1. Anthropological Approaches

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The historical development of anthropological approaches

Just what anthropology is supposed to be about has changed considerably over time. The subject began in the nineteenth century as the search for the origins of humankind. This included looking for fossil remains, and studying humans' nearest animal relatives (primates), as well as investigating what were then taken to be the oldest surviving human societies. Such societies were called 'primitive'. Today it seems a mere historical accident that all these activities go under the label 'anthropology', but at the time they were all held together by a key idea, the idea of evolution.[1]

The early anthropologists, like almost all the intellectuals of the nineteenth century, were evolutionists. They thought all human societies could be arranged in order, as if on a giant historical escalator: some societies – their own – were at the top; others – the 'less developed' European nations and the Asian 'civilizations' – were somewhere in the middle; and some – the small-scale supposedly 'primitive' societies – were at the bottom. All societies were thought to be in a process of evolution during which they became more complex and more rational and less simple and 'primitive'; but some seemed to have got stuck at lower steps of the escalator. Within more advanced societies certain social circles – especially peasants in geographically remote parts of the country – were thought to preserve the customs and thought patterns of earlier epochs. Children were believed to recapitulate the history of the human race, gradually achieving adult rationality through rigorous education. The 'primitive' peoples were, in exactly the same way, seen as

children in need of firm guidance by those brought up in the ways of 'civilization'.

These views of history and society received considerable support from Darwin's work on biological evolution, but they did not depend on it. They predated Darwin and could indeed be held in a Christian and anti-Darwinian manner. As such, in fact, they were an obvious justification for missionary work and for the whole colonial enterprise. These associations with the colonial era mean that among intellectuals today the theory of *social* evolutionism is barely respectable, whereas in popular culture and everyday speech the theory is alive and well. (Where the theory of *biological* evolution is concerned, it is the other way round: taken for granted as a scientific fact by intellectuals, it is denied – at least in the USA – by populist fundamentalists.)

Early anthropologists engaged in fierce debates over the form of the earliest human societies: were they characterized by group marriage, for example, or by matriarchy (women holding power over men)? (Solid evidence for either institution has never been found.) The prehistory of religion was also a controversial matter. Was the earliest form of religion magic? Was it the worship of forces of nature? Was it belief in spirits as apprehended in dreams and visions, a form of religion labelled 'animism'? Or was it totemism, the worship by each constituent clan of the society of its own special totem (sacred object)? There was great fascination with 'primitive' society and its religion among the reading public of the nineteenth century. For some the very difference and strangeness of exotic practices confirmed them in the rightness of their own ways. For others the historic continuity, which all believed in, between the 'primitive' and the 'modern', was a way of debunking and undermining religion as such.

Let us start by considering two very different works: Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Emil Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890 and going through numerous editions, is a massive work. It was read very widely and influenced writers and thinkers far beyond the narrow confines of anthropology. It brought together examples of ritual and magic from classical texts and all over the world. Beautifully written (though by modern standards over-written), it saw all religion as a kind of fertility magic. Frazer's readers cannot have missed the inference that Christ too was a kind of god-king who had to die in order to ensure the fertility of his people. In later editions of the work Frazer proposed a simplistic evolutionary schema, an expression of his confident rationalism: human

history passed through three stages dominated respectively by magic, religion, and science (cf pp. 146 and 195).

As anthropology Durkheim's *Elementary Forms*, originally published in French in 1912, represented a great advance over *The Golden Bough* (see Box 1). In the first place, in contrast to Frazer, Durkheim realized that taking examples from all over the world with little regard for the original context, and piling them high, was faulty as anthropological method. Piling up examples of what was supposedly the same phenomenon only worked to persuade as long as everyone was agreed that all the things piled up were the same. It assumed what needed to be proved. Against Frazer, Durkheim declared that 'one well made experiment proves the rule' and set out to examine in great depth a single example (or what he took to be such): the religion of the aborigines of central Australia, especially the Arunta. In fact Durkheim could also be accused of assuming the truth of his theories and using the Australian data simply as an illustration, not a test. But the richness of his analysis has made his book an enduring and fertile classic of ethnography. Durkheim's theory inspired later anthropologists, both *structural functionalists* and *structuralists* (described below), who entirely rejected his *evolutionism*. Furthermore, by focusing on a single case study and attempting to extract universal truths from it, Durkheim had – probably unwittingly – moved significantly beyond the evolutionist concern with historical stages and mechanisms of historical development. Sophisticated cross-cultural studies, still within the evolutionist framework, continued to be written in France by Durkheim's nephew, Marcel Mauss, into the 1940s.

Box 1

Durkheim's theory of religion

Emil Durkheim (1995/1912) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, tr. Karen E. Field, New York, The Free Press.

Durkheim was very concerned to stress that he was not writing about religion in order to discredit it: 'Fundamentally . . . there are no religions which are false. All are true after their own fashion: All fulfil given conditions of human existence, though in different ways' (p. 2). He used the aboriginal example because, he believed, it was 'the simplest and most primitive religion that observation can make known to us' (p. 21). He assumed that religion was one thing, 'a fundamental and permanent aspect

of humanity' (p. 1), and that its essence could be more easily grasped in this case than in the later, more complex religions. Primitive religions, he asserted, 'fulfill the same needs, play the same role, and proceed from the same causes; therefore, they can serve just as well to elucidate the nature of religious life' (p. 3).

At the same time he had an even more ambitious aim. He believed that by analysing the origin of religion he was also revealing the origin of human thought as such. The most general categories of human thinking – space, time, and cause and effect – are inculcated in people by society; different societies have different versions of these categories, which are essentially religious.

Durkheim criticized other definitions of religion as belief in the supernatural, or belief in God or spiritual beings. The notion of the supernatural is a late development and Buddhism, while definitely religious, does not focus on a God or gods (though of course some modern intellectuals have used precisely this Christian criterion to argue that Buddhism is 'really' a philosophy, not a religion). Durkheim then noted that all religions presuppose a distinction between the sacred and the profane, and advanced his own definition:

> A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is, to things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. (p. 44)

This definition had the great merit of giving equal importance to *practices*: previous approaches had taken for granted a very Christian assumption that *belief* is central to religion, an assumption that does not hold good for most other religions. His stress on *community* is also particularly significant: the social or communal *functions* of religion are at the heart of the Durkheimian approach.

Among the *evolutionist* anthropologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the discussion of *totemism*, which was held to be the earliest form of religion, was particularly controversial. As new reports were received from Australia, scholars fought over their correct interpretation. Among the Arunta each clan had its own totem, usually an animal or a plant, which was sacred to it but not to other clans. Central to Durkheim's account was the Intichiuma ceremony described by the ethnographers Spencer and Gillen. During the short wet season when the desert suddenly blooms the totemic group's chief calls for an Intichiuma. The clan collect in the places sacred to the ancestors, find stones associated with the totem, strike them and collect the dust, which is believed to strengthen the clan,

and scatter it around. Then there is the sacrificial consumption of the totem. For example, if the totem is a kangaroo, which is normally tabooed to members of the kangaroo clan, on this occasion alone the young men of the clan must catch one, and the elders eat a small portion of it, and anoint their bodies with its fat.

Durkheim saw the ethnographic data reported by Spencer and Gillen as evidence that Frazer had been quite wrong to see totemic ritual as mere magic: on the contrary, it was evidently a kind of communion. In the festivities which concluded the Intichiuma there was a 'collective effervescence' which united the worshippers, convinced them that the gods were with them, and thereby made them all stronger. He concluded:

> We now glimpse the profound reason why the gods can no more do without their faithful than the faithful can do without their gods. It is that society, of which the gods are only the symbolic expression, can no more do without individuals than individuals can do without society . . . To have a sound basis for seeing the efficacy that is imputed to the rites as something other than offspring of a chronic delusion with which humanity deceives itself, it must be possible to establish that the effect of the cult is periodically to recreate a moral being upon which we depend, as it depends upon us. Now, this being exists: It is society. (pp. 351–2)

Thus Durkheim believed all societies required some kind of religion to bind them together. In the modern world religion as traditionally conceived would be replaced by some kind of civic and national 'religion of the individual'. So he posed the rhetorical question:

> What basic difference is there between Christians celebrating the principal dates of Christ's life, Jews celebrating the exodus from Egypt or the promulgation of the Decalogue, and a citizens' meeting commemorating the advent of a new moral charter or some other great event of national life? (p. 429)

Many criticisms have been made of Durkheim's theory, for example, that the ethnography he relied on was faulty, that the Intichiuma ceremony is found only among a small number of aboriginal groups, that the sacred and profane spheres do not form two distinct classes of object as he claimed, that his *evolutionism* allowed him to fit any awkward evidence he liked into his framework. Evans-Pritchard declared that 'It was Durkheim and not the savage who made society into a God' (*Nuer Religion*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956, p. 313). This is perhaps the severest criticism. A very large part of religion has to do with social or communal matters, as the general fruitfulness of Durkheim's and the *structural functionalist* approach to religion shows, but there is certainly more to it: religion can equally be radically individualist and anti-social.

An example from northern Spain may show how Durkheim's approach does indeed have some validity in explaining a complex religion, a task that he himself shied away from undertaking. William Christian Jr. did fieldwork in the Nansa valley in what is now Cantabria in 1968–9 and published *Person and God in a Spanish Valley* in 1972. At that time 85–95 per cent of the local population still lived from agriculture. Theologically, the Virgin Mary is a single figure, but the doctrine of advocations allows there to be many different forms within Roman Catholicism, for example, Mary of the Immaculate Conception, Mary of the Purification, Mary of the Sorrows, and so on. There are also different forms associated with different places, such as Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Montserrat, and so on. In this way there has developed in northern Spain a whole hierarchy of shrines which symbolize and serve to create different social units. At the national level there are shrines which symbolize the whole of Spain; these were of little interest to villagers at the time of Christian's fieldwork. The most important regional shrine for the Nansa valley was called El Brezo; this exemplified an important principle of shrine geography, that shrines are very frequently to be found right at the edge of the territory they 'rule over', marking its boundary. El Brezo is sited at the very limit of the herding area of the cattle keepers of the region. At the annual festival of El Brezo every September there is an open air mass attended by 15,000–20,000 people.

At a lower level there are shrines that symbolize the unity of a whole valley, and people from all the villages of the valley come together to worship at its annual festival. Finally at the village level, each village has its own shrine, often on a ridge or mountain top above. For its festival a procession forms, the children first, then the men, then an image of the Virgin Mary, and finally the women, and climbs up to the shrine.

> The procession forms an image of the way the social unit views itself, or is encouraged to view itself, as an organic whole made up distinct parts . . . The villagers for once in the year see the village as a social unit, abstracted from the buildings and the location that make it a geographical unit. (1989 edn, p. 70)

Yet even in the past this Durkheimian view of Roman Catholicism was not the whole story. The church always taught a person-centred doctrine of salvation which had nothing to do with symbolizing group solidarity. Christian describes how, in the 1970s, this part of Catholicism was gradually becoming more important, and rituals of the group less so, as a new generation of priests began to have influence at the village level.

The two other great 'founding fathers' of social thought should be mentioned here, though they had relatively little direct influence in the formative period of anthropology and are therefore dealt with in greater

detail elsewhere in this book (pp. 198–201; cf. Morris 1987: chs. 1 and 2): Karl Marx (1818–83) and Max Weber (1864–1920). Nineteenth-century social evolutionism was at the very heart of Marx's views and his later formulations were influenced by the anthropological work of the founder of kinship studies, Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–81). This evolutionism of his meant that he was little read by the British structural functionalists (see below) though there was certainly some similarity between the Marxist view that religion serves to legitimate and perpetuate the position of the ruling class and the structural functionalist one that it serves to legitimate and perpetuate the existing social structure. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, Marx and his collaborator Engels were at last read by and began to influence at least some anthropologists.[2] Max Weber, on the other hand, was the first great *anti*-evolutionist, but he was rarely read by early anthropologists because he had little to say about small-scale, non-literate societies. Later on, however, his stress on the importance of understanding social actors' views and motivations from within meant that Geertz claimed him as an intellectual forebear of his influential *interpretivist* approach (see below).

The revolt against evolutionism came about independently in the USA and in Britain, but in both cases it was inspired by the development of fieldwork methods. Close study of particular societies was to suggest that explaining everything in terms of some grand historical design was hardly the way to understand a living society. In the USA it was a German, Franz Boas (1858–1942), who introduced detailed field studies. Educated in the German historical school, he insisted that societies must be studied and understood in their own terms; he discouraged grand evolutionary speculation. In Britain it was a Pole, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), who opened the way to modern fieldwork. Having done considerable library research on the aborigines already, he set out for Australia in 1913. When the First World War broke out in 1914 he found himself, as a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in the difficult position of an enemy alien. The Australian authorities allowed him to do fieldwork providing he remained within their territory. He spent a total of two years in the Trobriand Islands off the north-east corner of Papua New Guinea. The mass of rich material he gathered there served as the basis for the monographs which made his name in the 1920s and 1930s.

Malinowski insisted he was a 'functionalist'. What he understood by this was the idea that society was to be seen as a functioning whole: all

customs and practices should be understood in their full context and explained in terms of the functions they fulfilled for the people of that society. It was wholly irrelevant as far as he was concerned to invoke the evolutionist notion of 'survivals' to explain anything. Everything that people did was to be explained by its role in the present; even customs that looked like leftovers from an earlier period must have a function and that function is the real explanation for their existence. Even more important than this theory was Malinowski's innovative method: living with the people to be studied, taking part in their daily activities, learning to speak to them in their own language without the help of an interpreter, and recording everything. This method came to be called participant observation. The method and the theory went together like hand and glove. Living in one place for an extended period was conducive to seeing everything as connected to everything else ('holism'); the theory legitimated what came to be the distinctive basis of social and cultural anthropology: an extended period of participant observation as an essential first step in the career of all aspiring anthropologists. Malinowski's followers, who were deeply committed to holism and participant observation, and to the rejection of 'speculative history', believed themselves to be separated from the nineteenth-century evolutionists by the gulf of Malinowski's Revolution. That Malinowski's Revolution was neither as radical nor as sudden as he and his disciples represented it in retrospect is suggested by the fact that the appreciative preface to Malinowski's first great monograph, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), was written by none other than the arch-evolutionist, Sir James Frazer.[3]

Malinowski explained religion and science in terms of his functionalist theory of human needs. In a late work, he listed seven spheres within which society must satisfy basic human needs: metabolism, reproduction, bodily comforts, safety, movement, growth, and health.[4] Religion, he argued, served to provide psychological support in the face of death. He thought that Durkheim's theory was overdone, but he admitted that religion also often served to bind a community together. Magic, on the other hand, provided psychological assurance in face of the world's general uncertainty. Fishing in the lagoon was highly predictable; Trobrianders performed no magic for this. Fishing out at sea was both dangerous and highly unpredictable: here magical rituals were performed at every step of the way in order to try and ensure a successful trip. All his life Malinowski wrote against the Western stereotype of the 'irrational savage'. He knew from personal experience that Trobrianders

were as canny, calculating, and reasonable as any European. Magic and religion, whether in the Pacific or in the West, were simply responses to ignorance. More importantly, in my opinion, Malinowski distinguished between magic and religion in terms of their very different purposes. Magic is intended to bring about some specific result (better crops, recovery from illness), whereas religious practices aim at no such precise goal: they are done because they have always been done, or because it is appropriate to do them on these occasions (festivals, life-crisis rituals, etc.).

Malinowski was acknowledged as a brilliant fieldworker. Even though he never wrote the synthetic overview of Trobriand life that he always planned, his collected corpus is so rich that it has stood up to repeated reinterpretations by anthropologists of succeeding generations who have never been anywhere near the Trobriand Islands. His functionalist theory of human needs has not fared so well. Of course social institutions must serve human needs in some sense, but frequently – as individuals often complain – social arrangements ride roughshod over what particular humans feel they need right now. In other words, Malinowski's theory of needs was either false or a vague tautology (because existing arrangements are held to be what people need by definition). The problem with his theory as applied to religion has been eloquently pinpointed by Geertz (1968: 92–3):

> When Malinowski concludes that religion has an immense biological value because it enhances 'practical mental attitudes,' because it reveals to man 'truth in the wider, *practical* sense of the word,' one doesn't, remembering Aztec human sacrifices or the self-immolation of Indian widows, know whether to laugh or cry.

A much more powerful paradigm for social anthropology was developed by Malinowski's contemporary, Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955). Radcliffe-Brown was not in Malinowski's class as a fieldworking ethnographer, but he was a much clearer and more important theoretician. They both shared a stress on holism and the need for in-depth fieldwork; both rejected 'historical speculation' for identical reasons. But where Malinowski's functionalism focused on the biological needs of individuals, Radcliffe-Brown's focused on the needs of the society. Far more than Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown viewed society as itself an organism with the social structure analogous to the 'hard' anatomy of the body. It was the job of social anthropology to describe and analyse the social

structures, that is, the rules and workings, of different societies and to compare them in a scientific fashion. Different subsystems within societies were to be analysed in terms of their contribution to the good functioning of the social whole. It was admitted that sometimes certain parts of a society might not be functioning very well, but this was seen as due to change introduced from the outside. It was assumed that the natural state of all societies was one of smoothly functioning stability.

Radcliffe-Brown systematized the outlook of a whole generation of British social anthropologists. His theory became known as *structural functionalism* in order to distinguish it from Malinowski's *functionalism*. But since it was far more influential than Malinowski's position, it is often – confusingly – referred to simply as 'functionalism'. What Radcliffe-Brown had done was to simplify and systematize one part of Durkheim's position and introduce it to anthropology in Britain, the British Commonwealth, and the USA (he was for a time Professor of Anthropology in the University of Chicago).

In the structural functionalist view, religion was seen as the cement of society: it was analysed so as to show how it contributed to maintaining the social structure of the group. A classic of the genre was John Middleton's *Lugbara Religion* (see Box 2, pp. 24–7). In so far as attention was paid to magic, it was in the context of witchcraft. The main theory here was that an increase of witchcraft accusations was some kind of measure of 'social strain': when societies were changing rapidly, then, it was thought, this put stress on social relationships, which in turn led people to accuse others of witchcraft.

The anthropological consensus which existed at least in Britain fell apart in the very changed intellectual climate of the 1960s. Malinowski and the structural functionalists were seen as having benefited from colonialism and were charged with having actively supported it. In their monographs they ignored or minimized the role of the colonial state: they described societies as if they were isolated and stable over hundreds of years (when in fact the social arrangements in question emerged only with the advent of colonialism). Furthermore, they are supposed to have adopted a conservative, male-oriented, and elitist viewpoint in describing local societies. Some of these charges had considerable truth, others were exaggerated (the new generation simply replayed here Malinowski's messianic rejection of evolutionist anthropology).

The analysis of religion as social cement played a major part in the organic vision of structural functionalism. Alternative ways of studying religious phenomena loomed large in the works which rejected the

hegemony of structural functionalism. It was only with the greatest difficulty that, for example, cargo cults could be incorporated into the conventional structural functionalist framework. These were messianic movements which arose in the Pacific: cargo cult leaders instructed their followers to destroy traditional religious shrines, abandon their farms, and wait for the 'cargo' which would soon arrive and usher in a time of plenty. Peter Worsley wrote an influential Marxist interpretation of these movements.[5]

At the same time anthropologists became more interested in studying people's culture for its own sake, and not just for the contribution it made to social stability. (Radcliffe-Brown had dismissed such interest as 'folklore'.) An influential framework here was structuralism, the seminal figure being the French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss. Thought systems were analysed in terms of binary oppositions, revealing their inner 'logic'. Some basic oppositions were supposed to be universal, to be found in myths, symbols, and cultural practices all over the world: for example, the oppositions between male and female, cooked and raw, nature and culture, among others. This approach was inspired by the methods of structural linguistics and for a time it was seen as an alternative way in which to pursue scientific method in the study of culture. The analyst, it was argued, could reveal structures in the thought of the people studied that they themselves were aware of only dimly, if at all.

In contrast to this, most anthropologists were putting an even greater emphasis on viewing things from the point of view of the people themselves. In other disciplines this might have been called a phenomenological or hermeneutic perspective (see Chapter 3). In anthropology in the USA it was associated above all with the viewpoint called 'interpretivist', whose foremost spokesman was Clifford Geertz (cf. pp. 29–30, 93–4). The manifesto of this position was Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). Geertz too was moving away from a form of structural functionalism in which he had received his academic training, that of the sociologist Talcott Parsons.

Geertz's view became increasingly dominant within American cultural anthropology, replacing a variety of positivistic approaches (that is, approaches which aspired to universal generalizations and to emulate the natural sciences). This change is often described as the move from 'etic' approaches to 'emic' approaches, i.e. from looking at cultures from the outside and in the light of universal principles, to viewing them from the inside and in the light of their own categories. There was an

American theory, componential analysis, which attempted to do scientific analyses of how people themselves view things, i.e. its proponents wanted to square the circle of producing objective accounts of subjective views of the world. However, their research programme never got very far; the accounts it produced of what a person must know to operate a given indigenous concept were so complicated that they appeared quite implausible, both psychologically and culturally. In general the task of interpreting other people's worldviews was seen to involve a degree of subjective assessment that precluded it from counting as science. In the British context the same change was conventionally described as the move from 'structure' to 'meaning'. The collapse of structural functionalism was simultaneously a move away from seeing anthropology as a form of science and towards conceptualizing it as more like an art or one of the humanistic disciplines. On the other hand, the method (as opposed to the theoretical framework) of structural functionalism – intensive fieldwork adopting a holistic approach in a defined context – has survived, and has in fact become a defining feature of social anthropology as a discipline (see p. 22ff. below).

An associated trend was to focus more on individuals and less on what Durkheim had called 'social facts'. This meant looking at people less as determined by their social background and more as autonomous actors. This spawned the framework, found also in cognate disciplines like sociology, known as interactionist. Here the point was to show how social arrangements emerged from the different actions of individuals, rather than being a fact of life that determined those actions. This greater interest in individuals has also led to a growth in biographical studies and life histories.

Yet another trend was feminist anthropology. Unsurprisingly, the majority of anthropologists had in the past been male. But even female anthropologists often adopted a 'male persona', communicating mainly with male informants and describing society from a male point of view. Many superb ethnographies were produced which corrected this bias. Lynn Bennett's *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters* (1983) was not only a sensitive study of the place of women in a Hindu village, but also a superb account of village Hinduism as practised by both men and women (see Box 3, pp. 34–5). Lila Abu-Lughod's *Veiled Sentiments* (1986) described how Bedouin women in Egypt on the one hand shared their society's public stoicism, showing disdain for any open display of emotions, while, on the other hand, giving vent to feelings of loss and anger in a culturally sanctioned way, through poetry.[6]

A major theme of feminist anthropology was to focus on the ways in which women negotiated and resisted the inferior place which in one way or another different societies nearly always assign them. Indeed resistance has come to be a major theme of a great deal of modern anthropology. In this way it has come full circle from structural functionalism. In the heyday of structural functionalism, religion was studied in order to show how it contributed to social stability and how it legitimated the powerful, even when there were 'rituals of rebellion', i.e. regular occasions in which a show of opposition to the powerful was permitted.[7] Nowadays the focus tends to be on the ways in which it also permits the relatively powerless to fight back in small ways or large against their position.

Anthropologists today have mostly resigned themselves to the fact that their subject will never have the theoretical unity and uniformity that it once had. Instead there are a variety of approaches and possibilities that anthropologists are expected to be aware of. Some orient their studies of religion to the interests of cognitive psychology, others to feminism, others to what might be called sociological history. There is no longer any theoretical orthodoxy to speak of; it is perhaps fair to say, however, that there is some consensus on the timeless value of good fieldwork and on some of the hallmarks of good ethnography.

Principal characteristics of anthropological approaches

One of the most important key concepts of modern anthropology is, as already indicated, holism, that is, the idea that social practices must be investigated in context and seen as essentially connected to others within the society in question. Anthropologists must consider religion and agricultural practices, kinship and politics, magic and medicine, *together*. There can be no question of viewing religion, for example, as an autonomous system unaffected by other social practices.

In recent years, as the postmodernist vogue for deconstruction has swept through the social sciences, the holistic approach has come under attack. Today it would generally be acknowledged that earlier frameworks, such as structural functionalism in its heyday, exaggerated the systemic nature of the societies they investigated. We should not, in writing about other societies, or indeed our own, make them out to be neater and less messy than social reality usually is. That said, most anthropologists today would admit that holism retains its validity as a

methodological injunction. In other words, even if the social world is not in fact organized into neatly interlocking organic wholes, it is still good anthropological practice to look for interconnections. But one should not be surprised to find that some values or practices within a society are in tension with others, rather than supporting them. In fact societies can often live with unresolved tensions, competing values, and problematic choices. It is the anthropologist's job to look at religion's role in producing problems and tensions just as much as to analyse its role in preserving existing power structures or encouraging social cohesion, for example.

It should come as no surprise to learn that the key notions of structural functionalism were the ideas of structure and function. What these mean can best be shown by means of an example, Middleton's *Lugbara Religion* (see Box 2). It examined the structure of Lugbara society, which was provided by segmentary, patrilineal kin links, supplemented by the continuing relationship of women to their natal clans and by men's relationships with their maternal kin. Middleton showed in great detail how the practices of Lugbara ancestor worship function both to legitimate positions of authority within the structure and, simultaneously, to express challenges to the authority of a declining elder. This view, that conflict between generations was expressed in and legitimated through ritual, was an advance on Radcliffe-Brown's more static views. But Middleton remained within the structural-functionalist paradigm, as he showed when he explained the difference between gradual and radical social change: 'It is the distinction between growth by regeneration and a sudden qualitative change in the structure of a social organism' (p. 266). Middleton is, therefore, open to the criticisms that are characteristically made of structural functionalists: that he ignored or downplayed the importance of the colonial government, of labour migration, and of Christianization, in an attempt to produce an idealized picture of a supposedly stable and unchanging 'traditional religion'. For instance, he never raises the historical question whether the colonial government's ban on feuding between lineages meant that kin had less need to stand together and therefore that elders had to invoke the wrath of 'ghosts' more often against disobedient young men.

Such criticisms may have some force – Middleton was well aware of them, as he makes clear in his very useful account of how he did the research.[8] But they do not detract from the great richness of Middleton's ethnography. He pays great attention to how the Lugbara view things

themselves and gives extensive quotations of their own words. He selects English terms, such as 'ancestor', 'ghost', 'witchcraft', and 'sorcery', to stand for Lugbara words only after careful discussion of all the nuances in the Lugbara language.[9] He gives 34 extended case studies relating to a single Lugbara settlement so the reader acquires a real 'feel' for the process of social action and religion as it is actually practised. In other words, his account is very much more than a jejune list of statements of the form 'The Lugbara believe that . . . '. Lugbara religion comes across as it is lived, as part of everyday life and conflict, as do the personalities involved. Middleton's study is therefore very far from being a mechanical illustration of a particular anthropological theory. As with other classic ethnographic studies, the richness of the material makes it possible to approach it from a variety of theoretical approaches that the author himself did not contemplate.

Box 2

Lugbara religion

John Middleton (1960) *Lugbara Religion: Ritual and Authority among an East African People*, London, Oxford University Press for the International African Institute.

The Lugbara are a people living in Uganda and Zaire just south of the border with Sudan. When Middleton did his fieldwork among the Ugandan Lugbara, from 1949 to 1952, there were about 183,000 of them living on fertile land in dispersed farming settlements. From here on the present tense is what anthropologists call 'the ethnographic present': in other words, it refers to the time of Middleton's fieldwork; the account may not be valid for the Lugbara of today.

Settlements are based on a core of men related in the male line, along with their wives and children. There are often other people living in the settlement as well, who have lesser status. Such 'clients' are usually refugees from quarrels in other settlements: some of them have links through their mothers and have come to live with their maternal uncles; others have no previous kin link, but may over time, and by a gradual process of genealogical manipulation, come to be seen as the descendants of junior lines of the founding lineage. Leadership of the settlement passes down from eldest son to eldest son, so that a man of a collateral line, however rich and talented, cannot be the ritual leader of a settlement unless he breaks away

and has his branch of the lineage accepted as independent. Lugbara men may have more than one wife, and although 60% of marriages are monogamous, respected elders usually do have more than one wife; closely related lineages are often thought of as being descended from different co-wives and are named after their respective ancestresses. There is no 'king' or paramount chief, and there are no leaders other than these lineage elders.

The Lugbara maintain an elaborate series of shrines both outside and within their residential compounds and houses. Most of them relate to the cult of the dead, since ancestors have to be both worshipped and placated. (1) The most important is the 'external lineage ghost shrine' which usually consists of two flat stones, each representing one *ori* or 'ghost' with a third upright stone behind which is their 'policeman' which receives blood from a sacrificed animal before the two main stones. Only elders may control and worship at these shrines; nobody else is even supposed to lay eyes on them. Nearby and associated with them are an ancestress shrine and separate shrines for specific named *ori* which have sacred fig trees planted at their heads. (2) The second most important is the fertility shrine, a flat slab associated with ancestral power. There is one in every compound. An offering will be made whenever there is a sacrifice, but a special offering will be made to it only if there are fears about the lack of fertility of the women or livestock of the compound. (3) The next most important are the shrines set up beneath the granary at the centre of the compound (the granary is always built on stilts). The most important of these are the 'internal ghost shrines'. They are built as small houses made of five granite slabs or as miniature huts with roofs of thatch. They house the recent important dead; more distant ancestors are in the 'external lineage ghost shrines'.

These different types of shrine (and there are many more than can be listed here), and the relationships between them, cannot be understood except in relation to their social organization, and the connection is clearly perceived by the Lugbara themselves. One elder said to Middleton, about a homestead where the head was a Christian and had therefore done away with the shrines: 'These people are not real Lugbara. Have they no ancestors? Do they not respect them? Do they not even respect their fathers while they are alive? What will happen to their children if they do not respect their fathers?'

As this suggests, the authority of elders and of all heads of households is a pervasive problem of Lugbara society. Ideally kinsmen should stick together and sons should obey their fathers. In practice they often quarrel and young men refuse to share their earnings or heed their elders' advice. One of the main sanctions of the elders is their ability to 'invoke' the *ori* to

send sickness to punish the impious. Middleton uses the English 'ghost' to translate the special Lugbara term for these important ancestors who are remembered by name. Some sickness – that leading to death – is thought to come from God, some may be caused by witchcraft and sorcery, some by specific spirits, but a very large proportion is thought to come from *ori*. Sometimes *ori* are thought to send it out of anger at not receiving offerings. But in many cases an elder is thought to have caused a man, or one of his dependants, to become sick by thinking on the disobedient or immoral behaviour of the miscreant in his settlement; the *ori* 'hears' his complaint and sends the sickness as a punishment. This is considered entirely right and proper. Middleton was told:

> It is good that an elder invokes his ghosts against his disobedient 'sons', who do not follow his words . . . It is bad for a man to strike with his hand, or with his spear; now the ghosts strike on his behalf . . . a client cannot invoke the ghosts; he has no clan. But I, and that elder there . . . we have our kinsmen, and it is good that we invoke the ghosts against our sons.

When someone falls sick it is necessary to find out who has sent the sickness in order to effect a cure, and for this the Lugbara have five different kinds of oracle. The most common, the rubbing-stick, may be operated by the elder of the settlement himself; the others require specialists who must be visited elsewhere.

Middleton shows how, within a settlement where several men are vying for leadership, there may be competing claims to have invoked the *ori* and there may be disputes over which *ori* has in fact sent the sickness. This happens because the ability to invoke the *ori* is a recognized attribute of an elder. At the same time, however, no elder is likely to be popular and gain support if he is continually invoking the *ori* to send sickness against the members of his lineage, and so it is essential not to overuse this power. In fact the term used to refer to the 'righteous indignation' with which an elder invokes the *ori* also means the 'envy' which incites a witch to cause harm to others. Unusually, among the Lugbara only men are thought to be witches (though women are believed to be capable of sorcery: causing harm with medicines). In fact, an elder who invokes frequently may be implicitly accused of witchcraft, and young men sometimes openly accuse elders who are trying to control their behaviour of being witches.

Once it has been agreed that a specific *ori* has sent a given sickness, an animal is promised to the *ori* should the patient recover. When recovery occurs there is a sacrifice: elders of closely related lineages attend, the elder of the host lineage states the facts of the case, the animal is sacrificed and portions offered to the *ori*, the host elder then makes a long ritual address, and at the end the meat is distributed and the visitors are fed consecrated meat and beer. The ritual address recapitulates local genealogical lore and is full of exhortations to unity and virtue. It is axiomatic that such addresses are 'true'; any lie would nullify the effect of the ritual. In practice, competing elders may make different ritual addresses which implicitly or even explicitly contradict each other.

One example may give the flavour of these cases. Draii was the head of one household within the settlement but junior to its overall head, Ondua. One day at a beer party Draii's son, Kalfan, was rude both to his father and to another man. Draii ordered him to leave, saying that he was a good-for-nothing who did not deserve to spend money on beer. Kalfan threatened to leave to live with his mother's brother. His father retorted that in that case he need not expect to inherit anything from him. After Kalfan left, Draii sat getting angrier and angrier, ending by invoking an *ori*, his dead father, to punish his son. When, later, Kalfan fell ill, Draii maintained that consulting the oracles to find out who was responsible was pointless, since he had invoked against his son. Ondua insisted that it be done, so against Ondua's wishes Draii consulted one himself. He then immediately 'showed', i.e. promised a goat in sacrifice if Kalfan recovered. This usurpation of Ondua's authority angered the head, and he asserted that it was he, not Draii, who had invoked against Kalfan because of his rudeness, and that only a sacrifice by him, with all the elders present, could therefore cure Kalfan's illness. Nonetheless Draii went ahead and performed the sacrifice himself; no one attended except for Kalfan's friends and his mother's brother. After the rite Kalfan told his friends that his father and Ondua were both witches. No one paid much attention; the elders used this as an example of the bad habits young men were picking up in southern Uganda. When, later, Ondua died, Draii wished to set himself up as an independent elder, but was not recognized as such by the others, and, at least in the short term, had to accept the ritual authority of Ondua's son.

The way in which an interest in 'meaning' replaced a focus on 'structure' has already been referred to. The actual historical development of anthropology was considerably more complicated than such a simplistic textbook account would suggest. It was in fact a classic ethnography published in 1937 by John Middleton's teacher, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, which in retrospect came to be seen as pointing the way to a new way of doing anthropology: *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. The Azande are a people who live not very far from the Lugbara, some in the southern Sudan where Evans-Pritchard studied them, some in Zaire, and some in the Central African Republic. Evans-Pritchard, as he later said quite explicitly, was primarily interested in Azande thought. Since

they themselves regulated their lives by means of oracles and the avoidance of witchcraft, while he lived among them he did the same. He entirely rejected the idea that they were somehow irrational, or stuck at a lower level of thinking than so-called civilized peoples. They were open, practical, and matter-of-fact people when it came to making pots or planting crops. But at the same time, it was axiomatic among them that all deaths are due to witchcraft, and that unexpected misfortune must also be due to witchcraft (why else, they would argue, would a normally skilful hunter return without game, or a skilful potter make pots which suddenly start to break?).

Evans-Pritchard did note that commoner Azande could not accuse aristocrats of witchcraft; nor could wives accuse husbands, or sons fathers. However, he did not make the exploration of these structural inequalities the theme of his monograph as a conventional structural functionalist would have. Instead he explored the thought of the Azande, asking how far, and in what ways, they believed in witchcraft, in oracles, and in magic. Since their ideas were largely expressed in action, this involved a detailed study of how these institutions worked in practice. Despite Evans-Pritchard's own inclinations in these matters, his study influenced many more structural functionalists who followed: they tended to look at how witchcraft accusations would increase when a society was going through rapid change, either because the kin group had grown too large and was about to split, or because of other political and economic changes brought about by colonial governments. This body of anthropological work has had a considerable influence on historians working on early modern Europe.[10]

At the same time *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* came to be seen as raising classic questions of rationality and translation. The study of religion raises these questions also, but when the culture under study puts a great deal of importance on beliefs in magic and witchcraft that the anthropologist finds it hard to share, the same questions arise in still more acute form. In describing such beliefs it is impossible to say that it makes no difference whether they are true or false. One cannot simply 'bracket' them. If people really do harm others, as the Azande believe, by the unconscious operation of an inherited substance in their bellies, then the explanation of Azande beliefs is straightforward; if they do not, then an exploration of Azande beliefs has to ask why they do not see that their beliefs might be false. And it is this that Evans-Pritchard, in great detail and subtlety, in beautifully lucid prose, did, showing how, within their own way of life and thinking, Azande presuppositions

appeared entirely reasonable. A considerable literature eventually grew up, some thirty years or more after the book was written, discussing how far all thought systems shared this unfalsifiable quality and whether supposedly 'rational' scientific worldviews are any different. A classic paper of this sort was written by a British anthropologist of Nigeria, Robin Horton: 'African traditional thought and western science'.[11] He examined the ways in which African religions and Western science differed from and resembled each other. He concluded that, in spite of obvious differences, African religions are, like science, systems of thought the point of which is to explain, control, and predict the natural world; the secret of science's success in this project is that it is 'open' whereas traditional religious systems are 'closed'. This was, as Horton recognized, a controversial claim among anthropologists, who were and are loath to accept the neo-Frazerian view that the religions of pre-literate societies are an inferior form of science.

Geertz's advocacy of an interpretive anthropology was, in a global perspective, even more influential than Evans-Pritchard's less theorized and more voluminous ethnography. The key idea is that what is really important is to be able to interpret events in the way that people themselves do (cf. p. 77). For this, a working knowledge of the local language is usually held to be indispensable. This means that it is less important to count how many cattle each household owns, or to carry out statistically quantifiable surveys or questionnaires in an attempt to say how representative one's conclusions are. Rather, the point is to avoid imposing one's own categories and agenda and to find out, and to manage to convey, what distinctions and concepts and which problems are significant to the people studied. To do this it is not enough simply to ask, or to visit briefly: a prolonged stay, continuous contact, and deep acquaintance are necessary. This is, of course, the point of participant observation as pioneered by Malinowski. Geertz goes beyond Malinowski, however, in insisting that all the anthropologist is doing is advancing interpretations of events and interpretations of 'natives'' own interpretations. Anthropology, on his view, is really about good ethnography: 'theory', such as it is, means little without the empirical case studies which flesh it out.

Geertz introduced the term 'thick description' into anthropology (he took it from the philosopher, Gilbert Ryle): in order to describe what people are doing you have to know (be able to interpret) what they think they are doing; you cannot simply describe it from the outside. Ryle's example was a boy winking. A 'thin description', which paid no

attention to the boy's intentions, could only say that he closed one eyelid. Someone who knew the boy and the context would be in a position to give a thick description: the boy is winking as a greeting, as a warning, or as a burlesque of someone else winking, as the case might be. As an anthropological example we can take the case of *puja* (worship) among the Jains of India: a thin description would be that a person came up to a statue and placed certain substances (food, flowers, water) before it. On the basis of this, the observer might then conclude (importing assumptions from their own culture) that the person was worshipping the Jain saint whose statue it was, engaging in a dialogue or prayer with him, and asking him for something. Proper investigation of the context (the kinds of things normally done in Jain worship) and discussion with the person concerned would enable a 'thick description' to be produced. This would be doubtless be long and involved, but a brief summary might run as follows. The worshipper was 'remembering' the good qualities of the saint, who is believed to be beyond this world and therefore incapable of communicating or granting favours to people; the worshipper habitually carries out such a worship every day for the sake of a generalized religious 'merit'. In order to get to this level of understanding, the anthropologist must spend considerable periods of time in the field and, as far as possible, allow local people and events to set the research agenda. In this way, by avoiding the aggressive imposition of questions set elsewhere and adopting the method of participant observation, many anthropologists have found that they stumble across or are gradually led to insights when they least expect it.

For detailed explanation of local ritual and symbolism it is often necessary to consult experts, which immediately raises the question how far experts and lay people have the same view of the religious activities in question. A very influential anthropologist, famous for his close relationship with a 'native informant' called Muchona, was Victor Turner. His first work was a classic structural functionalist analysis of the dynamics of matrilineal kinship among the Ndembu of Zambia.[12] Thereafter he produced a series of analyses of the symbolism of Ndembu rituals which were unrivalled in their richness and detail.[13] Turner's works had a great impact because he simultaneously paid great attention to cultural ideas – indigenous religious notions – and explained them in universalist terms. In his later works Turner threw academic caution to the winds and did not hesitate to make global comparisons.

Turner drew particularly on Arnold van Gennep's work on rites of passage – any ritual which marks a change of state, but especially life-crisis rites. Van Gennep had posited three stages through which participants in such rituals must pass: separation, marginality or liminality, and aggregation. Such rituals are frequently symbolized as a 'rebirth' or 'new birth': in order to acquire a new status one must first 'die' to one's old status and become marginal. Turner argued that in such rituals the participants, removed from their normal exclusivist and hierarchical social roles, have a shared egalitarian experience for which he coined the term 'communitas'. Turner conceived of this in an almost mystical way:

> I have frequently written about communitas, meaning by this relationships which are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential, 'I-Thou' (in Ludwig Feuerbach's and Martin Buber's sense), between definite and indefinite human identities. The empirical base of this concept was to some extent my experience of friendship during the war as a noncombatant private soldier in a British bomb-disposal unit. But it was mainly village life in Africa which convinced me that spontaneous, immediate, concrete relationships between individuals not only were personally rewarding but also had theoretical relevance.[14]

Turner argued that communitas was at the heart of the pilgrim's experience, pilgrimage being a liminoid or quasi-liminal phenomenon: by this he meant that when on pilgrimage, as during life-crisis rituals, people move outside the structures and roles of everyday life.[15] Though highly suggestive and compellingly argued, other anthropologists working on pilgrimage, particularly in non-Christian contexts, have mostly found that hierarchical social roles are not actually laid aside for the duration of the pilgrimage.

Turner himself noted the parallel between his notion of communitas and the ideas of the hippies:

> The hippie emphasis on spontaneity, immediacy, and 'existence' throws into relief one of the senses in which communitas contrasts with structure. Communitas is of the now; structure is rooted in the past and extends into the future through language, law, and custom . . . [T]he collective dimensions, communitas and structure, are to be found at all stages and levels of culture and society.[16]

Turner believed that not only hippies, but mystics, diviners, shamans, monks, and other marginal people all have a special link to communitas.

Unlike most anthropologists, who have tried to remain 'methodological agnostics' (i.e. avoiding the question of the truth of the beliefs they study), Turner became a Roman Catholic in later life and this undoubtedly had an effect on his writings. He wrote:

> After many years as an agnostic and monistic materialist I learned from the Ndembu that ritual and its symbolism are not merely epiphenomena or disguises of deeper social and psychological processes, but have ontological value . . . I became convinced that religion is not merely a toy of the race's childhood, to be discarded at a nodal point of scientific and technological development, but is really at the heart of the matter.[17]

Turner came to believe in a universal spiritual quest, a conception that other anthropologists found problematic and question-begging. His stress on communitas in rituals also downplayed the extent to which the participants in life-crisis rites are subjected to painful and frightening situations as means of marking the transition they must make.

A very different trend to Turner's humanism, and a very different understanding of structure, was introduced by the structuralists. The idea here was that all social life is produced by thinking human beings, and all human thought takes the form of binary oppositions. Particular societies make specific characteristic associations. These might not be immediately apparent, but by diligent work the analyst should be able to find them, and there was then the confident expectation that these associations would turn up in every sphere of social action in the society in question: in kinship, in the organization of space, in ritual, in cosmology, in politics, and in myth. The more enthusiastic supporters of the method even talked of 'cracking the code' or 'finding the master key' to the cultures they studied. There remained the problem of how such a 'key' could be validated: did other analysts have to come up with the same 'key'? Did the people themselves have any say in whether this was the right view of their culture? Structuralist method eventually came to be accepted as part of the social or cultural anthropologist's toolbox, rather than as the revelation of a faultless new scientific method. Structuralist models came to be seen as just further interpretations, interpretations that had to be situated within the structures of power and status of the society in question. Perhaps the most powerful structuralist monograph, which combined ethnography, history, and sacred texts, was Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus*.[18] This attempted to explain caste in India as a system generated by the opposition of the pure to the impure. By comparing hierarchical and

holistic India with the egalitarian and individualistic West, Dumont put his analysis in a comparative framework reminiscent of Max Weber's writings on world religions; but unlike Weber, Dumont never really overcame a crucial ambiguity in his thinking: was traditional India typical of all premodern societies, or was it an extreme case of hierarchical social organization? Furthermore, students of South Asia were increasingly unhappy with Dumont's framework, feeling that it represented too simplistic a picture over-influenced by the views of Brahman priests.[19]

Similar conclusions were also reached by those who did not join the structuralist bandwagon. If anthropology is a question of interpretation, whose interpretation should one adopt? It was soon noticed that different people within a given society have different points of view. There has been a wider movement in Western societies to give a greater place to the voices of previously subordinated groups: women, ethnic minorities, the disabled, and so on. In the same way, within anthropology there have been some attempts to reach socially deprived groups, but most effort has undoubtedly gone into feminist anthropology. The question here is often phrased in terms of an idea first floated by Edwin Ardener, that women are a 'muted group', whose different view of the world has to be inferred since it is rarely if ever expressed.[20]

The conclusions of Lynn Bennett (1983) are worth quoting here. She conducts an exemplary analysis of the Hindu pantheon, the rituals, and the social organization in a Nepalese village (see pp. 34–5). She then looks in detail at the life course of high-caste women in the village and shows how, rather than two different views of the world as suggested by Ardener, men and women have different angles on and interests in a *shared* Hindu cosmology. Where the goddess Durga is a symbol of the problem of women from the point of view of men, the goddess Parvati, especially in her form as Swasthani, is a symbol of the problematic position of women in Nepalese society from the point of view of women. And in fact the worship of Durga is entirely in the hands of men and is carried out in order to achieve power and worldly success; the worship of Swasthani takes the form of a fast which women undergo in order to acquire a good husband or, if they are married, for the well-being of their husband.

Bennett's conclusions are summarized in the form of a table of oppositions (see pp. 34–5, adapted from Bennett 1983: 310), which is a good example of the way in which structuralist method is incorporated into an ethnography which is at the same time an analysis of social

organization, social process, individual biography, and competing interpretations of myths and symbols, and so on. The best ethnography, as has been suggested already, combines different approaches and cannot be easily pigeon-holed as belonging to any one.

Box 3

Symbolic oppositions in the Hindu perception of women

Lynn Bennett (1983) *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters*, New York, Columbia University Press

Lynn Bennett worked in a village of high-caste Parbatiya people, Bahuns (Brahmans) and Chetris (Kshatriyas) by caste, not far from the Nepalese capital, Kathmandu. After two years of fieldwork in the early 1970s she continued to be based in Nepal, working on various aid-related projects. This meant that by the time she wrote up her work she had been in continuous contact with the people of her field site for ten years, which gave her ethnography a depth, sensitivity, and comprehensiveness which is rarely achieved.

Bennett describes how a high-caste Hindu girl's status changes as she grows older. As a young, unmarried girl she is occasionally worshipped as a form of the goddess; she has considerable freedom in her parents' home; and she ranks high in the family's status system. When she is given away in marriage, she moves to her husband's home where she experiences a dramatic drop in status. She is now a young wife and daughter-in-law. She must serve her mother-in-law dutifully, do all the hardest domestic tasks, and appear submissive and demure at all times. She will be suspected of trying to lure her husband away from the joint family. She is necessary to the joint family – it cannot be perpetuated without her – but she contains the seeds of its eventual destruction. Furthermore, any failure of proper behaviour on her part will threaten the good reputation of her husband's entire household.

On occasional visits to her natal home, a married woman reverts to being a 'consanguine', i.e. the daughter or sister of the men of the household, but these visits are few and usually brief. With time a woman produces offspring and herself achieves the status of mother-in-law when her son marries. By this time she is no longer an outsider in her husband's home and is now much more fully incorporated into her husband's family. In structuralist terms she has come to mediate between the positive pole of womanhood (the sacred virgin) and the negative (the dangerous, sexually active, young married woman). These three forms of womanhood are also associated with three forms of the Hindu goddess.

Positive Extremes	Mediations	Negative Extremes
consanguineal women	senior affinal women	junior affinal women
sister/daughter	mother	wife/daughter-in-law
no material benefit to natal patriline; confers spiritual merit when given away in marriage	contributes to her husband's patriline by producing offspring and working	destructive of solidarity of husband's patriline by luring husband away to form separate household
cow's milk	mother's milk	menstrual blood
asceticism	reproduction	eroticism
Parvati and the gentle nurturing forms of the goddess	Devi (the goddess)	Durga and other terrible and destructive forms of the goddess

Issues and debates

There has been a long-running debate among anthropologists over just how religion should be defined, referred to already in relation to Durkheim (see Box 1, pp. 12–15 and pp. 195–7). Tylor's classic definition, 'belief in spiritual beings', has been updated by Spiro. He defines religion as 'an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings'.[21] Durkheim's stress on the importance of ritual in imparting fundamental categories reappeared in Geertz's famous essay, 'Religion as a cultural system'. Geertz (1973: 91) defined religion as

> (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

When he came to explain how these 'long-lasting moods and motivations' are imparted, the answer was: through ritual.

Southwold has come up with a solution that would probably command wide assent among anthropologists. It is, he argues, a mistake to look for any single characteristic, or a fixed list of characteristics, that are present in every case of what we want to call a religion. Rather, we should accept that religion is a polythetic category, that is, the term 'religion' implies a cluster of characteristics, most of which are present in most cases, but no one of which is everywhere present. He puts forward a list of twelve such characteristics:

(1) A concern with godlike beings and men's relations with them.
(2) A dichotomization of elements of the world into sacred and profane, and a central concern with the sacred.
(3) An orientation towards salvation from the ordinary conditions of worldly existence.
(4) Ritual practices.
(5) Beliefs which are neither logically nor empirically demonstrable or highly probable, but must be held on the basis of faith . . .
(6) An ethical code, supported by such beliefs.
(7) Supernatural sanctions on infringements of that code.
(8) A mythology.
(9) A body of scriptures, or similarly exalted oral traditions.
(10) A priesthood, or similar specialist religious elite.
(11) Association with a moral community, a church (in Durkheim's sense . . .).
(12) Association with an ethnic or similar group.[22]

Some religions have no ethical code; others may lack a body of scripture or oral tradition; Theravada Buddhism is not centrally concerned with relationships to gods. But taken together this list, or something similar, can be taken as a polythetic definition of religion.

Controversy over definitions often reflects deeper differences, of course. Some of the issues which continue to be debated in anthropological works on religion may be listed as follows.

1. Is there a transcultural religious or spiritual sphere (something like Durkheim's or Eliade's sacred perhaps – cf. pp. 84–5, 254–5) which is apprehended by people all over the world in different ways? Should this possibility be ignored or bracketed in research on religion? Or is it perhaps a mistaken, even ethnocentric idea, that hinders sympathetic understanding of other cultures' religious notions?

2. Regardless of whether such a sphere exists, or should be assumed, should all religions be interpreted in fundamentally the same way or not? Maurice Bloch has recently made an ambitious attempt to show that all religious phenomena make use of symbolic or actual violence to conquer and domesticate fertility and vitality.[23] One can contrast such an approach with the theory of Jack Goody that the presence of literacy and written scriptures makes a fundamental difference, so that 'tribal' religions cannot be understood in the same way and with the same conceptual framework as 'world' religions.[24]

3. Is religion an inherently or predominantly conservative force, so that even movements which begin as some kind of protest wind up by supporting the status quo, or a new set of institutional arrangements very similar to it? Or can religion be revolutionary? If religion is not a source of radical opposition to existing structures of power and authority, is it nonetheless a resource for minor, everyday resistance, for instance, by women?[25]

4. How far should one go in making the religious beliefs of others appear sensible and rational? Is the anthropologist's duty to approach others' beliefs and practices in a sympathetic spirit – to convey them as making sense – in conflict with the fact that some religious beliefs have to be accepted on faith because they don't make sense (as in Kierkegaard's dictum 'I believe because it is absurd')?

5. Do religions provide culturally sanctioned outlets for what other cultures might consider pathological or antisocial forms of personality? For example, is it valid to interpret the Theravada Buddhist monastic community in Burma as 'an institutionalized solution to the problems of all kinds of men including those who, from a secular perspective, are (or would become) misfits, neurotics, and failures'?[26] Furthermore, do particular religions encourage pathological states that might otherwise not be experienced by their adherents? Is it appropriate to approach non-Western religions using Western psychological or psychoanalytical categories at all? (See Chapter 5.)

6. In religions where there are scriptures, how relevant are these for understanding what ordinary adherents of them believe? Could an anthropologist's prior knowledge of the scriptures actually be an impediment to proper understanding?[27] How much of a gap is there between the religion of the specialists, who preserve the scriptures, and the ordinary (often illiterate) lay people? Should anthropologists pay more attention to lay people than specialists, or less?

Despite the differences between anthropologists that have been highlighted here, all would agree that nothing can be taken for granted

about other people's religions or cultures and that it would be a grievous mistake to argue back from what the texts say to what ordinary people think and believe. Richard Gombrich, a Sanskritist and Pali scholar who is also an anthropologist, was told by Theravada monks in Sri Lanka that 'gods have nothing to do with religion'.[28] This sounds paradoxical in English but is perfectly obvious, even platitudinous, in Sinhalese, in which the sentence is something like '*deviyo* have nothing to do with *agame*'. This shows that you have to start from the terms of the people themselves: in this case, a careful examination of what *deviyo* and *agame* mean to Sinhalese, which avoids importing Christian or Western assumptions about what 'religion' or 'gods' are. It is part and parcel of such a project that highly negative terms such as 'superstition' (or, nowadays, 'primitive') have little or no use as terms of analysis, though they may be highly significant if they are part of an internal cultural debate that the anthropologist is attempting to understand.

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NOTES

1. Today what is known as biological or physical anthropology studies humans as biological beings, their fossil remains, and primates. The analysis of religion is not an important part of physical anthropology; this chapter therefore uses 'anthropology' to mean 'social or cultural anthropology'.
2. See M. Bloch (1983) *Marxism and Anthropology: The History of a Relationship*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
3. On Malinowski, see A. Kuper (1996) *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The Modern British School*, London, Routledge, 3rd edn, ch. 1.
4. *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1944, p. 91. By 'metabolism' he meant bodily needs such as food and air.
5. *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of 'Cargo' Cults in Melanesia*, London, Paladin, 1957.
6. L. Abu-Lughod (1986) *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

7. For this idea, see Max Gluckman's classic article 'Rituals of rebellion in South East Africa' in his (1963) *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa*, London, Cohen & West.
8. J. Middleton (1970) *The Study of the Lugbara: Expectation and Paradox in Anthropological Research*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston. See also Middleton's short account of Lugbara society, including also two chapters on their religion, for the Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology series: (1965) *The Lugbara of Uganda*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
9. Another classic of the anthropology of religion, written at about the same time, also by a student of Evans-Pritchard, was Godfrey Lienhardt (1961) *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka*, Oxford, Clarendon Press. Lienhardt's handling of issues of translation and interpretation is widely held to be a model of clarity and sophistication.
10. See e.g. K. Thomas (1971) *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England*, London, Weidenfeld.
11. Originally published in the journal *Africa* 37, 1967, pp. 50–71, 155–87, and republished in many other places, notably in B.R. Wilson (ed.) (1970) *Rationality*, Oxford, Blackwell, and in Horton's own collection of essays (1993) *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
12. V.W. Turner (1957) *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
13. V.W. Turner (1967) *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press; (1968) *The Drums of Affliction*, Oxford, Clarendon Press; (1975) *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press; (1977) *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, originally 1969.
14. *Revelation and Divination* (see n. 13), pp. 21–2.
15. See V. Turner and E. Turner (1978) *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*, New York, Columbia University Press.
16. *Ritual Process*, p. 113.
17. *Revelation and Divination*, p. 31.
18. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, complete revised edn, University of Chicago Press, 1980; 1st publ. in French in 1966.
19. Critiques are many and various. See e.g. A. Appadurai, 'Is Homo Hierarchicus?' *American Ethnologist* 13, 1986, pp. 745–61, and D. Quigley (1993) *The Interpretation of Caste*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
20. See E. Ardener, 'Belief and the problem of women', in S. Ardener (ed.) (1975) *Perceiving Women*, London, Dent; reissued in E. Ardener (1989) *The Voice of Prophecy and Other Essays*, Oxford, Blackwell.
21. 'Religion: problems of definition and explanation', p. 197, in B. Kilborne

and L.L. Langness (eds) (1987) *Culture and Human Nature: Theoretical Papers of Melford E. Spiro*, University of Chicago Press; originally published in M. Banton (ed.) (1966) *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, London, Tavistock.

22. M. Southwold, 'Buddhism and the definition of religion', *Man* (NS) 13, 1978, pp. 362–79, esp. pp. 370–1.
23. See M. Bloch (1992) *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
24. See esp. his (1986) *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. For a critique, see J. Halverson, 'Goody and the implosion of the literacy thesis', *Man* (NS) 27, 1992, pp. 301–17.
25. Ioan Lewis has drawn attention to the way in which spirit possession can provide a resource for the amelioration of women's lack of power and/or status; see his *Ecstatic Religion*, London, Routledge, 2nd edn (1989); and *Religion in Context: Cults and Charisma*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (1986).
26. M.E. Spiro (1982) *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2nd edn, p. 350. For a very different use of psychoanalysis in the study of religious symbolism, see G. Obeyesekere (1981) *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
27. Southwold has argued this extraordinary proposition in his (1983) *Buddhism in Life: The Anthropological Study of Religion and the Sinhalese Practice of Buddhism*, Manchester, Manchester University Press. Few anthropologists would go so far, but Southwold's arguments are well worth considering.
28. See R.F. Gombrich (1971) *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Highlands of Ceylon*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 46.

FURTHER READING

Bennett, L. (1983) *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High-Caste Women in Nepal*, New York, Columbia University Press.
Superb account of women's lives which is also one of the best ethnographies of popular Hinduism; it manages to combine detailed analysis of kinship, ritual, and myth with personal life histories.

Christian, W.A. (1989) *Person and God in a Spanish Valley*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, rev. edn of 1972 work.
Classic sensitive ethnography of Spanish Catholicism, including analysis of historical changes.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. (1937) *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
Classic account of witchcraft and sorcery which has influenced all subsequent work on witchcraft.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. (1965) *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
Idiosyncratic but highly readable history of sociological, anthropological, and psychological approaches.

Geertz, C. (1960) *The Religion of Java*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
Geertz's first book and arguably his finest ethnography; describes the different ways in which Islam is practised in Java.

Geertz, C. (1968) *Islam Observed: Religious Developments in Morocco and Indonesia*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
Short, readable account of what Islam has meant to two very different peoples, and a powerful statement against essentialism.

Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books (especially the essay 'Religion as a Cultural System').
The book is one of the most influential texts of modern anthropology, particularly in North America; the essay has been very widely used beyond anthropology.

Keesing, R.M. (1982) *Kwaio Religion: The Living and the Dead in a Solomon Island Society*, New York, Columbia University Press.
A theoretically sophisticated ethnography by an anthropologist who was highly respected both as a fieldworker and as a theoretician.

Lewis, I. (1989) *Ecstatic Religion*, London, Routledge, 2nd edn.
Highly readable and controversial text arguing that women are more involved in spirit possession than men because they use it as a way to overcome a lack of power and status in the wider society.

Middleton, J. (1960) *Lugbara Religion: Ritual and Authority among an East African People*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
One of the classics of African anthropology; see pp. 23–7.

Morris, B. (1987) *Anthropological Studies of Religion: An Introductory Text*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
A useful textbook, both on modern, especially British, anthropology, and on the founding fathers, including those often omitted in other histories of the subject, e.g. Marx and Weber.

Tambiah, S.J. (1990) *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
An approachable and sane introduction to some of the crucial issues of rationality in the study of religion and other cultures.

Turner, V.W. (1967) *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
A classic of modern anthropology; a key text in the move away from analysing culture as a reflex of social structure and towards viewing it in its own terms.