
UNIT 23 MAGIC, SCIENCE AND RELIGION — MALINOWSKI

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23.0 OBJECTIVES

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.

23.1 INTRODUCTION

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.

23.2 THE DEBATE ON MAGIC, SCIENCE AND RELIGION

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.

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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.

23.3 THE DOMAIN OF THE PROFANE

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.

<p>Activity 2</p> <p>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.</p>

23.4 THE DOMAIN OF THE SACRED - RELIGION

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.

.....
.....

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

23.6 SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

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?
 - a) Based on the belief that one can still hope and desire.
 - b) Based on the conviction in validity of experience, effort and reason.
 - c) Particular experience of tense and emotional states.
 - d) Related to the general experience of life.
 - e) Has many aspects and purpose and its rationale lies in the function of its belief and practice.

23.7 THE FUNCTION OF MAGIC, SCIENCE AND RELIGION

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.

23.8 LET US SUM UP

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.

23.9 KEY WORDS

Animism	In the context of Tylor's view of religion, it refers to belief in the existence of spirits separable from bodies.
Nonce	A person admitted to probationary membership in a religious ceremony.
The Profane	It refers to those areas of life, which are not concerned with religion or religious purposes. In other words, they deal with secular aspects.
The Sacred	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.

23.10 FURTHER READING

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

23.11 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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