malinowski, the important role of initiation ceremonies is that the youth is given lessons in sacred tradition under the conditions of bodily pain and the sanction of superior powers. This indicates the overarching relevance of preserving at any cost the customs and beliefs, the knowledge received from previous generation. Stressing this aspect of



the ceremonies Malinowski (1948: 39) gives the following functions of initiation ceremonies.

- i) They give 'a ritual and dramatic expression of the supreme power and value of tradition in primitive societies'.
- ii) They serve 'to impress this power and value upon the minds of each generation'.
- iii) They transmit tribal lore and therefore preserve tradition and maintain tribal solidarity.

In addition to pointing out the above functions of these ceremonies, Malinowski emphasises another aspect, which relates to the changing status of a novice. The religious ceremonies of initiation mark a natural or biological event, i.e., the fact of bodily maturity. This is not all. They signify also a 'social transition' from mere physical growth to the idea of entry into manhood with associated duties, rights, knowledge of sacred traditions. They provide an occasion for 'communion with sacred things and beings'. Malinowski (1948: 40) describes this as 'a creative element in religious rites'. Creativity is expressed in the process of one's transition from physical to social and to a spiritual sphere.

According to Malinowski, this discussion of the main features and functions of initiation ceremonies shows that initiation is 'a typically religious act' and the very ceremony includes its purpose as well. In a larger sense, its function is the creation of 'mental habits and social usages of inestimable value to the group and its civilisation'. Let us now take another example to explain Malinowski's view of religion.

### **23.4.1 Rites related to Death**

According to Malinowski, the final event of life, death, is also a source of religion. Rites related to death seem to Malinowski as being very similar across the world. For example, we find that at the time death approaches, the dying person is surrounded by close relatives and at times by the whole community. In this way, a private act of an individual becomes a public event. This involves a chain reaction. Some persons remain near the dying or dead person while others make preparations for subsequent rites. In some parts of Melanesia, Malinowski cites, the relatives by marriage carry out the death ceremonies and the dead person's kin remain at a distance. Interestingly in some Australian tribes, it is exactly the reverse of the above.

Soon after death, the washed, anointed and decorated corpse is kept in full view of all and mourning begins with a dramatic outburst of grief and crying. In some cases shaven and in some other cases disorderly hair and torn clothes mark the public display of sorrow. Then comes the time to dispose off the corpse. The common forms of disposal are, as reported by Malinowski, burial in an open or closed grave, exposure in caves or on platform, in hollow of trees, or on the ground in a deserted place. It may be done by burning or floating the mortal body in boats.

Malinowski shows that there are contradictory customs among primitive communities. One is to preserve the body or to retain some of its parts. The other is to finish it off completely. Mummification and burning are

two extreme ways of achieving the two ends. Malinowski does not accept the view prevalent during his times that these practices are results of the spread of and contact between cultural traits of different areas. Rejecting these diffusionist claims, he argues that in relation to a dead person these customs reflect the twofold attitude of mind. One is the attitude of longing for the departed and the other is the fear and disgust of the changes brought by death. The desire to preserve the link with the dead and the parallel wish to break it, both ends are served by mortuary rites. This is why Malinowski includes them in the domain of religion. Remember what we learnt in the beginning of this unit, we learnt that all the rites which have their purpose inherent in their performance signify religious behaviour. This is exactly what happens in rites related to death. For example, contact with the corpse is considered to be polluting and dangerous. The persons taking part in mourning have to wash and cleanse themselves. Further, the mortuary rites force the mourners to overcome the disgust and allay their fears. This leads us to the second aspect of death ceremonies.

Overcoming disgust and allaying fears is achieved by people's belief in a future life or life after death. This implies a belief in the continuity of the spirit, or, in the idea of immortality. According to Malinowski, belief in the substance of a spirit or the idea of immortality is an outcome of 'a deep emotional revelation, standardised by religion, rather than a primitive philosophic doctrine'. This belief in immortality of spirit helps human beings to overcome or conquer the fear of death.

Here, we find that Malinowski has brought out a major feature of rites related to death. The rites held soon after death and the belief in immortality signify both the loss suffered by the whole group and the feelings of survival of the spirit. So, the natural event or a biological fact assumes the significance of a social event.

It is time now to quickly complete Check Your Progress 2 and then turn to the next sub-section 23.4.2.

### **Check Your Progress 3**

- i) Write, in two lines, about the main aim of initiation ceremonies among the primitive people.

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- ii) What is it that helps an individual to conquer the fear of death? Use one line for your answer.

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### **23.4.2 Some Other Examples of Religious Behaviour**

Further examples of religious ceremonies, given by Malinowski, include a brief comment on marriage rites. This comment provides him an opportunity to discuss the needs of propagation and nutrition. As in the case of initiation so also in marriage rites, Malinowski finds the ceremonies signifying much more than mere biological facts. They reflect the lifelong union of man and woman and concern a long chain of activities related with propagation

and nutrition. Malinowski points out that the act of eating involves an emotional tension for primitive people. Ceremonies, such as the first fruit offerings, harvest and seasonal festivities play a significant role in the agricultural cycle of the primitive culture. Celebrating among fishermen a big catch of fish or among hunters an animal hunt occupy similar place of importance. The food is a link between a person and his or her surroundings and in primitive religion, food is sacred besides being culturally and biologically important. Consideration of food as sacred leads Malinowski to view in a new light the ceremonies of sacrifice (an act of offering something precious usually some form of food to deity) and communion (an act of sharing food). We find that food is ritually administered in these rites and therefore they can be linked with the attitude of reverence towards the abundance of food. He gives the case of sacramental eating, related with totemic beliefs among Central Australian tribes. As mentioned before (see sub-section 23.2.2) a limited number of animals and/ or plants are selected for its totem by a tribe. Malinowski explains that for survival the primitive people have an abiding interest in continuity of the supply of particular species of animals and plants. In order that they get an abundant supply, they want to control these selected species. They study their habits and movements and develop an attitude of reverence for them. In this way an abiding interest in a limited number of animals and plants and its deification in the form of totemic rites is the natural outcome of the very survival of primitive communities. Again Malinowski has posited both a moral value and a biological significance in a system of beliefs related to totemic objects. We can now attempt to put together Malinowski's view of religion.

### **23.4.3 A Summary of Malinowski's View of Religion**

Malinowski has basically shown the functional value of religious ceremonies. In brief, he has surveyed the main types of religious acts and concludes that main types of religious acts have the following functions.

- i) The initiation ceremonies give a sacred character to traditional knowledge.
- ii) The event of death in a primitive society sets in motion a pattern of religious acts, which counteract the forces of fear and destruction.
- iii) The rites associated with food, sacrifice and totemistic beliefs bring the people in direct contact with powers, which provide sustenance.

Malinowski has used the method of providing concrete evidence for his views. Taking examples from his collection of data among the Trobriand islanders, he has formulated the view that all religious ceremonies have a social side without which they do not or cannot exist. So the social side of a religious ceremony is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. He emphasises that we cannot understand religion without analysing the individual mind. This is why you would find that he refers to the individual's state of mind at every stage of a religious ceremony. Further, he explains religious behaviour by contrasting and comparing it with magic. So it is now essential for us to turn to Malinowski's view of magic.

### Activity 3

Write a one page note on Malinowski's view of religion, with particular reference to the need of individuals

## 23.5 THE DOMAIN OF THE SACRED — MAGIC

We have briefly mentioned how Malinowski distinguishes magic from science (see section 23.3) and from religion (see section 23.4). Malinowski describes magic as a range of practical acts, which are carried out to achieve a desired result. Among several types of magic, Malinowski selects for special mention (i) the black magic and love magic, (ii) imitating or forecasting type of magic and (iii) simple magic.

i) In black magic, a pointed object (like a bone or a stick, an arrow or the spine of an animal) is directed towards the person to be destroyed. This is done in a mimic fashion to an imagined body of the victim. The performance of such a ritual is marked by a dramatic expression of emotion. The magician ritually, in a mimic way, destroys a figure or object, which symbolises the victim. The rite expresses all the hatred and fury against that person.

Love magic is the reverse of black magic. In this the magician strokes and fondles the object representing the beloved. Here, the behaviour of a love-stricken person is imitated. One can say that all such magical acts, be they black or love or terror, are basically expressions of emotion. Objects and actions used in these rites are linked through emotions.

ii) In the second type of magic the ceremonies imitate the desired result. For example, if the aim is to kill a person then the performer of the ritual will slowly weaken the voice, utter a death rattle and fall down in imitation of the rigor of death (see Malinowski 1948: 72).

iii) Then, there are simple acts of magic, which are meant for immediate results. Generally, a magician conveys the magic spell to some object, which can be later applied to the person who has to be controlled. In such a case the material object, which receives the magic-spell, has to be of an appropriate and pre-determined nature.

After describing these common types of magic, Malinowski points out that the common feature in them is the force of magic. This refers to the power contained in the spell. Mysteries of the spell are known only to the magician whose job is to preserve the tradition of knowledge in this field.

### 23.5.0 The Tradition of Magic

The magic spell may be contained in the ritual utterance of a formula, which is handed down from one to the other generation of magicians. Malinowski describes three elements associated with the magical formulas.

i) The first element is the phonetic effect, which results from imitations of natural sounds, such as the whistling of the wind, the sound of thunder, the roar of sea-waves.

- ii) The second element is the uttering of words, which point to the desired result of the particular magic. For example, in black magic the performer speaks about the symptoms of the disease, which is meant to kill the victim. Similarly, in healing magic, the performer describes the conditions associated with good health.
- iii) The third element refers to, according to Malinowski, the most important aspect of every spell. This comprises the mythological references to magic being handed down by ancestors and culture-heroes. Such mythological allusions provide a traditional setting of magic. Malinowski considers this element in more detail and focusses on the link between tradition and magical ritual.

Almost each magical rite has a story justifying its existence. The story generally describes when and where a particular magic rite became the property of a magician of a certain group of a family or clan. But this sort of story, Malinowski cautions, should not be confused with the origins of magic, because all magic is considered to be existing since the beginning. Magic is supposed to coexist with all rational efforts of human beings to control their surroundings. The spell or the magical rite takes care of what eludes their normal rational attempts. Malinowski gives examples of Central Australia where all magic is considered to be inherited from the times immemorial. In Melanesia, magic is supposed to come from a time when all human beings lived underground,

Secondly, magic is primarily associated with all-human activities, such as agriculture, fishing, hunting, trading, disease, death, and lovemaking. Malinowski points out that magic is mostly directed to human beings' relation to nature and all those activities, which affect this relationship. Magic is not as such directed to nature and is not conceived as a product of nature. It is also not derived from knowledge of natural laws. Rather it is primarily based on tradition and refers to human beings' power to achieve desired results.

This interpretation of magic leads Malinowski to attack those scholars who equated magic with phenomena like *mana* among the Melanesians or *wakan* among the North American Indians or *orenda* among the Iroquois.

### 23.5.1 *Mana* and Magic

Malinowski establishes that magic is a human possession. In other words it is localised in a particular person who exercises it under special instructions and in a traditionally instituted manner. He argues that then it cannot be a force akin to *mana*, which has been described as prevailing all around. It is not fixed in anything and can be conveyed in almost anything. Obviously, if magic is strictly localised in human beings and acts in a specified traditional manner, it cannot be equated with *mana* and similar ideas.

Further, he suggests that to understand native mentality one should first study the types of behaviour and then explain the local vocabulary with the help of their customs. He concludes that magic should not be taken to arise from an abstract idea of universal power, like *mana*. Malinowski emphasises that each type of magic is born of its own situation. It comes

out of the emotional tension created by certain situations. The spontaneous reaction of people and subsequent flow of ideas are the source of magic. All this so far sums up Malinowski's description of native ideas or native view of magic. This is that magic endows human beings with a power to control their surroundings.

Before moving to the next sub-section, do complete Check Your Progress 4. This will enhance your understanding of Malinowski's view of magic.

**Check Your Progress 4**

- i) What is the most common feature of different types of magic? Describe, in three lines, its three elements.

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- ii) Is magic akin to the faith in an all pervading spirit or power, commonly found in primitive tribes? Use two lines for your answer.

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**23.5.2 Magic and Experience**

Malinowski now explains as a sociological observer this belief in a power over certain things. He describes once again the situation in which magic rites are performed. Whenever a person engaged in a chain of practical activities comes to a standstill, i.e. he or she cannot do anything more to stop the negative outcome, then comes over a feeling of impotency. The feeling is one of not being able to turn the course of events in one's favour. Despite best efforts, the hunter is unable to kill the game, the sailor does not find the shoal or the gardener is unable to control the havoc caused by insects. What is one to do? The fear of losing control over one's surroundings creates tension, which leads one to some sort of activity. According to Malinowski, in this situation, one is driven to 'some substitute activity'. The person under tension or 'the sway of impotent fury' performs imaginary attacks at the enemy and utters words of anger against the enemy. Or, the separated lover would see the beloved in visions. The fisherman would see in imagination the multitude of fish in his net, he would invoke them by name.

Based on this reasoning, Malinowski concludes, "these reactions to overwhelming emotion or obsessive desire are natural response of man to such a situation, based on a universal psycho-physiological mechanism". These reactions take the form of magical rites. According to Malinowski, these are 'revealed to man in those passionate experiences, which are faced by him in the moments of his realisation of impotency of his rational actions'.

Here comes the question of the link between what is promised by performance of magical rites and what is actually achieved in real life? Malinowski gives an answer to this with 'one gain easily outweighs several

losses'. This means that the times when magic is successful are much more reckoned than those times when it fails. As magic is always held by some outstanding person of the group, it coincides with that person's skills, abilities and mental powers. The efficacy of magic is then dependent on the personal fame of the magician. In this way, myths associated with magic give it the character of a living force.

The failure in magic is accounted in terms of neglect in following the taboos and observances. Secondly, it is also explained in terms of stronger magic or counter-magic. Desire to achieve an ultimate control of one's surroundings and limit one's rational actions and subsequent impotency and substitute activities results in magical rites. Now counter-desire, for example, to own more property or power than your neighbour, gives rise to counter-magic. Malinowski gives examples from his Trobriand data and tells us that each magical act has a counter-magical act, which is supposed to destroy the effect of the initial rite of magic. A sorcerer who learns how to cause a disease has to, at the same time, learn the formula to cure the disease. So the dual forces, positive and negative, are an essential feature of magic and these help in explaining why a magical act may not sometimes bring the desired result.

#### **Activity 4**

Do you agree with Malinowski's claim that magic is a kind of 'substitute activity'? Write a note of two pages on reasons for an individual's resorting to a substitute activity

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## **23.6 SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES**

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Malinowski outlines, as a conclusion to the essay, relations between magic and science and between magic and religion.

### **23.6.0 Magic and Science**

Relation between these phenomena is shown by Malinowski in terms of both the similarity and difference. First we give the similarities.

#### **Similarities**

- i) Like science, magic has a specific aim related with human needs and instincts. Both are governed by a system of rules, which determine how a certain act can be effectively performed.
- ii) Both science and magic develop techniques of carrying out certain activities. On the basis of these similarities, Malinowski concludes that he would agree with James Frazer and call magic a pseudo-science. Then he outlines the following differences between science and magic.

#### **Differences**

- i) Science, as reflected in the primitive knowledge of tribals, is related with the general experience of everyday life. It is based on observation and reason over their interaction with nature. Magic, is on the other

hand, founded in particular experience of tense emotional states. In these states not the observation of nature but of one's own self or rather of impotency is crucial. It is the drama of emotions upon the human organism (see sub-section 23.5.3).

- ii) The basis of science is the conviction in validity of experience, effort and reason. But magic is based on the belief that one can still hope, one can still desire.
- iii) The corpus of rational knowledge is incorporated in a social setting and certain type of activities, which are clearly separable from the social setting, and activities related with the body of magical knowledge. On the basis of these differences, Malinowski concludes that science belongs to the domain of the profane while magic comprises half of the domain of the sacred.

### **23.6.1 Magic and Religion**

Just as Malinowski compares magic with, science, he shows the relationship between magic and religion. According to him the similarities between the two are as follows.

#### **Similarities**

- i) Both magic and religion belong to the area of sacred and are born and function amidst emotional tension.
- ii) Both phenomena provide an escape from emotional stress, which cannot be wished away on the basis of the primitive people's range of rational knowledge.
- iii) Mythological traditions closely surround both magic and religion. Taboos and practices associated with the two areas separate them from the domain of the profane.

#### **Differences**

Looking at the differences between religion and magic, we find the following areas of differences.

- i) Magical acts are a means to an end, which must follow them. Religious acts are self-contained acts, performed in self-fulfilment.
- ii) The art of magic has a clearly marked and limited technique in which spell, rite and the magician are the main elements. Religion has no such simple technique. It has many aspects and purposes and its rationale lies in the function of its belief and practice.
- iii) The magical belief concerns one's simple faith in one's power to bring about certain results on the basis of a particular spell. Religion concerns, on the other hand, with a whole range of supernatural powers.
- iv) Mythological tradition in religion is both complex and creative and focuses on tenets of belief. In magic, mythology centers around boastful accounts of what was in the beginning.



- v) Magical art is handed down, from generation to generation, from one magician to another, mostly in direct filiation (i.e. from father to son). Thus, it is confined to the specialists. In religion everyone takes an active part, for example every member of the community has to go through initiation. Similarly everyone has to go through the act of mourning and in due course, the mourner has also to be mourned. Again, spirits have significance for all and in after life everyone becomes a spirit. Becoming a spiritual medium is one specialised role in religion. But this is not a professional role, which can be learnt. This is only a personal gift.
- vi) In magic we have both positive and negative types. Because magic has practical implications in terms of direct results, the contrast between positive and negative magic assumes a significant role. In religion in its early stages, according to Malinowski, there is little distinction between beneficial and malevolent powers.

Complete Check Your Progress 5 so that you can make sure of your ability to demonstrate similarities and differences between religion and science on the one hand and religion on the other hand.

#### **Check Your Progress 5**

- i) Which two of the social phenomena of magic, science and religion are formed by a system of rules, which determine how a certain act can be effectively performed?
- ii) Which two of the social phenomena of magic, science and religion belong to the domain of sacred and are born and function amidst emotional tension?
- iii) Identify to which of the three social phenomena of magic, science and religion does each of the following statements relate?
- Based on the belief that one can still hope and desire.
  - Based on the conviction in validity of experience, effort and reason.
  - Particular experience of tense and emotional states.
  - Related to the general experience of life.
  - Has many aspects and purpose and its rationale lies in the function of its belief and practice.

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### **23.7 THE FUNCTION OF MAGIC, SCIENCE AND RELIGION**

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Finally, Malinowski returns to his favourite theme of showing cultural function of each phenomenon. The function of primitive knowledge is making the tribals familiar with their surroundings and enabling them to use natural resources. It sets them apart from all living species in the world.

The function of religion is to establish mental attitudes, e.g., respect for tradition, adjustment with nature, courage and confidence in struggle for survival and in the event of death.

The function of magic is to supply primitive people with a practical way out of difficulties faced by them in day-to-day pursuit of their survival. It provides them with the ability to carry on with life despite inevitable problems. In this way, Malinowski (1948: 9) argues, 'the function of magic is to ritualise man's optimism, to enhance his faith in the victory of hope over fear'.

In order to fully comprehend the function of magic, science and religion complete Activity 5.

#### **Activity 5**

Choose two examples of religious behaviour of a group of your choice. Show their functions in Malinowskian terms.

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## **23.8 LET US SUM UP**

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We began this unit with a discussion of the debate on magic, science and religion, during the time of Malinowski. This was followed by Malinowski's approach to the study of social phenomena of magic, science and religion. Summarising his essay on this theme, we described the domain of the Profane and the domain of the Sacred. The former dealt with his view of primitive knowledge which Malinowski considered as an example of the scientific attitude and rational outlook to one's surroundings. The latter included a consideration of the magical and religious beliefs and practices. Finally we presented Malinowski's view of similarities and differences between magic and science and between magic and religion, followed by a brief discussion of the function of magic, science and religion. Here, the attempt was to give you a concrete illustration of Malinowski's approach.

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## **23.9 KEY WORDS**

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<b>Animism</b>	In the context of Tylor's view of religion, it refers to belief in the existence of spirits separable from bodies.
<b>Nonce</b>	A person admitted to probationary membership in a religious ceremony.
<b>The Profane</b>	It refers to those areas of life, which are not concerned with religion or religious purposes. In other words, they deal with secular aspects.
<b>The Sacred</b>	It refers to those areas of life, which are related to religion. For Malinowski, the sacred includes magical rites, which are different from religious rites. So Malinowski's definition of this term is a more inclusive category.

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## **23.10 FURTHER READING**

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Malinowski, B., 1974. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Souvenir Press: London.

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## **23.11 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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### **Check Your Progress 1**

- i) Animism, in the context of Tylor's view of religion, refers to belief in spirits which are separable from bodies.
- ii) Frazer argues that the primitive people try to control nature for their day-to-day survival. They employ magic for this purpose. When their magic fails to achieve the desired ends they appeal to higher supernatural beings and this leads to emergence of religion.

### **Check Your Progress 2**

- i) This signified that the Trobriand islanders do not mix up the domain of secular activity of work with the domain of magical practices. The former domain represents their rational outlook to their surroundings while the latter represents their feelings of impotency over the unaccountable and unforeseen events in nature.
- ii) A rational outlook to one's surroundings does not imply an absence of faith in magic. Magic has the function of accounting for the unforeseen conditions of life while the rational thinking and actions help the people to actually control their surroundings.

### **Check Your Progress 3**

- i) The main aim of initiating ceremony among the primitive people is to initiate a novice into the mysteries of sacred traditions of their group.
- ii) The idea of immortality of soul helps the people to overcome the feelings of fear and sorrow caused by death.

### **Check Your Progress 4**

- i) The force of magical spells is the common feature of most types of magic. Its three elements are (i) the phonetic effect of ritual utterances, (ii) selection of words, in magical spells and (iii) references to culture-heroes or ancestors or other supernatural powers.
- ii) The faith in an all pervading spirit or power cannot be equated with magic because magic relates to only one aspect of social life whereas an all-prevailing power has to encompass all aspects.

### Check Your Progress 5

- i) Magic and Science
- ii) Magic and Religion
- iii)
  - a) Magic
  - b) Science
  - c) Science
  - d) Magic
  - e) Religion



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## **UNIT 24 CONCEPT OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE RADCLIFFE.BROWN**

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### **Structure**

- 24.0 Objectives
- 24.1 Introduction
- 24.2 Intellectual Influences
  - 24.2.0 The Field-work Tradition
  - 24.2.1 The Durkheimian Tradition : Radcliffe-Brown's 'Conversion'
- 24.3 The Concept of Social Structure in Radcliffe-Brown's Work
  - 24.3.0 Social Structure and Social Organisation
  - 24.3.1 Social Structure and Institutions
  - 24.3.2 Structural Continuity and Structural Form
- 24.4 The Structural System in Western Australia
  - 24.4.0 The Territorial Basis
  - 24.4.1 The Tribe
  - 24.4.2 The Moieties
  - 24.4.3 The Totemic Group
- 24.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 24.6 Key Words
- 24.7 Further Reading
- 24.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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### **24.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After going through this unit, you will be able to

- mention the major intellectual influences which helped shape Radcliffe-Brown's brand of social anthropology
- describe the concept of social structure and related concepts elaborated by Radcliffe-Brown
- see how these abstract concepts assume concrete shape through a case study presented by Radcliffe-Brown.

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### **24.1 INTRODUCTION**

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The previous two units have familiarised you with some of the important contributions of Bronislaw Malinowski. We now move on to the work of Malinowski's contemporary and academic rival, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. Radcliffe-Brown was three years Malinowski's senior and survived him

by eleven years. Together, these two men dominated contemporary British social anthropology. Whilst Malinowski, in the words of Adam Kuper (1973: 51), brought “new realism into social anthropology with his lively awareness of the flesh and blood interests behind custom..... Radcliffe-Brown..... brought a more rigorous battery of concepts to the aid of the new fieldworkers.” It is precisely one of these rigorous concepts that we will study in this unit, namely, the concept of social structure.

To make our task easier, we will first briefly trace the intellectual influences, which contributed to shaping Radcliffe Brown’s brand of social anthropology. This will be the first section.

In the second section, the major theme of this unit will be described, namely, Radcliffe-Brown’s understanding of social structure.

The third and final section will focus on a case study. We will briefly describe some structural features of tribes in Western Australia which were studied by Radcliffe-Brown. This will help clarify abstract ideas through concrete examples.

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## 24.2 INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

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Modern social anthropology, as Jain (1989: 1) puts it, is woven from the twin strands of the fact-finding, **empirical** ethnographic tradition, (about which you have studied in the previous units of this Block) on the one hand and the ‘holistic’, analytical tradition on the other. The former is represented by British and American anthropology, the latter by French social anthropology which was profoundly influenced by Emile Durkheim.

Social anthropology as practised by Radcliffe-Brown bears the stamp of both these traditions. Let us first consider the impact of the fieldwork tradition on Radcliffe-Brown’s work.

### 24.2.0 The Field-work Tradition

Cambridge University, England, where Radcliffe-Brown studied, was during his time going through an extremely creative and productive intellectual phase. Teachers and students freely shared and challenged each other’s views. Radcliffe-Brown became the first student of Anthropology of W.H.R. Rivers in 1904. Rivers and Haddon had participated in the famous ‘Torres Straits’ expedition, which you have read about earlier in Unit 23.

Under the guidance of Rivers and Haddon, Radcliffe-Brown was initiated into fieldwork. His first field studies (1906-08) dealt with the Andaman Islanders. He thus became a part of the new, empiricist tradition of British scientific anthropology. This was a major formative influence, which was to persist throughout his career.

Emile Durkheim’s path-breaking work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), had a profound impact on some British scholars. Radcliffe-Brown was one of them. Let us now go on to see why he was so attracted to the Durkheimian perspective.

### 24.2.1 The Durkheimian Tradition: Radcliffe-Brown's 'Conversion'

The contributions of Emile Durkheim have been systematically described to you in Block-3 of this course. The Durkheimian tradition, in the words of Adam Kuper (1975: 54), offered "...scientific method, the conviction that social life was orderly and susceptible to rigorous analysis, a certain detachment from individual passions..." Durkheim was optimistic that human beings would be able to lead a life that was both individual and social, in a properly organised society, i.e. a society based on '**organic solidarity**' (see key words).

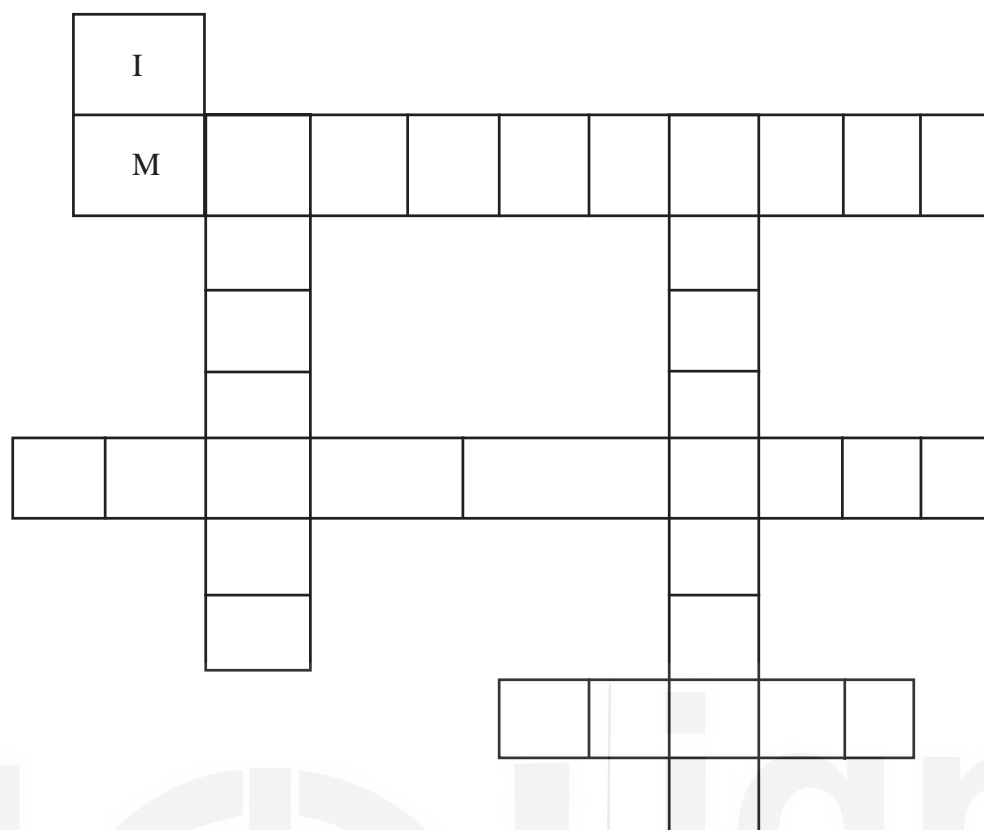
As you know, Durkheim advocated the study of 'social facts' in a sociological manner. He spoke of studying these facts objectively, without preconceived notions. In his view, society was basically a moral order. The concept of the 'collective conscience' was an important part of his work. Durkheim wanted to develop sociology on the lines of the natural sciences i.e. as an 'objective', rigorous science. All these ideas attracted Radcliffe-Brown. Durkheimian sociology combined with Radcliffe-Brown's admiration for the natural sciences resulted in his ideas about the ideal society of the future.

In a nutshell, the impact of the Durkheimian tradition marked a shift in emphasis in Radcliffe-Brown's work. The 'ethnographer' became a 'sociologist'. From mere gathering of descriptive, ethnographic information, an attempt was made by Radcliffe-Brown to analyse this information using sociological concepts. He tried to organise his data on comprehensive, theoretical lines. We will now go on to examine an important concept developed by Radcliffe-Brown, namely, the concept of social structure. But before we do so, why not check your progress by attempting a crossword-puzzle?

#### Check Your Progress 1

- i) With the help of the following clues, complete the crossword puzzle. To help you, the first puzzle has been solved.

D
U
R
K
H
E



### Clues

- 1) Down - The French sociologist whose ideas profoundly influenced Radcliffe-Brown.
- 2) Down - Name of the islands where Radcliffe-Brown conducted his first field studies.
- 3) Down - He was Radcliffe-Brown's teacher.
  - 1) Across - Radcliffe-Brown's contemporary and rival.
  - 2) Across - Radcliffe-Brown studied here.
  - 3) Across - For Durkheim, society was basically an order.

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## 24.3 THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN RADCLIFFE-BROWN'S WORK

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According to Radcliffe-Brown, the basic requirement of any science is a body of coherent concepts. These concepts are to be denoted by technical terms that are accepted and used in the same sense by all the students of the subject. For instance, physicists use terms like 'atom', 'molecule', 'combustion' etc.

The meanings and usages of these terms do not change from student to student. Can the same thing be said about sociology and social anthropology? Radcliffe-Brown points out that in anthropological literature, the same word is used in the same sense by different writers and many terms are used without precise definition. This shows the immaturity of the science.



He says that confused, unscientific thinking may be avoided by constantly keeping in mind a clear picture of the nature of the empirical reality to be studied. All concepts and theories must be linked to this reality. According to Radcliffe-Brown (1958: 167), “the empirical reality with which social anthropology has to deal, by description, by analysis and in comparative studies is the process of social life of a certain limited region during a certain period of time”. What does this “process of social life” consist of? Well, it involves the various actions of human beings, particularly joint actions and interactions. For example, in rural Indian society, we could speak of agricultural activities as ‘joint actions’. The activities of youth clubs, women’s organisations, co-operative societies etc. also imply joint actions.

To provide a description of social life, the social anthropologist must identify certain general features. For example, when a sociologist studies agricultural activities in rural India, he/she will try to derive its general features. How, when and by whom are these activities performed? How do various persons co-operate and interact during the processes of sowing, transplanting, harvesting, threshing and marketing the produce? Some general features that the sociologist could identify could include the composition of agricultural labourers, the role played by women and so on. It is these generalised descriptions which constitute the data of the science. These may be obtained through various methods - participant observation, historical records etc.

Do these general features remain the same over time? Well, different features may change at different rates. Taking the example given above, we can see that agricultural activities have exhibited a number of changes over the years. The availability of agricultural labourers has declined to some extent. Unlike in the past, they resist brutal exploitation. Increasingly, machines, fertilisers, pesticides etc. are being used. Despite these changes, we can still say that in most parts of the country, women continue to do back-breaking work on the field without getting due recognition for it. Any anthropological description, which accounts for changes over a period of time, is termed a ‘diachronic’ description. A ‘synchronic’ description, on the other hand, refers to the features of social life at a particular period of time.

Rigorous, clear concepts will, according to Radcliffe-Brown, help social anthropology to develop as a distinctive science. It enables generalisations based on synchronic and diachronic explanations of social life. In this context, the concept of social structure becomes an important one, helping us to see the entire web of social relationships in a systematic way. Thus, we can gain insights into the way society works and stays integrated.

### **24.3.0 Social Structure and Social Organisation**

As Radcliffe-Brown (1958: 168) puts it, “the concept of structure refers to an arrangement of parts or components related to one another in some sort of larger unity.” Thus, the structure of the human body at first appears as an arrangement of various tissues and organs. If we go deeper, it is ultimately an arrangement of cells and fluids.

In social structure, the basic elements are human beings or persons involved in social life. The arrangement of persons in relation to each other is the social structure. For instance, persons in our country are arranged into castes. Thus caste is a structural feature of Indian social life. The structure of a family is the relation of parents, children, grandparents etc. with each other. Hence, for Radcliffe-Brown, structure is not an abstraction but empirical reality itself. It must be noted that Radcliffe-Brown's conception of social structure differs from that of other social anthropologists. You may read more about the diverse uses of this concept in Box 24.1.

How does one seek out the structural features of social life? Radcliffe-Brown says we must look out for social groups of all kinds, and examine their structure. Within groups, people are arranged in terms of classes, categories, castes etc. A most important structural feature, in Radcliffe-Brown's opinion, is the arrangement of people into dyadic relationships or person-to-person relationships, e.g. master-servant or mother's brother-sister's son. A social structure is fully apparent during inter-group interactions, and interpersonal interactions. Having had a preliminary look at the concept of social structure, let us see what Radcliffe-Brown meant by social organisation. Structure, as we have seen, refers to arrangements of persons. Organisation refers to arrangements of activities. For instance, whilst studying this Block you have organised your activities, i.e. reading a particular section, attempting the exercises, referring to keywords whenever necessary etc. This is organisation at the individual level. Social organisation is for Radcliffe-Brown (1958: 169) "the arrangement of activities of two or more persons adjusted to give a united combined activity". For instance, a cricket team consists of bowlers, bat-persons, field-persons and a wicket-keeper whose combined activities make the game possible.

#### **Box 24.1 The Concept of Social Structure**

In the decade following World War II, the concept of social structure became very fashionable in social anthropology. The concept has a long history, though, and has been used by scholars in different senses.

- i) The original English meaning of the word structure refers to building constructions. The concept of structure in the sense of building or construction can be discerned in early Marxist literature. Marx spoke of the relations of production as constituting the economic 'structure'. Marx and Engels were profoundly influenced by the evolutionist Morgan whose book *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity* (1871) may be described as the first anthropological study of social structure.
- ii) By the 16th century the word structure came to be used in anatomy. Herbert Spencer, who had an anatomical image of society in mind, brought the terms 'structure' and 'function' into sociology. This image is also to be found in the work of Durkheim from whom Radcliffe-Brown drew many of his ideas. Following Radcliffe-Brown a number of British scholars like Evans-Pritchard, Fortes and Forde concentrated on certain formal aspects of, society like the political structure and kinship structure.

iii) Another dimension of the concept of structure can be seen in the work of the French structuralist Levi-Strauss. His view of structure has been drawn from linguistics and denotes an abstract, analytical model against which empirical systems are compared. Certain patterns or regularities are then discerned and explained.

Radcliffe-Brown illustrates the concepts of structure and organisation with reference to a modern army. To begin with, the structure consists of arrangement of persons into groups: divisions, regiments, companies etc. These groups have an internal arrangement of their own, namely ranks. Thus we have corporals, majors, colonels, brigadiers etc.

The organisation of the army or arrangement of activities can be seen in the allocation of various activities to various persons and groups. Manning the borders of the land, helping the Government during times of national calamity etc. are some of the activities of an army.

Complete Activity 1 and try to inter relate the concept of social structure.

#### **Activity 1**

Study any one of the following in terms of their social structure and social organization, (i) hospital, (ii) a village panchayat, (iii) a municipal corporation. Write a note of about two pages and compare it, if possible, with the notes of other students in your Study Centre.

### **24.3.1 Social Structure and Institutions**

One of the basic premises underlying a social relationship (which, as we have seen, is the building block of social structure) is the expectation that persons will conform to certain norms or rules. An institution refers to an established, socially recognised system of norms and behaviour patterns concerned with some aspect of social life. A society's family-related institutions, for example, set down acceptable patterns of behaviour to which family members are expected to conform. In our society, a child is expected to show respect to the parents; the parents are expected to support and care for the child as well as aged members of the family and so on.

Institutions, in Radcliffe-Brown's (1958:175) words, "define for a person how he is expected to behave, and also how he may expect others to behave". Of course, individuals do violate these rules from time to time and various **sanctions** exist to cope with deviations. According to Radcliffe-Brown, social structure has to be described in terms of the institutions, which regulate the relationships between persons or groups. As he puts it, "the structural features of social life of a particular region consist of all those continuing arrangements of persons in institutional relationships, which are exhibited in the actions, and interactions that in their totality make up the social life." (1958: 175).

### **24.3.2 Structural Continuity and Structural Form**

If, as Radcliffe-Brown describes it, social structure refers to an arrangement of persons, we could conclude that once the persons die or disappear,

structure must also disappear. This, however, is not the case. Individuals may come and go, but structure persists or continues. For example, social groups, classes, castes, have an ever-changing membership. They lose members by death and gain new ones by birth. For example, the Lok Sabha may lose members who may die, resign, or lose the next election, but they will soon be replaced by new ones. A tribal chief may die, but soon a successor takes his place. At this stage, we must highlight the distinction made by Radcliffe-Brown between social structure and structural form.

As we have seen above, the social structure is always in a state of flux. Individuals are born and die, the composition of society is ever-changing. Radcliffe-Brown argues that although social structures are in flux, the structural form is comparatively stable. This structural form is reflected in the 'social usages' or norms widely observed. These social usages persist, even though persons come and go. The stability of this structural form depends on how well integrated its parts are (e.g. family, educational system, political system etc.) and the performance by these parts of the special tasks necessary to maintain it. For instance, the special task of the family is the rearing and socialisation of children. Educational institutions impart training, the political system is concerned with governance. These tasks refer to 'functions' of the parts of the system. We will study Radcliffe-Brown's notion of 'function' in detail in the next unit. As a word of caution it may be said that Radcliffe-Brown's distinction between social structure and social form is not made absolutely clear even in his own writings, where the latter comes out as synonymous with social organisation.

In a nutshell, 'social structure', an important social anthropological concept developed by Radcliffe-Brown, refers to empirically observable phenomena, namely, arrangements or relationships of the members of a society. There is an organisational aspect as well, which refers to a pattern of arranging the activities people engage in. Social structure involves institutions, which define socially acceptable rules and modes of interpersonal behaviour. Social structure is constantly in a state of flux, but the structural form an abstract concept taking into account social usages is relatively stable. Its stability depends on how effectively its component parts carry out their 'functions'.

Thus far, we have been talking about social structure in a rather abstract way. The best way to make these ideas crystal clear is through an example. Radcliffe-Brown's field studies took him to various parts of the world from the Andaman Islands to Africa and to Australia. We will now focus upon the structural system of the tribes of the Western Australia as studied by Radcliffe-Brown. This will clearly demonstrate to you how social relationships help to build up the social structure.

Before going to the next section complete Check Your Progress 2.

### **Check Your Progress 2**

- i) Answer the following questions in two sentences each.
  - a) What did Radcliffe-brown mean by 'Social Structure' and 'Social Organisation'?

.....  
.....  
b) What are social ‘institutions’? Give an example.

.....  
.....  
ii) Mark whether the following statements are True (T) or False (F).

- a) People never violate institutions. (T/F)
- b) The social structure is extremely stable whilst structural form is in a permanent state of flux. (T/F)
- c) According to Radcliffe-Brown, social anthropology can become a science only when it develops rigorous concepts. (T/F)

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## 24.4 THE STRUCTURAL SYSTEM IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Let us look some of bases of the social structure of these tribes as systematically set down by Radcliffe-Brown.

### 24.4.0 The Territorial Basis

The essential basis of the structure of Western Australian tribal society, says Radcliffe-Brown, was the division of the country into numerous distinct territories. Each male belonged to his distinct territory from birth to death. His sons and their sons inherited this territorial identity. The men connected to a particular territory formed a “clan”, which was of basic importance in the social structure. Where did women fit in? Well, girls belonged to their fathers’ clans. Clan exogamy being a strict rule, they married men from other clans to which they then belonged.

The men of a clan, along with their wives and children formed a ‘horde’, which was identified by its distinct territory. The horde was an economically self-sufficient and politically autonomous unit. Elders held authority. Its total population was small, usually not more than 50 persons.

The horde was sub-divided into families, of the nuclear type. Each family had its own home, hearth and food supply and was dominated by the male. It dissolved upon his death. Even though the family was temporary, the clan was a permanent group. The horde, however, was in a state of flux. The male members were its nucleus, but females married out and new ones married into the horde. Briefly, the ‘clan’ consists of the men identified with a particular territory. The ‘horde’ refers to the men of a clan along with their wives and children, the wives having earlier been members of their fathers’ clans.

### 24.4.1 The Tribe

A number of clans having similar customs and language formed a linguistic community or tribe. Radcliffe-Brown points out that unlike some other

regions, these tribes were not politically united, nor did they come together for collective action. Different hordes and tribes had an important link, namely, the kinship structure. As Radcliffe-Brown puts it, the kinship structure was "...a complex arrangement of dyadic, person-to-person, relationships. A particular man was closely connected through his mother with her clan and its members. He could always visit their territory and live with the horde though he was not and could not become a member of the clan. Different members of a single clan were connected in this way with different other clans". Similarly, a man had relations with his grandmother's clan, his wife's clan and would probably keep in touch with the clans his sisters had married into. Thus, the kinship structure involved a large number and range of social relationships.

#### 24.4.2 The Moieties

Read this sub-section very slowly and carefully because it may be unfamiliar and confusing. The society Radcliffe-Brown was speaking of, namely, western Australian tribes society was divided into two 'moieties'. Moieties are the two broad divisions into which society is divided. Each clan belongs to either one of them. These moieties may be referred to as I and II. Further, society is divided into two alternating generation divisions. Let us call them 'x' and 'y'. If your father belongs to generation 'x', then you will be part of 'y' and your children will be 'x' and so on. Therefore, a clan always consists of persons of both divisions. Society is thus divided into four "sections", namely, Ix, Iy, IIx and IIy. Radcliffe-Brown mentions some of the names given to these sections, e.g. Banaka, Burong, Karimera and Paldjeri.

In accordance with the tribal laws, a man must find a wife in the opposite moiety in the same generation division, thus a man of Iy must find a wife from IIy. For example, in the Kareira tribe, a man from Banaka section can only marry a Burong woman.

#### Activity 2

Select any five of your married relatives (e.g., mother, brother, sister, mother's brother's son/daughter, father's brother's son/daughter etc.) How were their mates selected? Is there any relationship between the families concerned? Write down your findings, and compare them, if possible, with the notes of other students at your Study Centre.

#### 24.4.3 The Totemic Group

Another basis of social structure is the totem. As you have studied in Blocks 3 and 5 of this course, the totemic object is regarded as the common ancestor of clan members.

Each clan has its own sacred totem-centres, myths, rites and ceremonies. The totem lends solidarity and persistence. Radcliffe-Brown shows how some totemic ceremonies (e.g. those for the **initiation** of boys) in fact lead to the co-operation of a number of clans. These meetings of friendly clans mark out the religious structure of society. Co-operation during ceremonies also implies some amount of political unity, as these clans have forgotten

any existing differences and have co-operated on the basis of mutual trust and friendship.

What can we conclude from the above section? We can say that the structural description provided by Radcliffe-Brown reveals a number of important things. Structural description must take into consideration not just social groups (e.g. family, clan, horde) but also the entire gamut of socially fixed dyadic relationships, as has been done by Radcliffe-Brown in the description of the kinship system of the Australian aborigines which you have just read about.

Radcliffe-Brown's concept of social structure, though sometimes criticised as being too general has been ably used by him in his studies. By focussing on the formal aspects of social life, i.e., the way social life is built up or constructed, he provides a valuable corrective to the extremely personal kind of description given by Malinowski.

Indeed, the work of these two men who disliked each other intensely is in fact complementary. As Adam Kuper puts (1973: 51) it, "some saw Radcliffe-Brown as the classic to Malinowski's romantic".

It is now time to complete Check Your Progress 3.

### **Check Your Progress 3**

Match the following items.

- |           |   |
|-----------|---|
| a) Burong | i) Linguistic community                     |
| b) Tribe  | ii) Economic and political self-sufficiency |
| c) Clan   | iii) Territorial identity                   |
| d) Horde  | iv) Kaieira tribe                           |

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## **24.5 LET US SUM UP**

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The theme of this unit was the concept of social structure, as described by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. We began with a brief look at the intellectual influences, which helped shape his distinctive brand of social anthropology. We focussed on the impact on Radcliffe-Brown of the fieldwork and Durkheimian traditions.

Moving to the main theme, i.e., social structure, we defined social structure and social organisation. We then spoke of social institutions, which are an important component of structural description. We then considered how social structure, though in a state of flux, has continuity. In this connection, we spoke of structural form as well.

In order to make these new ideas clear, we moved onto a structural description of some Western Australian tribes studied by Radcliffe-Brown. We saw some of the bases of structural arrangements like territory, tribes, moiety, and totem.

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## 24.6 KEY WORDS

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<b>Empirical</b>	Based on observation and experience
<b>Ethnography</b>	Collecting and compiling information regarding the life, customs, institutions, social relationships etc. of a particular social group
<b>Initiation ceremonies</b>	Ceremonies through which the young members of a group are ritually made a part of adult social life, which involves certain rights and duties (e.g. <i>janeu</i> or thread-ceremony amongst Hindus)
<b>Organic Solidarity</b>	A concept put forward by Durkheim, referring to a form of social solidarity which gives full scope to individuality and personal creativity
<b>Sanctions</b>	Rewards or punishments given by society for conformity or non-conformity to social rules

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## 24.7 FURTHER READING

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Radcliffe-Brown, A.R., 1958. Social Structure. In M.N. Srinivas (ed.). *Method in Social Anthropology*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

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## 24.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- Down
- 1) Durkheim
  - 2) Andaman Islands
  - 3) W.H.R. Rivers

- Across
- 1) Malinowski
  - 2) Cambridge
  - 3) Moral

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) a) By 'social structure', Radcliffe-Brown referred to patterns of social relationships entered into by individuals or persons in a society. By 'social organisation', he referred to the arrangements of the activities undertaken by a group.  
b) Social institutions are socially prescribed ways and rules of behaviour involving the expectations of persons entering into an interaction, e.g. in a classroom, teacher is expected to give a lesson, students are expected to pay attention.



- ii) a) F
- b) F
- c) T

**Check Your Progress 3**

- a) iv)
- b) i)
- c) iii)
- d) ii)



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## UNIT 25 CONCEPT OF FUNCTION — RADCLIFFE-BROWN

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Concept of Function-  
Radcliffe-Brown

### Structure

- 25.0 Objectives
- 25.1 Introduction
- 25.2 The Concept of Function
  - 25.2.0 Structure and Function
  - 25.2.1 Functional Unity
  - 25.2.2 'Eunomia' and 'Dysnomia'
  - 25.2.3 The Historical Method and the Functional Method
- 25.3 Some Examples of Radcliffe-Brown's Structural-Functionalism
  - 25.3.0 Ceremonial Weeping in the Andaman Islands
  - 25.3.1 The Study of Totemism
  - 25.3.2 Kinship in Primitive Societies
  - 25.3.3 The Mother's Brother
- 25.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 25.5 Keywords
- 25.6 Further Reading
- 25.7 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 25.0 OBJECTIVES

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After studying this unit, you should be able to

- describe the concept of 'function' put forward by Radcliffe-Brown
- give examples from Radcliffe-Brown's work to show how he used the concept of structural-functionalism.

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### 25.1 INTRODUCTION

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The earlier unit (unit 24) familiarised you with the concept of structure as elaborated by Radcliffe-Brown. In this unit, we move on to a related concept, namely, that of function. These two concepts, i.e. 'structure' and 'function' are really inseparable from each other. The study of structure makes sense only in terms of function and function may be observed within the format of structure. Together, these two concepts help build up the 'structural-functional' mode of sociological investigation. As you have read in Units 22 and 23, Malinowski made use of the concept of function to understand society. The concept was further developed by Radcliffe-Brown as we shall see in this unit. By linking function with social structure, Radcliffe-Brown made a theoretical leap that Malinowski failed to achieve.

This unit consists of two sections. The first section will systematically bring out the various facets of the concept of 'function' as described by Radcliffe-Brown.

In the second section, we will focus on examples from Radcliffe-Brown's work, which highlight the concept of structural-functionalism.

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## **25.2 THE CONCEPT OF FUNCTION**

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As you have studied earlier in this course, the concept of function is an important one in the science of biology. The various parts or components that make up the structure of a living organism have a definite role to play in maintaining it, in keeping it alive and healthy.

Emile Durkheim systematically applied this concept in the study of social institutions. He spoke of function in terms of the needs of the social organism. Radcliffe-Brown substitutes the idea of 'needs' with necessary conditions of existence. In other words, he assumes that human societies must fulfil certain basic conditions so that they may exist. Just as the animal must breathe, eat, excrete and reproduce, so must the social organism carry out certain activities. These 'necessary conditions for existence' can, according to Radcliffe-Brown, be discovered by the proper kind of scientific enquiry. Let us now elaborate the connection between structure and function as described by Radcliffe-Brown

### **25.2.0 Structure and Function**

How do structure and function interact in the case of living organisms? The process by which the structure of the organism is maintained, is called 'life'. The life-process involves the activities and interactions of the various cells and organs that make up the organism. In other words, it is the functioning of the various constituent parts of the organism that help maintain the structure. If our lungs or stomachs or hearts were to suddenly stop functioning, what would happen to the structure of our bodies? It would collapse and we would die. As Radcliffe-Brown (1971: 179) puts it, "...the life of an organism is conceived as the functioning of its structure. It is through and by the continuity of the functioning that the continuity of the structure is preserved"

Let us turn now from organic to social life. The continuity of the social structure is maintained by the process of social life. Social life consists of the activities and interaction of various human beings and of the groups of which they are a part. Social life, in other words refers to the way in which the social structure functions. The function of any recurrent social activity is the part it plays in maintaining the continuity of the social structure. For example, marriage is a recurrent social activity. Through marriage, individuals of the opposite sex are brought together and society legitimises their sexual relationship. Children may be born and new members are added to society. Thus, by providing a socially acceptable outlet for sexual relations and providing a legitimate way through which society obtains new members, marriage contributes or performs a function in maintaining social structure. In Radcliffe-Brown's (1971: 180) own words, "the concept of function .....thus involves the notion of a structure consisting of a set of relations amongst unit entities, the continuity of the structure being maintained by a life process made up of the activities of the constituent units"

Let us further emphasise the interconnections between social structure and function. Radcliffe-Brown points out that in the case of an animal organism, structure can to some extent be observed independent of function e.g., we can study the human skeleton in terms of the way in which the bones are arranged, their differing shapes and sizes etc, without considering their function. But in studying human society 'structure' and 'function' cannot be separated.

According to Radcliffe-Brown (1971: 181), "Some of the features of social structure, such as the geographical distribution of individuals and groups can be directly observed, but most of the social relations which, in their totality constitute the structure, such as relations of father and son, buyer and seller, ruler and subject, cannot be observed except in the social activities in which the relations are functioning". In other words, 'social morphology' (i.e. the study of the kinds of social structure, their similarities, differences and classification) and 'social physiology' (the study of the way social structures function) are interdependent for Radcliffe-Brown

Let us now first complete Check Your Progress 1 and then discuss an important idea expressed by Radcliffe-Brown, namely, the 'functional unity' of the social system.

### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Complete the following sentences.
  - a) Whilst Durkheim spoke of 'needs', Radcliffe-Brown used the term .....
  - b) According to Radcliffe-Brown, the life of an organism is the .....
- ii) State whether the following are 'True' (T) or 'False' (F)
  - a) Marriage is a private affair, having nothing to do with social structure. (T/F)
  - b) It is not possible to observe the structure of a biological organism independent of function. (T/F)
  - c) The study of social morphology and social physiology is interconnected, according to Radcliffe-Brown. (T/F)

#### 25.2.1 Functional Unity

As we have studied above, the function of social usage or activity refers to the contribution it makes to the functioning of the total social system. This implies that the social system has a certain kind of unity, which Radcliffe-Brown terms as 'functional unity'. By this he means a condition in which all the parts of the social system work together in a harmonious, consistent fashion i.e. without producing persistent conflicts which cannot be resolved or regulated. For instance, if we take up the example of Indian society in Pre-British India, we may say that the various parts of the social system, e.g. village organisation, caste, joint family etc. worked together in a consistent fashion. They complemented each other and contributed to maintaining the existing social structure.

We have so far been restricting our discussion to the positive functions of social institutions, namely, their role in maintaining the social structure. Let us now turn to the possibility of dysfunction as described by Radcliffe-Brown.

### 25.2.2 'Eunomia' and 'Dysnomia'

The science of pathology deals with the problem of organic dysfunction, in other words, disease, when some part of the organism fails to perform its function adequately, disease results, which, if unchecked, may lead to death. In the case of organic structures, we can identify strictly objective criteria which can help us to distinguish disease from health, or pathological from normal. For instance, we can say that if the body temperature of an individual rises above 98° Fahrenheit, he/she is ill, or if the stomach secretes more than a certain amount of acid, the individual might suffer from ulcers. In other words, we can diagnose disease on the basis of certain standards or rules. Radcliffe-Brown points out that an attempt to apply the notion of health and disease to society and the state was made by the Greeks of the fifth century B.C. They distinguished 'eunomia' (good order, social health) from 'dysnomia' (disorder, social ill-health). In the nineteenth century, Durkheim tried to understand social pathology with the help of the concept of 'anomie'. Radcliffe-Brown too adopts the terms 'eunomia' and 'dysnomia'. He points out that societies do not fall ill and die in the same sense as animals do, and accepts that it is not possible to have definite, objective criteria to determine the 'health' of society, because the science of human society, according to him, is not mature enough to do so.

For Radcliffe-Brown, the eunomia of a society refers to the harmonious working together of its parts or, in other words, functional unity or inner consistency of the system. Dysnomia, on the other hand is a condition of functional disunity or inconsistency. A society thrown into a state of dysnomia rarely dies, but instead struggles towards a new state of eunomia or social health. In the process, it might even change its structural type.

These concepts in Radcliffe-Brown's view are particularly relevant for social anthropologists who in the course of their investigations come across tribes whose social structures have been thrown into disarray with the onslaught of the outside world, particularly Western domination. Let us now see what Radcliffe Brown says about the use of the functional method in studying society, particularly primitive society.

In order to fully understand the terms 'eunomia' and 'dysnomia', let us now complete Activity 1.

#### Activity 1

Is Indian society in a state of 'eunomia' or 'dysnomia'? Substantiate your views with the help of an essay, of 500 words. Compare your views if possible, with that of other students at your -Study Centre.

### 25.2.3 The Historical Method and the Functional Method

Radcliffe-Brown mentions two methods for the interpretation of cultural materials, namely, the historical and functional methods. The historical

method concentrates on the process of historical development of a culture, in other words, on how the culture has come to be what it is.

This method is useful only when the society to be studied has historical records. In the case of primitive societies with no historical records, this method proves deficient. The result may be conjectural or speculative history in other words, guesswork. This is not a particularly useful exercise.

The functional method of interpretation, says Radcliffe- Brown, rests on the assumption that culture is an integrated system. Each element of the culture has specific function to perform in the life of the community. This method assumes that there are certain general laws of function, which are valid for all human societies and tries to discover and verify these laws with the help of logical, scientific methods.

It must be noted that Radcliffe-Brown sees both these methods as complementary in sociological investigations. He does not discard the historical method but points out its limitations in studying primitive societies.

We have just seen how Radcliffe-Brown conceptualises social functions as the contribution made by the constituents of the social structure to maintaining the life and health of the society. We have studied the notion of ‘functional unity’, ‘eunomia’, ‘dysnomia’ and the use of the functional method in social-anthropological investigation. Let us now take a look at how Radcliffe-Brown uses the concept of function in studying actual social realities. We will focus upon the function of ‘ceremonial weeping’ amongst the Andaman Islanders, the study of totemism, kinship in primitive societies and on the relationship between the mother’s brother and sister’s son in certain primitive communities.

But before turning to the next section (25.3), let us complete Check Your Progress 2.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- i) Answer the following questions in three sentences.
  - a) What does Radcliffe-Brown mean by the ‘functional unity’ of society?  
.....  
.....  
.....
  - b) How does a society respond to ‘dysnomia’, according to Radcliffe-Brown?  
.....  
.....  
.....
- ii) State whether the following are ‘True’ (T) or ‘False’ (F)
  - a) The historical method is especially effective in the study of primitive society. (T/F)

- b) The functional method studies culture as an integrated whole with the help of speculation and conjecture. (T/F)
- c) According to Radcliffe-Brown, the historical and functional methods are in complete opposition to one another. (T/F)

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### **25.3 SOME EXAMPLES OF RADCLIFFE-BROWN'S STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM**

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Radcliffe-Brown is more than just a 'functionalist', he is a 'structural functionalist'. By this we mean that he is concerned not just with the way customs and social institutions fulfil certain needs or conditions of existence. He is also concerned with the connection between social relationships of various kinds. His method of structural-functionalism is best understood through some examples. Note how he combines in the following examples the use of the concepts of social structure and function in arriving at explanation.

In his work, *The Andaman Islanders*, Radcliffe-Brown (1933: 230) writes: "Every custom and belief plays some determinate part in the social life of the community, just as every organ of a living body plays some part in the general life of the organism". It is against this background that you will be able to understand how he explains ceremonial weeping amongst the Andaman Islanders. For more details about, the Andaman Islanders listen to the audio-programme on Radcliffe-Brown.

#### **25.3.0 Ceremonial Weeping in the Andaman Islands**

Andamanese ceremonies are marked by formal weeping. Andamanese weep, ceremonially on a number of occasions, e.g. when friends and relatives are reunited after a long separation, after a death, during marriage and initiation ceremonies, peace making ceremonies and so on.

Radcliffe-Brown holds that the purpose underlying all ceremonials is the expression and transmission of sentiments, which help to regulate individual, behaviour in conformity with the needs of society. Hence, Radcliffe-Brown emphasises the importance of probing the meaning of the custom. How is this to be done? Well, in the first place, one can take account of the explanations of the various members of society. Further, one can compare the different contexts or situations in which the custom appears, and abstract its real significance.

Formal weeping, Radcliffe-Brown concludes, takes place in situations in which social relations which have been disturbed or interrupted are about to be resumed. For instance, when long-lost friends meet, ceremonial weeping marks the fact that the long separation is over, and the friendship will resume once more. Similarly, ceremonial weeping at funerals marks the final departure of the deceased. Soon, life will have to go on as usual; the normal relations and activities will be resumed in this manner, ceremonial weeping has definite role or function to play in the life of that society. We shall now discuss how Radcliffe-Brown views totemism as a way of expressing the structure of relationships.

### Activity 2

Observe and list down the various ceremonies performed in a marriage in your community. Select any two. What do these signify? What function do they play? Write down your findings in about a page, and compare them, if possible, with those of other students at your Study Centre.

#### 25.3.1 The Study of Totemism

As you have studied in Block 3 (unit 12) and Block 5 (unit 19) of this course, totemism refers to the way in which human beings relate themselves to some natural object from which they claim descent. In the words of Kuper (1975: 74), “In totemism a specific group within a society adopts a ritual attitude towards a natural species or object”. Durkheim argues that totemism is a way in which collective sentiments are expressed and ritualised through symbolism, and this symbolisation helps to maintain group solidarity. But Durkheim does not touch upon a crucial question, namely, why are natural objects selected as totems?

This is precisely what Radcliffe-Brown tries to explore. He observes in his Australian field-studies that some tribes in New South Wales are divided into two exogamous **moieties**. These are named after two birds, the eaglehawk and crow. Eaglehawk men marry crow women and vice-versa. Other such dual divisions have been found in Australia which are also named after pairs of birds or animals. These pairs of birds or animals are represented in myths as being opponents in a conflict. Despite this opposition, there is also some kind of fundamental similarity or resemblance. In the case of eaglehawk and crow, both are meat-eating birds. Interestingly enough, the relationship between moieties too is one of alliance and competition; they are paired and opposed at one and the same time.

Thus, Radcliffe-Brown sees totemism as more than just a technique of maintaining group solidarity, (i.e., its function) but also as a way in which the social opposition between groups is expressed (i.e., the structure of relationships). He has thus laid the foundation for much of the future work undertaken by structuralists who use the notion of ‘opposition’ to provide interesting interpretations of social usages. The work of Levi-Strauss may be cited in this context.

Let us move now to a brief appraisal of Radcliffe-Brown’s work on kinship.

#### 25.3.2 Kinship in Primitive Societies

The study of kinship is Radcliffe-Brown’s specialisation. His work in this area is path breaking for two reasons:

- a) Earlier studies of kinship were basically exercises in speculation and conjectural history, e.g. the theories of ‘primitive promiscuity’ (see unit 22). Radcliffe-Brown tries to make sense of kinship systems in terms their contemporary relevance for the concerned societies.
- b) Since the kinship system provided the major organisational principle for most primitive communities, it is imperative to understand its



principles. By focussing on this topic, Radcliffe- Brown contributes a great deal in helping students of social anthropology understand the peoples they studied.

Radcliffe-Brown is not merely interested in the usages, which shape the relationships between kin, but also in the terms used to denote kin, i.e., kinship terminology. Further, he concentrates on 'classificatory' systems of kinship terminology, wherein kin outside the circle of family are also classified along with members of the family. For example, mother's sister, though outside the circle of the patrilineal family, is nonetheless classified as 'mother', Radcliffe-Brown identifies three basic principles of the classificatory system of kinship terminology. These are,

- a) **The unity of the sibling group** — Here, brothers and sisters share a feeling of solidarity and were treated as a unit by outsiders. My mother's sister is also addressed as 'mother', my mother's brother is like a 'male mother' (see sub-section 25.3.4).
- b) **The unity of the lineage group** — A lineage refers to the descendants in a line (traced either through male or female) of a single ancestor. Like siblings, lineage members show solidarity and are treated as a single unit by outsiders.
- c) **The 'generation principle'** — It is observed that in all kinship systems, there is a certain distance or tension between members of succeeding generations. For example, my mother has to socialise me, hence she will try to discipline or control me. However, as Radcliffe-Brown points out, members of alternating generations (grandparents and grandchildren) tend to share easy and friendly relationships. In many societies it is believed that the grandchild replaces the grandparent in the social system. Kinship terminology in some cases (e.g. **the Hawaiian systems** - see Keywords for details) use generational combinations and oppositions to classify kin.

Although studying kinship terminology certainly provided interesting insights into the way kinship worked, Radcliffe-Brown did not neglect the social relationships that were the building-blocks of the kinship system. These relationships were shaped by solidarity and opposition. A reflection of this can be clearly seen in 'joking relationships' in which Radcliffe-Brown was very much interested. What is a 'joking relationship'? It is a relaxed and friendly relationship between kin marked by an exchange of jokes (often with sexual overtones) and friendly insults. Junod (1912-13), in his report on the Thonga of Mozambique, describes the joking relationship between a man and his mother's father.

Radcliffe-Brown, dismissing Junod's conjectural explanation of the phenomenon, focussed on the relationship between mother's brother and sister's son (see Radcliffe-Brown's *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, 1971). He chose to locate the problem of joking relationships in the context of alliance between members of socially separated groups. Joking relationships serve to protect the delicate relationships between persons who are bound together in one set of ties and yet separated by other ties for example, members of different lineages are socially separated

from each other. But if they marry each other, they are also allied. Joking thus is one way of defusing the tensions of certain delicate relationships. Another response is avoidance or extreme respect. In Radcliffe-Brown's own words, "I once asked an Australian native why he had to avoid his mother-in-law, and his reply was because she is my best friend in the world; she has given me my wife. The mutual respect between son-in-law and parents-in-law is a mode of friendship. It prevents conflict that might arise through divergence of interest".

### Activity 3

Make a list of all the joking and avoidance relationships among kinspersons that exist in your own society.

In a nutshell, Radcliffe-Brown gave a new impetus to kinship studies by firmly rejecting speculative hypothesis and focussing upon the structure of social relationships in the kinship network and the way these operated in balancing tensions and integrating society. We will now briefly discuss Radcliffe-Brown's special interest in the relationship between mother's brother and sister's son in some primitive communities.

### 25.3.3 The Mother's Brother

Let us now examine his treatment of the role of the mother's brother (referred to as '*mama*' in many Indian languages) in some primitive communities. This is an excellent example of Radcliffe-Brown's structural functional method. In a number of primitive communities, like the Bathonga group of Eastern Africa, the Nama Hottentots of South Africa and the Friendly Islanders of Tonga, the mother's brother and the sister's son are observed to share a particularly warm and affectionate relationship. The nephew is permitted to take many liberties with his maternal uncle who in turn takes special care of him, makes sacrifices on behalf of the nephew when the latter is ill, and leaves a share of his property and sometimes even one of his wives for the nephew to claim. Radcliffe-Brown says (1971:17), "It is a mistake to suppose that we can understand the institutions of society by studying them in isolation, without regard to other institutions with which they seem to be correlated". He identifies another affectionate relationship that seems correlated to the one between maternal uncle and nephew. He points out (1971: 17) that "the custom of allowing the sister's son to take liberties with his mother's brother seems to be generally accompanied with an obligation of particular respect and obedience to the father's sister... His father's sister is sacred to him; her word is his law; and one of the greatest offences of which he could be guilty would be to show himself lacking in respect to her".

Radcliffe-Brown points out that in most primitive societies, kinship regulates the social relationships of individuals. Various patterns of behaviour are associated with these relationships, and these follow stable and definite patterns. But if we display different kinds of behaviour towards every single relative, things could get very complicated, especially if the number of relatives is very large. This difficulty, says Radcliffe-Brown, is avoided in primitive societies by a system of classification. Different kinds of relatives are clubbed together into a limited number of categories. The most

commonly used principle of classification is that of the equivalence of brothers. In other words, if an individual stands in a particular relationship to a man, the same kind of relationship exists with the man's brother, the same is the case with a woman and her sister. Hence, the father's brother is regarded as a sort of father and his sons are like the individual's brothers. Similarly, mother's sisters are like other mothers and their children are like brothers and sisters.

How do the father's sister and mother's brother fit in? The three communities earlier mentioned are patriarchal. The father is regarded with awe and fear, the mother with tenderness and affection. In keeping with this trend, the father's sister is given much respect and reverence and the mother's brother affection and tenderness. In a word, the paternal aunt is a sort of 'female father' whilst the maternal uncle is a 'male mother'. This explanation derives from the notion of 'extension of sentiments'. By this we mean that the sentiments expressed towards the mother extend to and include her brother, and the same is the case with the father's sister.

How does Radcliffe-Brown explain this sort of classification? In his own words, (1971: 25) "in primitive society there is a strongly marked tendency to merge the individual in the group to which he or she belongs. The result of this in relation to kinship is a tendency to extend to all the members of a group a certain type of behaviour which has its origin in a relationship to one particular member of the group"

In a nutshell, Radcliffe-Brown studies the role of the maternal uncle in primitive societies in terms of correlated institutionalised relationships. This is the essence of functionalist methodology.

It is now time to complete Check Your Progress 3.

**Check Your Progress 3**

- i) Match the items in Column 'A' with the appropriate ones in Column 'B'

A	B
a) formal weeping	i) equivalence of brothers
b) Bathonga	ii) Andaman Islands
c) paternal aunt	iii) Tonga
d) father's brother	iv) East Africa
	v) female father
	vi) affectionate, warm relationship

- ii) How does Radcliffe-Brown view the institution of totemism?

.....

.....

.....

iii) Fill up the blanks with suitable words.

- a) Radcliffe-Brown paid special attention to the ..... system of kinship terminology.
- b) Tension existing in certain delicate relationships may be defused through ..... and .....

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## 25.4 LET US SUM UP

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This unit dealt with the concept of 'function' elaborated by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. The relationship between 'structure' and 'function', Radcliffe-Brown's idea of the 'functional unity of society' and the twin concepts of 'eunomia' and 'dysnomia' were made clear to you. A comparison was drawn between the historical and functional modes of analysis with particular reference to primitive society.

The concept of function and the functional method were further clarified with the help of some examples. You saw how Radcliffe-Brown explained the custom of 'ceremonial weeping' amongst the Andaman Islanders and how he analysed totemism as an expression of structured relationships. Then you learnt about Radcliffe-Brown's special interest in kinship studies and how he explained the institutionalised relationship between maternal uncle and nephew in certain primitive communities.

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## 25.5 KEYWORDS

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<b>Eunomia</b>	A state of societal health or well being
<b>Extension of sentiments</b>	In the context of Radcliffe-Brown's understanding of close relations between mother's brother and sister's son, it implies extending to the mother's brother the same kind of sentiments one does to the mother
<b>Dysnomia</b>	A state of societal ill-health, disease
<b>The Hawaiian System</b>	Anthropologists identify kinship systems of the world on the basis of the differences in kinship terminologies. Of the six types of kinship systems the Hawaiian system is also known as the 'generation system' of kinship. In this system, all persons in the same generation are classified in one group, with a distinction between the sexes. For example, in the first ascendant generation, a common term is used to designate father, father's brother and mother's brother. Similarly, a common term is used for mother, mother's sister and father's sister.
<b>Moiety</b>	One of two basic complementary tribal subdivisions

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## 25.6 FURTHER READING

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Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1971. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. Cohen and West Limited: London.

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## 25.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) a) 'necessary conditions of existence'
- c) functioning of its structure.
- ii) a) F
- b) F
- c) T

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) a) By the 'functional unity' of society, Radcliffe-Brown refers to a condition wherein all the parts of society work together harmoniously. Thus, conflicts and tensions are very limited.
- b) A society in a state of 'dysnomia' rarely dies. Rather, it once again tries to achieve a state of social health or eunomia. In the process, it may even change its structural type.
- ii) a) F
- b) F
- c) F

### Check Your Progress 3

i)

A	B
a)	ii)
b)	iv)
c)	v)
d)	i)

- ii) Like Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown too sees totemism as a way of maintaining social solidarity. He also sees it as a way in which the social opposition between groups is maintained. In this way, he accounts for both, the function and the structure of relationships involved in totemism.
- iii) a) classificatory
- b) joking, avoidance

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# UNIT 26 A CRITIQUE OF MALINOWSKI AND RADCLIFFE-BROWN

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A Critique of Malinowski  
and Radcliffe-Brown

## Structure

- 26.0 Objectives
- 26.1 Introduction
- 26.2 The Functional School - A Myth or Reality
- 26.3 A Natural Science of Society
  - 26.3.0 The Distinctive Place of Social Anthropology
  - 26.3.1 Radcliffe-Brown's Fieldwork
  - 26.3.3 Radcliffe-Brown's Theoretical Contributions
- 26.4 Growth of Anthropological Research under Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown
  - 26.4.0 Malinowski's Impact
  - 26.4.1 Radcliffe-Brown's Impact
- 26.5 Subsequent Developments
- 26.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 26.7 Key Words
- 26.8 Further Reading
- 26.9 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

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## 26.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit, you should be able to

- appreciate the relative positions of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown in the development of sociological theory
- assess their influence on the succeeding generation of anthropologists.

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## 26.1 INTRODUCTION

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This unit is both a critical statement on the last four units of this block and a glimpse into the later developments in sociological thought. Much of what Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown contributed to sociological theory has been discussed in units 22, 23, 24 and 25. Going through these units, you must have formed your own impression of strong and weak points in their writings. In this unit you will find a critical appraisal of their contributions in terms of the history of ideas about human society. This kind of evaluation will help you understand their relative place in the total body of sociological thought.

You already know that social thinkers interested in the history of human civilisation found it useful to study primitive societies. They regarded that primitive societies represented the early stages of human development and

their study would help them to discover the laws of progress of humankind. Understanding primitive cultures in terms of the use or function of a custom or belief for the maintenance of a society was a radically new approach, which was evolved by Malinowski. It came to be known as the Functionalist School of Social Anthropology. Some, for example Radcliffe-Brown (1971: 188-9), may even doubt its existence and consider it as myth. While others, such as Firth (1957), regard Malinowski's attempt to analyse social reality in terms of functional approach as a turning point in sociological studies. We examine this issue in section 26.2 and show that the tradition of rigorous fieldwork was the hallmark of this school and without this it would not have been possible to make further advances in our understanding of human behaviour.

As a fieldworker Malinowski is supreme but as a theoretician he proves to be a failure and his failure prompted others to introduce new elements to the Malinowskian functional approach. After a consideration of inadequacies of Malinowski's theoretical framework, we move on to Radcliffe-Brown's brave efforts to provide a sound theoretical basis to our understanding of primitive societies and then on to that of human societies in general. We discuss in Section 26.3 Radcliffe-Brown's conception of social anthropology as a branch of natural science

Both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown had a large number of followers. A great deal of anthropological research was carried out under their direct or indirect guidance. A brief review of this literature is given in Section 26.4. Finally we indicate the lines of subsequent development of ideas for studying human societies. These developments succeeded functionalist analysis in providing alternative explanations of human behaviour.

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## **26.2 THE FUNCTIONAL SCHOOL — A MYTH OR REALITY**

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You already know that Malinowski applied the concept of function to present in a coherent and logical manner the ethnographic account of the Trobriand Islanders' society. This proved to be a successful approach for making sense of apparently diverse and complex patterns of human behaviour. The whole exercise assumed the mantle of a school of thought, known as functionalism. As already mentioned in the Introduction to this Block, functionalism became a widely recognised theory (for the term 'theory' see Box 26.1) in social sciences. While rejecting the earlier established ways of understanding the progress of human civilisation, Malinowski provided an alternative way of making sense of the customs and beliefs of a primitive people. And, this was his unique contribution to sociological research. It is altogether another point that he tried to generalise his findings (which were strictly based on one case) in terms of human behaviour at large. This may not be acceptable. But the naivety of this step does not negate the lead that Malinowski gave by looking into the use or function of each custom. To explain one belief or activity he had to also look at its connections with other activities. This helped him in relating his account of Trobriand Islanders' life to one cultural whole. This was no

small achievement, considering the level of explanation of human behaviour offered by his evolutionist and diffusionist colleagues.

### Box 26.1 Theory

This is a commonly used term in social sciences. It generally refers to a systematic scheme of abstract terms. Such abstractions help in articulation of ideas in a particular branch of knowledge. Very often, the ideas about human society and human relations are expressed by the term social theory. In our elective course ESO-13 we have used this term to refer to abstract conceptual schemes about human society. Abstract conceptual schemes are basically systematically thought out inter-related ideas, which are commonly comprehended and accepted by academics.

The main features of Malinowski's functionalism may be summarised as follows.

- i) Compared to catch-all descriptions of social phenomena, presented by the nineteenth century scholars, Malinowski gave a biographical account of his fieldwork and presented his material in a systematic and coherent manner.
- ii) He focussed on one particular aspect of culture and gradually moved to the whole culture. This gave a thematic unity to his **monographs**.
- iii) Malinowski's emphasis on individuals, their behaviour, reactions, emotional states brought alive before us the cultural patterns of the primitive people. His view of individual interests and social order provides a balance in his understanding of human social behaviour. Even a long time after Malinowski, anthropologists have found it relevant to refer to his interest in experimental psychology and individual needs.
- iv) Malinowski cut across theories about man's nature and spoke about the hiatus between what is said by the people and done by them. This shows his awareness of the tension between individual interests and social order. For example, he discussed the reciprocal nature of exchange in his book, *Aragonauts of the Western Pacific*. His insight into this principle of exchange inspired the analysis of gift-exchanges by Mauss. Later Mauss inspired Levi-Strauss who maintained that the principle of reciprocity was the most significant aspect of social control. Transactional analysis has its roots in this very idea of Levi-Strauss.

We do not know if you have been able to raise questions regarding Malinowski's functionalist approach. Remember, in Unit 22 we had asked you to try to find inadequacies in his approach. Here we point out some of them.

- i) Malinowski linked each aspect of culture with its other aspects. The question comes up, if everything is linked to everything else, where does one stop? Obviously, the point of relevance of these connections is not taken up by Malinowski. He has not worked on any specific



problems. Rather, he has been too occupied in construction an integrated cultural whole.

- ii) The lack of analytical relevance in his accounts implies an absence of **abstraction** and therefore the absence of any development of a theory.
- iii) Malinowski's functionalism is akin to a crude utilitarianism, where everything has to exist to serve a purpose. It is surprising that he never arrived at the idea of a social system, a relationship between groups.
- iv) Malinowski (1935: 479-81) was not able to take account of changes, which affected tribal societies. He admitted of not including in his writings the European influence on the Trobriands in his book, *Coral Gardens and their Magic*. He considered this to be 'the most serious shortcoming' of his research in Melanesia.
- v) While emphasising the importance of fieldwork Malinowski did not displace evolutionism and diffusionism. He only added to them a **synchronic** analysis of a particular community. In fact Malinowski (1929) wrote,

I still believe in evolution, in the process of development, only I see more and more clearly that answers to any evolutionary questions must lead to the empirical study of the facts and institutions, the past development of which we wish to reconstruct.

But the special contribution of Malinowski's work lies in another direction. This refers to his invention of methods of field research. His theory of functionalism has been much criticised and improved upon by subsequent scholars. But we have hardly anyone who can claim to have improved upon his techniques of field research. Standards set by him are still used as measuring yardstick to evaluate the quality of anthropological fieldwork. Even now, one is supposed to spend a minimum period of eighteen months among the people one wants to study. One is expected to learn the local language and use it for data-collection. By living among the people and participating in their activities, one has to make a psychological shift from 'they' to 'we'. In other words, one has to become a part of the community. These ideal guidelines set by Malinowski, some, for example Powdermaker (1970: 347) would claim, are a kind of myth, generated by Malinowski's charisma. They would claim that even Malinowski did not conform to these ideas. All the same we find that this myth has provided many anthropologists with real guidelines.

As a conclusion to an appraisal of Malinowski's contributions, we may say that he gave a new vision not only to social anthropology but also to inquiry into human behaviour in general and by implication into one's own conduct. At the same time he gave new techniques of observation and data-collection. But he lacked the ability to deal with abstractions. In fact, he was quite suspicious of abstract theories. The task of introducing theoretical concepts to guide anthropological research was completed by Malinowski's contemporary, Radcliffe-Brown, who established social anthropology as a branch of natural science.

Let us complete Check Your Progress 1.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- i) Would you describe Malinowski as an evolutionist? Use three lines for your positive/negative answer.

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.....

- ii) How does a systematic ethnographic account of a society help us to understand better the culture of that society? Use three lines for your answer.

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**26.3 A NATURAL SCIENCE OF SOCIETY**

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Radcliffe-Brown’s theoretical position is contained in his paper, *A Natural Science of Society*. As a response to psychological studies of man, he had a vision of comparative sociology dominating all social sciences. In the following section we will first discuss how he carved a distinct place for social anthropology. This will be followed by a discussion of Radcliffe-Brown as a fieldworker and then as a theoretician.

**26.3.0 The Distinctive Place of Social Anthropology**

As you have read in Units 24 and 25, Radcliffe-Brown held the firm conviction that social anthropology must model itself on the lines of the natural sciences. Its methods, concepts and conclusions were to be strictly ‘scientific’, objective and verifiable. Radcliffe-Brown made a clear distinction between social anthropology and ethnology. Ethnologists were engaged in conjectural history, which was a completely unscientific exercise according to him. As you read in Unit 25, Radcliffe-Brown stressed that to study primitive society, insistence on historical details was not really necessary. Rather than asking ‘how did this come to be’? Radcliffe-Brown, in line with Durkheim, preferred to ask ‘what does this mean’? In short Radcliffe-Brown spoke out against the prevailing trend of delving into the historical roots of everything and laid stress on the contemporary significance of the societies he studied.

Radcliffe-Brown was also wary of explaining social phenomena in psychological terms. Unlike Malinowski, he avoided psychological explanations. We have repeatedly stated how Malinowski’s functional theory was heavily tilted towards the biological and psychological. Radcliffe-Brown did not fall into this trap. For him, social anthropology was primarily concerned with social rather than biological functions, with the ‘persons’ in a society rather than biological ‘individuals’ (See Kuper 1975: 86).

Despite his attempts to chart out a separate territory for social anthropology, Radcliffe-Brown could not quite free himself from his natural science background. This reflects in his insistence on scientific method, rigorous concepts, and the need to derive laws about society. As the discipline developed over the years, these notions came to be regarded as old-fashioned and naive.

However, it cannot be denied that Radcliffe-Brown's contribution to the discipline was immense. He cleared the path on which a generation of brilliant scholars was soon to tread, as we shall read in section 26.4 of this unit.

### 26.3.1 Radcliffe-Brown's Fieldwork

Your reading of the previous units will have brought home to you the crucial role played by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown in shaping modern social anthropology. You will by now have realised that fieldwork, as is practiced today, was brought into the forefront by Malinowski. Radcliffe-Brown too undertook a considerable amount of fieldwork. However, as has been pointed out by many scholars, the quality of Radcliffe-Brown's fieldwork was nowhere near the rich and lively work of Malinowski. Let us discuss this point further.

In the words of Adam Kuper (1975: 60) the fieldwork of Radcliffe-Brown was "... 'survey and salvage' ethnography, and it was sterile as compared with the type of fieldwork Malinowski was to persecute in the Trobriands". For example in his first field-study in the Andaman Islands, Radcliffe-Brown (1964) tried hard but failed to learn the local language. Finally, he resorted to collecting information by conversing in Hindustani, which the local people didn't really understand well. He made progress in his fieldwork only after he found an English-speaking informant!

Far from trying to involve himself with the life and customs of his "subjects", as did Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown maintained an aloofness, a distance which obviously reflected in the quality of his fieldwork. His fieldwork in Australia in 1910 was primarily directed towards gathering information about the complex Australian kinship system. To do so, he spent several months with his party on the Bernier Island, the site of a lock-up hospital for **Aborigines** suffering from venereal disease. It was partly on the basis of the memories of these informants that Radcliffe-Brown built up his model of a certain type of Aboriginal kinship system. So obsessed was he with the discovery of formal structures that he neglected the study of the many functioning tribes that still existed in Australia.

Radcliffe-Brown's basic concern was to fit facts into a logical, coherent theoretical mould. In the process it was inevitable that flesh-and-blood human beings with their special needs, ideas and values tended to be lost somewhere. On the other hand, Malinowski's fieldwork brought out the humanity of his subjects, their passions, motives and aims. In a way, Malinowski's work was content without much form whilst Radcliffe-Brown's work was form without much content. However, as has been repeatedly emphasised in the previous units, Radcliffe-Brown gave the discipline of social anthropology a theoretical impetus, a range of rigorous concepts that would make field work more focussed, more coherent.

### 26.3.3 Radcliffe-Brown's Theoretical Contribution

As you have studied in the previous units, the concepts of 'social structure' and 'function' advanced by Radcliffe-Brown are important in helping field-workers make sense of the data they collected. Let us once again review these concepts.

#### i) Social Structure and Function

Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, unlike their evolutionist predecessors, view primitive societies as living entities, rather than as links in the imaginary chain of progress and development. Both reject speculation and conjectural history and preferred to study primitive peoples on their own terms. The 'functionalist' school of social anthropology with which both are associated, sought to study social institutions and customs of primitive societies in terms of their relevance and value for the societies concerned, that is, their function. But while Malinowski's notion of 'function' draws primarily on physiological and psychological needs, (see unit 22), Radcliffe-Brown speaks of social functions or conditions of existence of the society used.

We have spoken earlier of the impact of Durkheim's sociology on Radcliffe-Brown's ideas (see unit 24). For Radcliffe-Brown, ceremonials, customs, ways of acting and believing had to be seen in the context of the social system from which they emerged, and the way in which they integrated and maintained that system. Our earlier discussion of the role of the mother's brother in some primitive groups amply illustrates this point (see unit 25).

#### Activity 1

If you were to make an anthropological study of a group of people, would you follow Malinowski and consider both individual interests and social order? Or, would you rather follow Radcliffe-Brown and consider conditions of existence of the society itself? Write a note of one page on how you would prefer to go about this exercise.

But while Malinowski's theoretical thrust ends with the notion of function, Radcliffe-Brown has in addition a well-developed notion of social structure. For Radcliffe-Brown, social structure refers to the web of social relationships entered into by the persons who constitute society. By describing social structure, the notion of function becomes more clear, more explanatory. Section 25.4 of Unit 25 has already made this point quite clear.

We shall now see how both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown influenced the succeeding generation of anthropologists.

#### Check Your Progress 2

i) How did Radcliffe-Brown's fieldwork differ from that of Malinowski?

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- ii) Distinguish between Malinowski's and Radcliffe-Brown's notions of function. Use three lines for your answer.

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## 26.4 GROWTH OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH UNDER MALINOWSKI AND RADCLIFFE-BROWN

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The thirties and forties of the twentieth century marked an unprecedented growth of anthropological research in England. During this period, under the leadership of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, anthropologists experimented with radical methods of gathering sociological data and interpreting them in first, functionalist and later, structural functionalist terms. Malinowski is constantly present in meticulously carried out field researches and Radcliffe-Brown is abundantly present in the efforts at theorising through abstractions. We shall briefly examine highlights of this creative period in the development of sociological thought.

### 26.4.0 Malinowski's Impact

Malinowski continues to be a powerful influence in anthropology. His theoretical framework, comprising the ideas of culture and needs, may not inspire us now but his interest in methodological and philosophical issues is again and again referred in the Malinowski Memorial Lecture, held annually in his honour. The most profound impact of his ideas on his students is recorded in *Man and Culture*, edited by his student, Raymond Firth (1957). This collection includes essays by Audrey, I. Richards, Ralph Piddington, Talcott Parsons, Phyllis Kaberry, J.R. Firth, E.R. Leech, I. Schapera, Meyer Fortes, S.F. Nadel, Raymond Firth, Lucy Mair and H. Ian Hogbin. The essays by Malinowski's former students and colleagues are a clear testimony of his influence on their works. The spirit of this collection is not to write high praises, it is to evaluate Malinowski's contribution and its relevance for contemporary sociology.

His efforts to develop field techniques for carrying out intensive sociological studies of particular societies have been recognised by Evans Pritchard (1951), Firth (1951), and earlier by Richards (1939). Ethnography written from 1929 to 1940 reflects the liberal use of Malinowski's functional approach. His practice of documenting generalisations has also been emulated by his successors. For example, Firth's *We the Tikopia* (1936) and Schapera's *Married Life in an African Tribe* (1940) explain the institution of family in terms of its function. The functions of procreation and socialisation, have been related to other aspects of social life. Similarly, the function of providing sustenance has been described by Richards (1939) in explaining the economic activities of the Bemba in Northern Rhodesia. These rather voluminous books give long descriptions in a truly Malinowskian mould. They lack a sense of social organisation and its

principles. Descriptions of concrete ground-realities are expected somehow to spell out these principles. In other words they present a mix-up between analysis and description — a common feature of Malinowski's scholarship.

Students came to Malinowski from different parts of the world, including from Australia, New Zealand and India. Hogbin, Hart, Piddington, Kaberry and Stanner were from Australia and New Zealand. You may like to know a little more about Malinowski's Indian student. He was D.N. Majumdar, who wrote his Ph.D. thesis at Cambridge, in 1935, under T.C. Hodson. Based on this, he published in 1937 a book, *A Tribe in Transition : A Study in Culture Patterns*. Following Malinowski, this book takes the holistic approach of functionalist method. It appears that Majumdar (1937:1) was fascinated by Malinowski's notion of culture, defined as social response to biological and psychological needs.

### 26.4.2 Radcliffe-Brown's Impact

Radcliffe-Brown's first appointment to a professorship was in 1920, when he was invited to start a department of Anthropology in the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Thus he entered a new phase in his career which was now to be devoted to teaching, writing, developing theory and training a new generation of social anthropologists. In Cape Town he set up a School of African Studies. In 1926, he moved to Australia to take up a post at Sydney. He organised a course for undergraduates, started several research projects on the aborigines and launched a new journal called *Oceania*. He then went on to Chicago in 1931. American anthropology at that time was dominated by Lowie and Kroeber. The development of psychoanalysis had made 'culture and personality' studies very popular. In that milieu Radcliffe-Brown introduced a new way of thinking into American anthropology. People like Eggan, Warner and Tax came to represent a 'Radcliffe- Brownian' theoretical school whose contributions to the discipline have been considered.

In 1937 Radcliffe-Brown returned to England to the chair of social anthropology, newly established in Oxford. Shortly after his return, Malinowski left the country. Radcliffe-Brown took Malinowski's position as the leader of the profession. In Adam Kuper's (1975: 65) words, "...Radcliffe-Brown was the leader of a long overdue challenge to Malinowski, representing sense, clarity and sociology". The theoretical weaknesses of Malinowski forced many fieldworkers to look for a more theoretical, sociological orientation and Radcliffe-Brown seemed to fulfil this need.

The value of the sociological option offered by Radcliffe-Brown had yet to be demonstrated. Social anthropological analysis had to experiment with sociological frameworks. The results of these 'experiments' were such brilliant monographs as Bateson's *Naven* (1936), Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937).

Radcliffe-Brown's tenure at Oxford resulted in an extremely fruitful partnership with Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes, they produced a series of works mainly concerned with the political structure and kinship. In 1940 they brought out *African Political Systems*. Evans-Pritchard brought out

two monographs. *The Nuer* and the *Political System of the Anuak* in the same year. In 1945 and 1949 Fortes produced monographs on the Tallensi community. In 1949 and 1951 Evans-Pritchard published studies on the Sanusi of Cyrenaica and the Nuer kinship respectively. In this manner, Radcliffe-Brown brought into British social anthropology a new theoretical framework and areas of interest (notably political structure and kinship) which were to bear fruit in some of the most important and influential studies of the period.

You will probably be interested to know that Radcliffe-Brown had a very profound influence on one of India's leading social anthropologists, M.N. Srinivas. Srinivas's D. Phil thesis at Oxford, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (1952) was completed under Radcliffe-Brown's supervision. In this work he attempted to see the connections between religion and the social structure leading to important formulations like 'sanskritisation'. Spearheading the movement for village studies in India, Srinivas studied the Indian village in terms of its social structure developing important concepts like that of 'dominant caste' along the way.

### Check Your Progress 3

- i) Identify the feature of Malinowski's scholarship that is commonly shared by the followers of both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown.
- ii) Match the items in Column 'A' with those in Column 'B'.

A	B
i) Oceania	a) Srinivas
ii) Coorgs	b) Fortes
iii) Naven	c) Evans-Pitchard
iv) Tallensi	d) Bateson
v) Nuer	e) Radcliffe-Brown

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## 26.5 SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS

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As we have repeatedly stated, Malinowski failed to give his brand of social anthropology an analytical thrust. The concepts he used were not sufficiently rigorous. No doubt, he gathered extremely rich and interesting details about the societies he studied, but he failed to fit them into a sound theoretical mould. It is against this background that we can appreciate Radcliffe-Brown's efforts. Radcliffe-Brown tried to introduce a certain level of abstraction with the use of concepts like 'social structure' and 'function'. However, he was not too successful in his efforts. He defined social structure merely in terms of the interactions and relationships entered into by concrete person. In effect, the level of abstraction that he himself preached was not quite attained. Evans-Pritchard successfully attempted what Radcliffe-Brown could not.

Evans-Pritchard developed a notion of social structure which was basically concerned with the persistent, permanent groups in society like the family, the tribe and the nation. He brought home the realisation that the social anthropologist need not stop at observation of the actual interactions between persons to arrive at conclusions about the social structure. One needs to go to higher levels of abstraction. In his study, the Nuer (1940), he demonstrated the 'segmentary' structure of Nuer society in which different groups were mutually united and opposed at various levels of the social structure. In this fashion, he brought in a higher level of abstraction to the understanding of social structure. It was in fact Evans Pritchard who rejected 'structural-functionalism' and brought pure 'structuralism' into the discipline.

Another development was the work of the French 'structuralist' Claude Levi-Strauss. Borrowing heavily from linguistics, Levi-Strauss took the notion of 'social structure' to the highest level of abstraction. He distinguished between the 'structure' and 'social relation' and constructed models, which were basically analytical constructs against which actual social relations could be compared and contrasted. Levi-Strauss's studies of kinship and mythology became extremely influential.

In a nutshell, Malinowskian functionalism was refined into 'structural-functionalism' by Radcliffe-Brown. Following his lead, Evans-Pritchard introduced a greater level of abstraction in his theoretical framework and developed 'structuralism'. In France, 'structuralism' was given a new dimension with the work of Levi-Strauss. Sociology today may be said to be in the 'post-structuralist phase'. Many scholars have borrowed extensively from diverse disciplines like literature, linguistics, mathematics etc. resulting in exciting theoretical developments. It is not within the scope of this course to bring to you these developments, you may learn about them at the M.A level.

This brief resume of post-Radcliffe-Brownian developments may have conveyed the impression that functionalism died with Malinowski. This is certainly not the case, as functionalism continued to thrive. To this day it remains an important theory in sociology. The work of Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton is important in this regard. Block 7 will bring their contributions to you.

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## **26.6 LET US SUMUP**

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In this unit we assessed the contributions of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. First, we gave critique of Malinowski's achievements. Then we discussed in a little more detail Radcliffe-Brown's scholarship as both a fieldworker and a theoretician. We reviewed anthropological research under the direct and indirect guidance of both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. The unit ended with a brief account of subsequent developments in sociological theory.



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## 26.7 KEY WORDS

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<b>Abstraction</b>	It expresses a quality apart from an object and refers to the intrinsic form with no attempt at concrete representation. In the context of this unit, the term has been used to express the theoretical ideas as opposed to descriptive accounts of human behaviour
<b>Aborigines</b>	The original inhabitants of a place. The tribal people in Australia are generally known as aborigines
<b>Monograph</b>	A written account of a single theme
<b>Sanskritisation</b>	It is a concept, given by M.N. Srinivas, who writes, “Sanskritisation is a process by which a low Hindu caste or tribe or other group changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently twice-born caste”.
<b>Synchronic</b>	It concerns with the set of events existing in a contemporary time frame, without referring to historical events

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## 26.8 FURTHER READING

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## 26.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Malinowski cannot be described an evolutionist because he became obsessed with empirical reality. Though he remained an evolutionist at heart, in practice he was moving away from the evolutionist’s love for speculations about human culture.
- ii) In catch-all accounts of social phenomena, it is not possible to find systematic and logical correlation between different aspects of a culture. But as systematic, ethnography is always based on data from a particular society, it is possible to relate all aspects of that culture in an integrated whole.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) Radcliffe-Brown maintained a certain aloofness and distance from the people he studied. Hence his fieldwork is sometimes dull, lifeless and sterile. Malinowski, on the other hand tried to fully involve himself with his subjects, resulting in lively and richly detailed field-work.

- ii) Malinowski speaks of function primarily in terms of physiological and psychological needs. Radcliffe-Brown, on the other hand, speaks of the needs of society or its necessary conditions of existence.

**A Critique of Malinowski  
and Radcliffe-Brown**

**Check Your Progress 3**

- i) Meticulously prepared ethnography
- ii) a) e  
b) a  
c) d  
d) b  
e) c



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