
UNIT 22 CONCEPT OF CULTURE AND FUNCTION - MALINOWSKI

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22.0 OBJECTIVES

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.

22.1 INTRODUCTION

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.

22.2 PRECURSORS OF MALINOWSKI

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

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 Bronislaw 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.

22.4 CULTURE AS A FUNCTIONING AND INTEGRATED WHOLE

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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- 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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22.6 THE CONCEPT OF FUNCTION AS DEVELOPED BY MALINOWSKI

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.

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- 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

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.

22.8 KEYWORDS

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

Eskimo	A group of people of Northern Canada, Greenland, Alaska and eastern Siberia
Ethnography	It refers to a descriptive account of the way of life of a particular society
Ethnology	It is the comparative study of the elements of culture in many societies
Evolution	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.
Fieldwork	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
Iroquois Indian	An Amerindian confederacy of New York that consisted of the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca and later included Tuscarora tribals
Matriliny	The system of tracing relationship to kin exclusively through females
Matriarchy	Social organisation in which mother is head of family
Moral Philosopher	Those who make the study of human conduct and values
Patriliney	The system of tracing relationship to kin exclusively through males
Patriarchy	System of society in which father or oldest living male is head of family
Pidgin-English	An English-based speech used for communication between people with different languages
Polyandry	The practice of marriage of one woman to two or more men
Torres Straits	A strait 80 meter wide between island of New Guinea and northern tip of Cape York peninsula, Australia

22.9 FURTHER READING

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

22.10 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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.