

---

# UNIT 6 COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF RITUAL

---

## Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 What is a Ritual?
  - 6.2.1 The Nature of Rituals
  - 6.2.2 The Definitions of Rituals
- 6.3 Characteristics of Rituals
  - 6.3.1 Ritual Needs
  - 6.3.2 Ritual as Conscious and Voluntary
  - 6.3.3 Ritual as Repetitions and Stylized Bodily Actions
- 6.4 Types of Rituals
  - 6.4.1 Confirmatory Rituals
  - 6.4.2 Piacular Rituals
  - 6.4.3 Other Types of Rituals
- 6.5 Theories of Ritual
  - 6.5.1 Evolutionary Theories
  - 6.5.2 Functionalist Theories
  - 6.5.3 Fieldwork Investigations of Malinowski
  - 6.5.4 Evans-Pritchard—The African Experience
  - 6.5.5 Symbolic Dimension of Ritual
  - 6.5.6 The Psychoanalytic Approach
- 6.6 The Importance of Rituals
- 6.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.8 Key Words
- 6.9 Further Readings
- 6.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

---

## 6.0 OBJECTIVES

---

After reading this unit you should be able to :

- examine the phenomenon of ritual as it occurs both in the religion as well as everyday sphere,
- to understand what constitutes a ritual, especially as presented by sociologists and anthropologists,
- to appreciate the importance of ritual for those who participate in it as well as for the society.

---

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

---

In our earlier units, we sought to familiarize ourselves with certain sociological explanations in the field of religion. In this unit your attention and enquiry will be drawn to the various theories contributed by the sociologists for studying religious behaviour in the everyday life of a society.

The focus of discussion in this unit is rituals. It is one of the human activities which has drawn the attention of scholars. What is this behaviour displayed by human beings whenever they participate in a religious activity? How have sociologists and anthropologists sought to interpret these human practices as they occur in the religious behaviour of any human group? The present unit will attempt to answer some of these questions.

## 6.2 WHAT IS A RITUAL?

I am sure all of us, at some stage in life have participated in ritual activity. But we never really thought of interpreting this ritual. What do these rituals mean to the society and individual?

A systematic enquiry of the ritual phenomenon in human society is a field of investigation of fairly recent origins.

A host of scholars from sociology, anthropology, psychology are interested in the field of rituals. They have contributed varied theories and explanations to the understanding of ritual. They study of ritual does not find a distinct area in sociology. It usually forms part of larger studies that focus on religion.

Before we can get down to considering the various definitions of the term ritual, let us very briefly consider what is this activity that is identified as 'ritual'. Nowadays, one often attributes the term ritual to any human activity that is repetitive, patterned and perhaps even monotonous. One thus speaks of—'the ritual of examinations' or the 'ritual of Republic Day parades' or the 'ritualistic character of work'. In all these examples, and many other, the term ritual is used as an adjective to denote the sameness, or the repetitiveness of the particular activity that is being described. Using the term ritual in such a manner is not wrong, as we shall see, such usage of the term contains some important and essential characteristics of the term.

### 6.2.1 The Nature of Rituals

In the ethnographic description of rituals in diverse cultures given by scholars like Edward Tylor, James Frazer, Bronislaw Malinowski, Emile Durkheim and many others, the term ritual is used to denote two separate sets of activities.

- i) The first is strictly in the sphere of religious practice and refers to a wide range of religious activities viz. prayer, ceremonial worship, chanting, a range of gestures and movements, activities with sacred object, etc. all done with the specific intention of spiritual communication with a Supreme Being. Thus, the various religious activities and practices engaged in by the Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, etc. in their respective temples, mosques, churches and *gurdwaras*, etc. may be referred to as rituals.

Besides, in their respective homes, practitioners of a faith also conduct religious activities that are referred to as rituals. Thus the Hindu family performing '*pooja*' on certain occasions, the Muslims family performing '*namaz*' at the call of the muzeinin, or the Christian family reciting the '*rosary*' at the hour of prayers are all rituals performed by these believers in their respective homes.

- ii) A second set of human activities that are identified as rituals are those associated with individual life cycle as they move from one social setting to the next.

In all societies, from birth to death an individual passes through several stages demarcating a transition from one stage of life to the next. Such transitions, are often marked by activity which is ritualistic in character. Sociologists and anthropologists term such rituals as 'rites of passage'. The next two units of this block i.e. Unit 7 and Unit 8 will give you examples of such rituals as 'Rites of Passage' from African society and South-East Asia society.

Indian society with its diversity of communities and cultures reveals a rich variety of such rituals performed at birth, puberty, adulthood, marriage, death, etc. (See ESO-02, Block 4 and ESO-05, Unit 28 and 29 for a detailed discussion on this). One must however, note that even in such ritual activity, the spiritual or the sacred

dimension is very much present. Invocations are always addressed to some sacred beings for granting a smooth transition to the next stage in the cycle of life.

These two sets of activities are what scholars refer to as rituals in their descriptions of religious practices. In this specific usage of the term, rituals constitute a major component of any organised religion. It is this specific usage of term 'ritual' that will constitute the frame of reference in discussing the comparative theories of rituals. We shall begin our discussion on these theories by first working at some of the important definitions offered by scholars concerning the term ritual.

## 6.2.2 The Definitions of Rituals

Developing a definition of the term ritual is not something on which scholars agree. The reasons for this are many, for one, the theoretical orientation from within which the scholar is working would prompt one sort of definition as opposed to another from some other theoretical orientation. Secondly, depending on what the scholar wants to know about ritual, a definition of ritual would be developed to suit such a purpose. Thus for example, there are those who ask the question—What does a ritual do for those who participate in it? And there are others who would ask the question—What does ritual say for those participating in it? Both questions have a distinct difference in emphasis and would consequently develop distinctly different definitions of the term ritual.

Yet again, there is the added problem, that most scholars discussing rituals have in fact, dealt at greater length on the larger issue of ritual interpretation, rather than the actual phenomena of ritual. Thus in defining ritual these scholar's understanding of religion played a decisive influence.

Notwithstanding such difficulties, it is still possible to present some important definitions of rituals as put forward by some of these scholars working on the subject of religion and its relationship of society.

In the previous Block on **The Study of Religion**, both evolutionary and functional theories of religion were discussed. These theories must serve as background for our own discussion on the definitions of rituals.

### 1) The Evolutionalist understanding of ritual

The early evolutionary scholars on religion like Tylor, Frazer, Morgan and others located religion like most other institutions of society within an evolutionary mould. Both Tylor and Frazer were inclined to explain religion as an evolving belief system. Rituals are understood as the first stage of this evolution. This original stage was termed as 'magic' or the pre-religious stage or the animistic stage by Tylor. He observed rituals as resulting from the cult of the dead—the early need of human beings understanding dreams, hallucinations, sleep and death led them to believe in a soul or an indwelling personality which became the object of ritual worship. This indwelling personality in the animistic stage is extended outwards to cover animals, plants and even inanimate practices. Tylor in his book **Primitive Culture** (1958) goes on to define rituals as practices in this animistic stage that are highly emotive, expressive to the point of being dramatic, non-rational and rooted in magical beliefs.

The evolutionist definition of ritual proved problematic in two important aspects. Firstly, it was an intellectual perception of rituals as perceived within the larger framework of religion itself undergoing evolution. According to Tylor this evolution involves the transition from magic and animism to religion and finally to science. Secondly Tylor restricted this observations of ritual practices to the first human forms of society, and from a scientific standpoint such conceptions were not only speculative and conjectural, they also failed to explain rituals as they existed in the organised religions of the world.

## 2) Functionalist understanding of ritual

Starting out from a different orientation to religion and ritual, Emile Durkheim began by asking—What does religion do to those who participate in its beliefs and practices? This functionalist approach (as discussed in Unit 3 Block 1) sought to establish an interrelationship between society and religion. Durkheim (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912-1954) pointed out that all human societies are divided into the opposing domains of 'sacred' and 'profane'. These two domains were separate and exclusive. The domain of the sacred consisted of things set aside and forbidden. The domain of the profane consisted of things not so regarded and belonging to the ordinary level.

According to Durkheim, ritual was that human behaviour that takes place in the domain of the sacred. By specifying the particular location within which religious activities occur, Durkheim laid the grounds for an empirical examination of the religious sphere as well as the relationship that practices and beliefs within this domain had with the larger human society.

It is this empirical emphasis to the study of religion, that brought about a substantive increase in anthropological field studies of the domain of the sacred. Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard and others all studied the religious beliefs and practices of various tribal societies with a view to further examining the inter-relationship between society and religion.

Improving on the definition of rituals offered by Durkheim, and orienting the meaning of rituals within the theory of the Social System, Talcott Parsons, reviewing the work done in the *Sociology of Religion* observes that rituals are human practices within the realm of the sacred that are characterized by their essential non-rational or transcendental nature. What Parsons means by this is that unlike human rational behaviour that occurs within a means-end relationship, ritual behaviour exists outside the means-end relations. They are an end in themselves.

## 3) Psychoanalytic understanding of ritual

Using almost the same ideas of means-end relationship in understanding human activity Sigmund Freud in his book *Totem and Taboo* (1918) defines rituals as those notably non-rational or formalised symbolic belief of any kind which are distinct from pragmatic, belief that is rationally linked to empirical goals.

Further, distinguishing ritual behaviour from both the scholastic and the common sense, Freud tried to bring out the essential neurotic component of ritual behaviour within religious practices. The basic emphasis in this Freudian perception of ritual is the understanding of how the conscious mind interacts with the world of the sacred. According to Freud, such behaviour is 'neurotic' because it defies any empirical pragmatic explanations. He even sought to see religion as a practice of 'obsessive collective neurosis'. Ritual behaviour was that practice in which both individual and group activity most explicitly brings out this neurosis in the realm of the sacred.

## 4) The symbolic component of ritual

Treating rituals as symbolic components of a culture, Social and Cultural Anthropology have tried to provide a new interpretation of religious practices. The Cultural Anthropologist, Edmund Leach defined rituals as culturally oriented behavioral patterns which seek to make a symbolic statement about human beings relationship with a Supreme Being.

The symbolic value of rituals was for long stressed by scholars of culture. Leach's definition is important because it stresses the fact that these cultural patterns serve as symbolic statements. In other words, besides looking at what rituals do, Leach is also trying to understand, what rituals say. In bringing out the significance of these symbolic statements, Leach points out that they were derived from the groups social and cultural life. In doing so, Leach, like Durkheim before him, is seeking to emphasise the close interrelationship between society and religion in the domain of religious practices.

Let us now understand the major characteristics of rituals in the next section (Section 6.3).

---

## 6.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF RITUALS

---

In this Section we will study the important characteristics of rituals and what components they include.

### 6.3.1 Ritual Needs

Let us begin by looking at the ritual at the manifest level i.e., at the level of the existing social reality. Let us know what are the various needs are, that anyone would be having when working at a ritual? Rituals needs includes :

- i) The ritual space
- ii) The participants
- iii) The ritual objects
- iv) Verbal and/or bodily actions

These four components are basic to all rituals in any religion. Let us briefly consider each of them.

#### i) The Ritual Space

This is a well-defined setting characterized mainly as the domain of the sacred. While in most cases such spaces are permanent and identified by members of the faith as such, there are also temporary settings defined as ritual spaces, during the occurrence of a ritual in such a space.

#### ii) The Participants

These include all the individuals participating in a ritual. In most ritual settings these would consist of a general audience made up of believers of the faith and the priest performing the main activities of the ritual together with their assistants or helpers. Each of the participant act or has a clearly defined role and is called upon to perform a specific function during the period of the activity.

#### iii) Rituals Objects

These generally refer to a range of objects that are used during any ritual. As objects whose meaning is basically centered around the fact that they exist in the domain of the sacred, these objectives also come to acquire a sacred character about them.

#### iv) Verbal and/or bodily actions

Every ritual involves a range of bodily actions from kneeling down, bowing, etc. to

verbal responses whether these be mere recitation of prayers or the chanting and singing of hymns. What is of important is these body actions and oral incantations is that they follow a definite pattern or sequence, and the adherence to such a pattern or sequence is quite rigidly maintained.

### Activity 1

Read Section 6.3 and its subsections. Can you think of any other type of ritual? Discuss with students in the study centre and note down your findings.

There is yet another set of characteristics that have to be pointed out about rituals. These concern the nature of activity that occurs during a ritual. Four such characteristics have been mentioned by M. Eliade in his discussions on rituals (*The Sacred and the Profane*, 1959). He observes that rituals are those conscious and voluntary, repetitive and stylised symbolic body actions that are centered on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences. Verbal behaviour is also included in this set of body action.

Let us take some of the major aspects of this characteristics of rituals for further discussion.

### 6.3.2 Ritual as Conscious and Voluntary

Ritual behaviour is not part of the common behaviour of individuals in everyday life. On the contrary, participation in ritual behaviour demands a conscious engagement on the part of these believers to submit to very highly patterned rules and roles which conform the self to all others who have embodied these 'typical' roles in the past. Hence the self must consciously sacrifice its individual autonomy, its freedom to be except that which is demanded of it within the ritual. Consider for example the Christian ritual of 'Mass'—here what we observe that activity from moment to moment the participants share in a common pattern of gestures, movements, vocal responses, etc. Such involvement reflects the conscious nature of the believers participation within the religious experience. It must be kept in mind that there are many types of ritual activity. Yet the rituals generally involve a raising of consciousness to a greater or 'higher' level.

The voluntaristic component of ritual must be understood from the larger context of ritual being part of a religious system of beliefs and practices. The believer of a faith voluntarily submits to his/her personal will to be collective will of the group engaged in the ritual. It is only through this voluntaristic submission of the self that the believer can enter the realm of the sacred to achieve communion with that which is 'divine'.

### 6.3.3 Ritual as Repetitions and Stylised Bodily Actions

At the manifest level, rituals are clearly and evidently expression that the human body articulates in the act of worship. The human body becomes an extremely important organ of religious experience i.e. not only does it pattern itself in terms of movements and gestures within a given religious practice but it also becomes the subject of internalising the experience contained in the given religious practices. The importance of the human body is evident from the fact that from childhood onwards the infant builds up an understanding of the world, out of sensory motor experience. This understanding underlies and sustains the adult experience of space, time, number and personal identify. Therefore within ritual the stylised patterned and repetitious nature of actions (for e.g., the chanting of mantras in a temple or the offering of the 'Namaaz' by the Muslims) brings out not only the patterned movements of the body but also serve as vehicles or communication through which the body relates to the sacred. Further, while such repetitive patterns might seem

as being monotonous and meaningless for an outside observer, for the participants themselves they constitute both the form and substance i.e. the implicit meanings that the religious experience must have for them.

**Box 6.01**

This stylised and patterned behaviour that gets represented in ritual falls into a range of expressions at one end of the spectrum the stylised and patterned behaviour as gets represented with the limited experience of ritual in a set religious experience e.g., the offering of mass. At the other end of the spectrum is a form of ritual activity incorporating the stylised patterned behaviour and circumscribes the entire life of an individual. One observes this extreme form of religious practice when one sees certain religious groups like the monastic Christian orders or the Buddhist monks in their monasteries or the Sanyasis in Hinduism.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- i) Freud tries to bring out the essential ..... component of ritual behaviour within religions.
- ii) Which sociologist observed that ritual behaviour exists outside the mean end relations?

.....  
.....

- iii) Who said that ritual resulted from the cult of the dead?

.....  
.....

---

## 6.4 TYPES OF RITUALS

---

The occasion of rituals in human society are both varied and diverse. Human nature characterised by its weakness and limited capacities is constantly in need of supernatural intervention in the various activities humans are engaged in within their everyday lives.

The ethnographic literature on the subject provided various types of classifications to contain the various types of rituals in human society. Earlier on, it was pointed out, that two sets of activities are referred to as rituals by scholars studying ritual phenomena. These include :

- i) The rituals associated with the religious practices of any organised religions; and
- ii) The Rites of Passage or rituals performed by a community on various occasions in their life to mark the importance of a particular event in their lives such as rituals at the time of birth, marriage, death, seasonal ritual in nature such as sowing time, harvesting time, etc.

Both sets of ritual activities may be classified on the basis of intentions underlying the same. At the comparative level, in which classification are developed by observing general features of rituals in diverse cultures, we shall provide two such classificatory types.

According to the Social Anthropologist, Evans Pritchard, rituals can be classified into two main types, based on the intention and occasion during which they occur.

### 6.4.1 Confirmatory Rituals

These are rituals that are concerned with the changes of social status and those concerned with the interaction of social groups. Thus rituals performed at the time of birth, marriage, death, etc. tend to be present in all cultures of the world and they symbolise a change in the status of the individual in any social group. Further, rituals concerned with group interaction, are those that symbolically emphasise the solidarity and the interdependence of various groups for the continued existence of the community. Individuals and groups participating in such rituals display a high degree of emotional solidarity with the larger community. In modern times, rituals in a Temple, Mosque, Church, etc. emphasise such group solidarity. Confirmatory rituals as the term itself would suggest can be explained as rituals that emphasise the identity, integrity and solidarity of the social group.

### 6.4.2 Piacular Rituals

Evans Pritchard categorized this second type as rituals concerned with the moral and physical well being of the individual or the social group. The need to emphasise this state of moral or physical well being arises from the fact that occasions arise in the life of an individual and group when such a state of moral and physical well being is threatened. An individual faced with catastrophe, an epidemic, or the failure of rains, etc. are situations that call for the performance of Piacular rituals. Such rituals incorporate intentions such as appeasement and atonement. While modern societies with their growing dependence on science and technology, might to some extent diminish the existence of piacular rituals, in traditional folk societies, Piacular rituals form an important part of the ritual behaviour in the life of the individual and community.

### 6.4.3 Other Types of Rituals

Using a similar criterion of intention but developing a more descriptive classification of rituals, based on their functions, Anthony F. Wallace in his *Religion : An Anthropological View (1959)* proposed the following types :

**A. Technology Rituals :** The functions of these rituals is essentially aimed at controlling non-human nature. Among this type are :

**Divination Rituals :** seeking out the cause of affliction, injustice and whether human or otherwise, as well as suggesting remedies for the same.

**Intensification Rituals :** meant to increase material resources such as increase of food, success in hunting, fishing, etc.

**Protective Rituals :** meant to avert any form of affliction, misfortune or catastrophe, etc.

**B. Therapy and Anti-Therapy Rituals :** The function of these rituals is to promote the well being of individuals and groups and include :

**Curative Rituals :** meant to cure individual illnesses or afflictions.

**Witchcraft and Sorcery :** meant to cause affliction or injustice on others.

**C. Ideology Rituals :** The function of such rituals is aimed at the control of the Social Group, its values and traditions. Among these are :

**Rites of Passage :** Rituals marking the transition in Individual status within the life cycle. These rituals are ubiquitous and part of all religions. As we can see there are many types of ritual for different kinds of situations.



**Social Intensification Rituals** : Rituals meant to renew group solidarity life Friday prayers among the Muslims.

**Rebellion Rituals** : Rituals that are meant to allow for catharsis amongst group members.

D. **Salvation Rituals** : The function of such rituals is to help individuals to cope with personal difficulties. Among these are :

**Shamanic Rituals** : Rituals performed by individuals claiming supernatural powers that may be put to good or bad ends,

**Expiation Rituals** : meant for forgiveness and repentance of individual misdeeds.

E. **Revitalisation Rituals** : The function of such Rituals is to cure society's difficulties and identify crisis e.g. the millenarian movements.

It is important to note that while the classification provided above is extensive in its categorisation of rituals, it may so happen that a single ritual may come under more than one type of ritual. Such an overlap in the classification of rituals is unavoidable given the integrative thrust of ritual activity in human society.

---

## 6.5 THEORIES OF RITUAL

---

Developing a comparative theory is an attempt by scholars to search for generalisations and universals that go beyond the specific boundaries of a particular culture. Thus comparative theory establishes their generalisations after surveying a vast amount of empirical observations from a wide variety of cultures. It is the common threads or the essential features of a phenomena that finally get represented as a comparative theory.

In this section we will discuss various theories on ritual.

### 6.5.1 Evolutionary Theories

The earliest efforts at developing theories of ritual were the efforts of the 19th century cultural evolutionists viz. Edward Tylor and James Frazer. In both Tylor's '*Primitive Culture*' (1871) 1958 and Frazer's '*The Golden Bough*' (1890) 1950 there is an effort to provide for an intellectual approach to the understanding of ritual behaviour. Neither Tylor nor Frazer used the term ritual when referring to the practices that we have identified and labelled as rituals. But Tylor observed that the world of human beliefs as passing through three stages—viz. Magic, Religion and Science and it was the practices the primitive man engaged in the stage of magic that interested those scholars.

It is now recognized that these early scholars of religion made an important contribution by bringing religion into sharp focus. All the subsequent sociologists and anthropologists who wrote on religion after Frazer and Tylor had the task of refining the existing theories and providing further inputs into the area.

Such practices were identified by Tylor as being magico-religious practices and he attributed the reasons for these magico-religious practices to the fact that man's intellect needed some form of explanation to understand phenomena like sleep, death, fate, etc. Such a need led to the creation of what Tylor termed as animism. The original form of magico-religious behaviour.

Rituals within animism result from human beings tendency to attribute a spirit or indwelling personality to the world of animate and inanimate objects. It is the

practice evolved out of such an intellectual exercise by primitive man that gives rise to the forms of ritual. It is important to note that Tylor emphasised magic and magical practices as the basis through which ritual worship evolved because according to him there was a distinct difference between the stage of magic and that of religion. Magical practices according to Tylor formed the first cohesive institutional basis for the emergence of societies. In these magical practices or what Frazer called 'Pseudo Science', primitive man was developing systems of explanations through which both, individually and groupwise they could come to terms with the various unknown realities that they had to live with.

The institution of magical practices is thus very much located in the realm of the spiritual and in primitive man's efforts to understand this spiritual. Tylor's and Frazer's observations of rituals as magico-religious practices or pseudo-science are essentially based on a conjecture to explain the origin of religion. Very little ethnographic evidence exists to prove or disprove such theoretical conjectures. But it is important to note that by making distinctions between magic and religion, Tylor set the ground for a future enquiry on the scope and identity of religious practices.

### 6.5.2 Functionalist Theories

If the nineteenth century evolutionists who studied religion were criticised for an over emphasis on the origins of religion and ritual, scholars on religion who followed them were inclined to shift the emphasis on the study of religions and rituals to answering the questions—what do rituals do in human society or what they ought to do in human society. Such an enquiry which is also termed as functionalism in Sociological theory was an approach adopted by both Emile Durkheim and Malinowski. In his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1954) Durkheim observed that in all human societies there exists a dichotomy between the world of the sacred and the world of the profane. Using this dichotomy of sacred and profane, Durkheim put forward a theory of religion in which religious beliefs and practices are seen to have a social function for the community that follow them, Durkheim identified this social function as the integrative function of society.

To illustrate Durkheim focuses on the Arunta Tribesmen of Western Australia whose elaborate religious ceremonies of worship of their totem symbolised the community worshipping itself.

The ritual thus took on the twin function of reinforcing collective values and reaffirming the community among individuals. In other words, Durkheim's emphasis on religion and rituals as an integrative force in society which must be seen as part of his idea of the 'collective consciousness of a society'. Religious beliefs and practices are the mechanism by which the collective consciousness of a society gets institutionalised and is reproduced from one generation to the next. Rituals in such a context must be seen as creating the ground for group solidarity amongst the individuals participating in them. The elaborate procedure in which individuals come to take upon themselves various roles performing various gestures and movements, engage in various forms of vocal recitations, chanting and so on are all means through which rituals bring about a sense of group solidarity among its participants. Through rituals, Durkheim tried to emphasise that the participants acquire the knowledge of what is good, required, accepted and desired by the community and in this sense brought the individual closer to the collective identity of the group.

Further Durkheim observed that at the symbolic level, rituals represented the collective identity of the social group. Thus, the sacred objects in ritual practices were sacred because they symbolized the collective identity of the group. Likewise the stylized pattern of movements and gestures should be perceived as symbolic forms whose

meanings and values were known to the members of the social group. These meanings may not be known to every member of a society. Instead there are usually priests whose specialization is in ritual, whose function it is to disseminate meanings. This emphasis on the importance of the social group in the understanding of ritual, is perhaps the most important aspect of Durkheim's explanation of rituals and their relationship to society. In doing so however, he argued that magic could not be in the domain of sacred as it was not obligatory on the part of the community. Magic does not have a set of beliefs which a church has—he argued further.

In general however, Durkheim's theory of rituals sought to establish a universal character of rituals in all human cultures. The domain of the sacred and the profane existed in all cultures that claimed to have a religion. The problem however, was that Durkheim never sought to elaborate on what exactly were the criterions on which the distinction between sacred and profane was to be made. Were there a set of sacred objects and symbolic forms that could be sacred to all cultures? Or was this distinction embodied in the mind of the individual participant taking part in the ritual? Or was the distinction a mere label of convenience developed by the European mind unable to explain the complex phenomenon as it occurred in non-European societies? Durkheim himself recognised a number of these problems in his distinction of sacred and profane. It was the fieldwork studies of later day anthropologists that sought to resolve some of these queries concerning the distinction of sacred and profane. Yet we must remember that later scholars have pointed out that the distinction between sacred and profane may not be absolutely distinct.

### 6.5.3 Field Work Investigations of Malinowski

Anthropological field studies of non-European cultures at the beginning of this century enriched the theory of rituals by actually investigating the domain of the sacred as it actually exists in the everyday life of tribal society. Important amongst such studies are the explanations offered by Malinowski and Evans Pritchard. Malinowski's Functionalist approach to the study of ritual is based on his field investigations of the Trobriand Islanders in the *'Argonauts of the Western Pacific'* (1922). Malinowski's functional theory of religion has already been discussed in a previous unit. Like Durkheim, the basic thrust of Malinowski's approach to rituals is that rituals have a social function for the community in which they take place. He disagreed with Tylor's reasoning that rituals are the result of primitive man's rationality at coming to terms with unknown and unexplainable forces in nature. The rituals of the Trobriand Islanders were neither the result of speculation nor the product of an underdeveloped intellect. In their everyday life, the Trobriand people were quite capable at distinguishing between those acts that they considered magical and those that belonged to the realm of common sense or technological activities.

The magic practices of the Trobriand Islanders had also an accompanying set of beliefs which were very much a part of the community and even if they did not have anything like a church as perceived by the European mind, their magical beliefs did create a strong bond of solidarity within the community.

The social function of ritual according to Malinowski was to create and enhance emotional solidarity within the community. Every individual or group in their everyday life has to grapple with a range of anxieties, sufferings, fears, moral problems of good and bad, problems arising out of severe problems such as epidemics, death etc. In such moments of tensions and emotional strain, rituals helps reaffirm solidarity with the group by creating a sense of security and oneness with other members of the group. The experience of a ritual thus unites them through its systematized and symbolic actions, which create a new integrative state of mind for the members of the group.

Ritual in the above sense performed both explanatory and validating functions. As an explanatory function Malinowski pointed out that rituals explained the larger 'why' questions of life and existence, or explanations about the uncontrollable forces of nature, or explanations of providence concerning the maintenance and welfare of the group, or explanations of the life cycle concerning birth and death. Such queries are to be found in all cultures, in primitive societies. Rituals as symbolic expression offer explanations to such queries for members of the social group.

As a validating function, rituals support and affirm the continued existence of the structure of the social group. Thus, the social relations, the institutions, the values, the goals of the social group etc. are supported by ritual practices so that such aspects of the social group are seen as righteous and rituals uphold with the threat of sanctions what is considered as desirable in the conduct of individuals towards the social group.

Malinowski also emphasised the interrelated and interdependent nature of rituals in primitive society. In the Trobriand Islands, he observed that the rituals linked up to every facet of the social life of the community. In the political sphere there were ritual and ceremonies for the physical well-being and strength of the leadership. In the economic sphere, rituals represented the continuity of certain forms of property relations, or rituals seeking divine intervention for a successful harvest or to avert some natural catastrophe etc. In short we can say that in the life of these primitive societies, rituals play a prominent role at any point of time in the life of the individual or social group, that is recognised as being crucial.

There does exist a great deal of similarity in the ideas of both Durkheim and Malinowski with regard to rituals. It must be remembered however, that Malinowski laid the real foundation for the scientific examination of ritual practices by actually studying these in the context of the Trobriand Islanders. In doing so he was able to not only prove Durkheim's views on magic as wrong, he was even able to empirically prove the distinct domains of sacred and profane amongst the community of the Trobriand people. Further, while Durkheim sought to emphasise integration as the basic social function of ritual practices, Malinowski emphasised emotional solidarity as the key social function of rituals within a social group.

#### **6.5.4 Evans-Prichard—The African Experience**

Finally, at a time when fieldwork based studies were becoming more and more important to anthropological investigation, Evans Pritchard's study of witchcraft among the Azande came to a very different perception of ritual behaviour and the domain of the sacred as observed amongst the Azande tribe. (*Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, 1937). Pritchard's observations do not necessarily contribute to a theory of rituals but they certainly make an important difference to the distinction of the sacred and profane as provided by Durkheim and further proved by Malinowski.

Pritchard observed that amongst the Azande tribe the conception of 'ritual as well as the clear distinction between sacred and profane' is both vague and confusing. Seen from the individual point of view, Pritchard observes, it becomes very difficult to distinguish when a particular activities takes on the character of a ritual and when it is not. Thus, for the Azande tribe, blowing burning barkcloth smoke into a termite mound while holding magical plants in one hand might mean both an ordinary technological activity to keep away the termites, as well as a magical rite in which the tribe explain the barkcloth as being termite medicine. In such a situation Pritchard points out that much depends on how the anthropologist categorises his or her observations, this in turn is based on how the European mind has come to classify what is ritual and what is not.

### Box 6.02

Concerning the distinction between sacred and profane, Pritchard observes that amongst the Azande, such clear cut distinctions simply do not exist. Categories of explanations that one would normally associate with the realm of the sacred are at the same time used in the very same way to denote a range of activities in the domain of the profane. Thus the Azande would use the term 'soul' when explaining what is happening during a magical rite, which is justified in that such an entity belongs to the domain of the sacred. But in the same manner they would use the term soul to explain the process by which a seed put in the ground germinates to become a plant. In fact, for Evans-Pritchard the rituals and the beliefs of the Azande clearly denote that for these tribes, the natural and the supernatural, the sacred and the profane, the ritual act and the non-ritual act are all inextricably intervened in their everyday life.

The observations of Azande witchcraft clearly question Durkheim's claim that the distinction between the sacred and the profane were universal to all human cultures. The problems of developing criteria to distinguish the sacred from the profane has continued to bother anthropologists and sociologists. What Evans Pritchard was able to do was to emphasise the culture-specific context of the activities being referred to as magic or rituals. It also stressed the need to find out how individuals from a community perceived and explained what they understood as the meaning and practice of activities others label as rituals, as well as, how they understood the meaning of sacred within their culture.

### 6.5.5 Symbolic Dimension of Ritual

One of the important aspect of rituals emphasised by Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, Malinowski as well as other scholars working on rituals was the symbolic dimensions of rituals. As symbolic expressions, what do rituals have to say? This is an area in which structural anthropology has also attempted to provide some explanations. You have already discussed the structuralist approach to religion in a previous unit. Unlike the functionalist approach to rituals which understands them primarily in terms of the social functions they fulfil in a society, the structuralist points out that rituals need not be reduced to their social functions but they can be studied in themselves as systems of symbolic expressions that are internally consistent and reflect the logic of the primitive mind in its effort to explain the unknown. The structuralist would point out that the division of the world into the domain of sacred and the domain of profane, is in keeping with the structural rule followed by the primitive mind in naming and classifying the world. Thus, sacred and profane are binary opposites resulting from the structuring of reality by the unconscious. In other words, the underlying symbolic value of rituals must be understood in terms of their relationship with the sacred as opposed to the profane.

Edmond Leach goes on to add that within the context of these oppositions, rituals are symbolic statements derived from the social and cultural dimensions of a community.

Finally, there is one more approach that we must consider in this study of rituals and that is the Psychoanalytic approach.

#### Activity 2

Do you think that sacred and profane are absolutely distinct? Talk to other students at the study centre and note down your findings.

### 6.5.6 The Psychoanalytic Approach

The Psychoanalytic theory on rituals is best articulated by Sigmund Freud in his book *Totem and Taboo* (1918) wherein he discussed the primeval manifestations of the oedipal myth. According to Freud, totemism, the original form of religious behaviour comes into being as a result of patricide in the primitive groups. The 'father' in the primitive group was an authoritarian patriarch who reserved his rights over all the resources of the group both human and natural. This led to jealousy among the other male members of the group (sons), who then conspired to kill their father. Having committed the patricide they were overcome with horror and feeling of guilt and shame. To rid themselves of this collective guilt, they create a totem which is a personification of the father image and begin to worship it with the accompaniment of various rituals. The rituals then play the psychologically useful role of an elaborate laying out of the shame that had engulfed every individual in society. Freud observes that ritual behaviour is at the same time non-rational and exists outside a pragmatic objective consideration of means-end relationship. Thus, while rituals might be seen to have components of group solidarity they are in the final instance, a pathological outcome contained in the collective neurosis of a society.



The symbolic value of rituals must be understood in relation with the sacred as opposed to the profane.

#### Check Your Progress 2

i) Who wrote the book 'Totem and Taboo'?

.....

ii) Write five lines on what Evans-Pritchard had to say about rituals.

.....

.....

- .....
- .....
- .....
- iii) Which sociologist emphasised the importance of social group in the understanding of ritual?
- .....

---

## 6.6 THE IMPORTANCE OF RITUALS

---

We go back to a point we made in the introduction. In traditional agrarian societies where the social structure is comparatively less differentiated, religion tends to be intricately woven into the very fabric of the social order. We must consider the importance of rituals in the Indian society, against the background of such an observation. Despite the continuous growth of industrialisation and urbanisation, large sections of Indian society continue to exist as basically peasant societies guided by their traditions and customs. Even in the metropolises of the country, the majority of inhabitants continue to offer resistance to giving up their old traditions and practices. In such a society, religion plays a very dominant influence. Ritual behaviour tends to take place on various occasions and for a variety of purposes. They intervene at various moments in the everyday life of the individual and the group. Indian society is a mosaic of religious communities and hence the magnitude of ritual behaviour in our society is very great.

One way of appreciating the importance of rituals in such a society is to restate the views of Durkheim and of Malinowski. Rituals are important because they create social integration of the group and they provide for emotional solidarity amongst members of the group.

The transition of Indian society from a traditional agrarian society to a modern society, based on democratic secular pattern has brought to the foreground the problem of compatibility amongst various religious communities having to exist together within a larger secular framework maintained by the State. In its political manifestation the problem is witnessed in the way religious beliefs and practices are used for political ends by various political parties within the country. This has led to heightening of religious sensitivity amongst growing sections of the population. Thus we observe that in modern Indian society, besides the importance of both integration and emotional solidarity, ritual behaviour also reinforces a sense of



Holi festivities and rituals in Baarsana village near Mathura (U.P.)

religious identity amongst members of a given religious community. Such efforts at reinforcing the religious identity of a group through ritual behaviour has sometimes threatened the secular fabric of modern Indian society.

The fact of the matter however is that most scholars of Indian society and culture have maintained that the collective conscience of the Indian society is deeply religious in character. The various religious groups and communities have a life-style and world view that is replete with religious symbolism and ritual practices. In such a situation religion in the form of ritual activities may well be seen to serve as a moral guide to both the individual and the group. Such a moral guide or moral code has indirectly also served towards the continued maintenance of the social order.

Other units in this course will deal more in detail with various religions in the Indian society. You will have an opportunity there to appreciate the importance of rituals in each of these religions. For the present, it will suffice to note that in Indian society rituals are important in the every day life of the various communities because they act as mechanisms for social integration, offer emotional solidarity to group members, regulate moral life within a group and offer both the individual and the group, with a group identity.

---

## 6.7 LET US SUM UP

---

This discussion was of comparative theories of ritual have sought to emphasise two major aspects of the discussion on rituals. Firstly we have highlighted the difficulty amongst scholars in defining the ritual activity. While Tylor and the evolutionist associated rituals with magic and animism, the functionalists perceived rituals as activities that take place in the domain of the sacred. The structuralists would seem them as attempts of the primitive mind to structure human activity into that which belongs to the realm of the sacred and that which is part of the everyday world.

Secondly we have tried to highlight how the various scholars have tried to explain rituals. For the evolutionists rituals were seen as primitive attempts to rationally explain the various unknown forces acting upon them in their life. Among the functionalists rituals are seen as having social functions for the social group whether they are of social integration or of emotional solidarity. Amongst the structuralists rituals are seen as system of symbolic expressions derived from the social and cultural order. Finally Freudian psychoanalysis has explained rituals as expressions of collective neurosis resulting from feelings of guilt and shame amongst the group members.

---

## 6.8 KEY WORDS

---

**Affliction** : Serious, often chronic maladies.

**Animism** : A belief that animate and inanimate beings possess a soul.

**Empirical** : Verifiable experience by logical deduction and reasoning.

**Neurotic** : Disease of the nervous system.

**Pragmatic** : A thing or an idea has significance if it has useful or practical consequences.



---

## 6.9 FURTHER READINGS

---

Gennep, Arnold van (1909) 1960, *The Rites of Passage*, London : Routledge.

Durkheim, Emile (1912) 1954, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, London : Allen and Unwin.

Leach, Edmund R. (1961), *Rethinking Anthropology*, London School of Economics and Political Science, Monographs on Social Anthropology, No. 22. London : Athlone.

David L. Sills (ed.), (1968) *Ritual*, pages 520-526 in '*International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*' Vol. 13, New York : Macmillan.

---

## 6.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

---

### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Freud tried to bring out the essential **neurotic** component of ritual behaviour within religions.
- ii) Talcott Parson observed that ritual behaviour existed outside the means-end relations.
- iii) Tylor thought that rituals resulted from the cult of the dead.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) Sigmund Freud wrote the book '*Totem and Taboo*'.
- ii) Questioning the claims of Durkheim that the distinction between the sacred and the profane were universal to all human culture, Evans-Pritchard argues that among the Azande tribe there is no clear distinction between sacred and profane. Pritchard observes that it is very difficult to distinguish when a particular activity takes on the character of a ritual and when it does not. Thus for Azande tribe blowing burning barkcloth smoke into a termite mound while holding a magical plant in one hand, might mean both an ordinary technological activity to keep away the termites, as well as a magical rite in which the tribe explain the barkcloth as termite medicine. In such a situation Pritchard points out that much depends on how the anthropologist categorizes his or her observations. This in turn is based on how the European mind has come to classify what is ritual and what is not.
- iii) Durkheim was one of the first few sociologists to emphasise the importance of a social group in the understanding of ritual and their relationship to society.