

ANXIETY AND RITUAL: THE THEORIES  
OF MALINOWSKI AND RADCLIFFE-BROWN

By GEORGE C. HOMANS

IN HIS Frazer Lecture for the year 1939, recently published as a pamphlet under the title *Taboo*, Professor A. R. Radcliffe-Brown restates certain of his views on magic and religion.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, he makes certain criticisms of Professor Malinowski's theories on the subject. The appearance of *Taboo*, therefore, offers the anthropologist an occasion for examining the present status of the theory of ritual by means of a study of a controversy between what are perhaps its two most important experts. Incidentally, the reader will find illustrated a type of behavior common in disputes in the world of science.

Malinowski's theory of magic is well-known and has been widely accepted.<sup>2</sup> He holds that any primitive people has a body of empirical knowledge, comparable to modern scientific knowledge, as to the behavior of nature and the means of controlling it to meet man's needs. This knowledge the primitives apply in a thoroughly practical manner to get the results they desire—a crop of tubers, a catch of fish, and so forth. But their techniques are seldom so powerful that the accomplishment of these results is a matter of certainty. When the tiller of the soil has done the best he can to see that his fields are properly planted and tended, a drought or a blight may overwhelm him. Under these circumstances the primitives feel a sentiment which we call anxiety<sup>3</sup> and they perform magical rites which they say will insure good luck. These rites give them the confidence which allows them to attack their practical work with energy and determination.

Malinowski clinches his argument with an observation made in the course of his field-work:

An interesting and crucial test is provided by fishing in the Trobriand Islands and its magic. While in the villages on the inner Lagoon fishing is done in an easy and absolutely reliable manner by the method of poisoning, yielding abundant results without danger and uncertainty, there are on the shores of the open sea dangerous modes of fishing and also certain types in which the yield varies greatly according to whether shoals of fish appear beforehand or not. It is most significant that in the Lagoon fishing, where man can rely completely upon his knowledge and skill, magic

---

<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere most prominently stated in *The Andaman Islanders* (new ed., 1933).

<sup>2</sup> See *Magic, Science and Religion* in J. Needham, ed., *Science, Religion and Reality; Coral Gardens and their Magic*; and *Foundations of Faith and Morals* (Riddell Memorial Lectures).

<sup>3</sup> The word *anxiety* is used here in its ordinary common-sense meaning. This use is not to be confused with the psychoanalytic one, though of course the two are related.

does not exist, while in the open-sea fishing, full of danger and uncertainty, there is extensive magical ritual to secure safety and good results.<sup>4</sup>

On this understanding of magic, Malinowski bases a distinction between magical and religious ritual. A magical rite, he says, has a definite practical purpose which is known to all who practise it and can be easily elicited from any native informant.

This is not true of a religious rite.

While in the magical act the underlying idea and aim is always clear, straightforward, and definite, in the religious ceremony there is no purpose directed towards a subsequent event. It is only possible for the sociologist to establish the function, the sociological *raison d'être* of the act. The native can always state the end of the magical rite, but he will say of a religious ceremony that it is done because such is the usage, or he will narrate an explanatory myth.<sup>5</sup>

This argument is the first with which Professor Radcliffe-Brown takes issue, and his criticism seems to the writer justified. He points out that the difficulty in applying this distinction between magic and religion lies in uncertainty as to what is meant by "definite, practical purpose." What is, in fact, the definite, practical purpose of a magical rite? To an anthropologist from western civilization, a magical rite and a religious rite are equally devoid of definite, practical results, in the usual sense of the phrase. The distinction between them must be based on other grounds. A scrutiny of the methods we actually use to determine the purpose of a magical rite reveals that what we take to be the purpose of the rite is the purpose as stated by a native informant. The native performs one rite and says that it has a definite, practical purpose. He performs another rite and says that it is performed as a matter of custom. If we call the first rite magic and the second religion, we are basing our distinction on a difference between the verbal statements a native makes about the rites. For some purposes the distinction may be a useful one, but one of the truisms of the social sciences is that we shall do well to look at the statements men make about what they do with extreme care before we take the statements at their face value. Or, to use Radcliffe-Brown's own words:

The reasons given by the members of a community for the customs they observe are important data for the anthropologist. But it is to fall into grievous error to suppose that they give a valid explanation of the custom.<sup>6</sup>

Without doubt there are many factors involved in the performance of magic, but the least number which must be taken into consideration are

<sup>4</sup> *Science, Religion and Reality*, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Taboo*, p. 25.

apparently the following. A sentiment which we call anxiety arises when men feel certain desires and do not possess the techniques which make them sure of satisfying the desires. This sentiment of anxiety then manifests itself in ritual behavior. We may recall to mind here Pareto's third class of residues—the need of expressing sentiments by external acts. The situation is familiar in American folklore: a man and his wife are held up in a taxi in New York traffic and in danger of missing their liner to Europe. There is nothing that either one of them can do that would be of any use, but the wife screams to her husband: "But do something, can't you?" Furthermore, the action taken under such circumstances, however useless it may be, does do something to relieve the anxiety. In the usual phrase, it "works it off."

A better statement, from the point of view of psychology, is the following:

From clinical, physiological, and psychological data, it has been shown that throwing into conflict powerful excitations toward and against motor reaction regularly results in disorganization of behavior, subjective distress, and persistent drive toward relief. This syndrome has been called variously "affect," "tension," "anxiety," and "neurosis". . . . The drive toward relief tends to set into operation implicit or explicit forms of behavior, the principal characteristic of which is their abbreviated or condensed or symbolic character and their relative indifference and impermeability (because of the necessity of attaining relief as quickly as possible) to the ordinary checks, delays, and inhibitions imposed by objective reality; thus they are objectively non-adaptive, but are subjectively adaptive to the extent that the relief aimed at is actually effected.<sup>7</sup>

In magic in a primitive society there is a further factor which must be taken into consideration. The primitives feel anxiety and perform ritual actions which have some effect in relieving the anxiety, but they also produce a statement. They say that magical action does in fact produce a "definite, practical result." This statement is to be taken simply as a rationalization, similar in character to other rationalizations. If the rationalization is to be used as a means of distinguishing magic from religion, it should at least be recognized for what it is.

The writer doubts whether the distinction between magic and religion, as formulated by Malinowski, is a useful one. In an effort to get away from the rationalizations, magic might be defined as the ritual which is closely associated with practical activities: hunting, fishing, husbandry. Then religion would be the ritual which is not associated with practical activities, in the sense that, for instance, the mass of the Catholic Church is not so

<sup>7</sup> R. R. Willoughby, *Magic and Cognate Phenomena: An Hypothesis*, in C. Murchison, ed., *Handbook of Social Psychology*, p. 471.

associated. But could a distinction be made in many societies between magic and religion as so defined? Anthropologists will be aware that in many primitive societies native informants say of the most fundamental and sacred rituals, i.e., those ordinarily called religious, that if they are not performed the food supply will fail. Are these rituals closely associated with practical activities? The food supply is certainly a practical concern. Once more we are involved in the native rationalizations. In a sense these rituals are both magical and religious.

Nevertheless, Malinowski's general theory of magic seems sound, and it may be well to cite one of his statements as a summary:

We have seen that all the instincts and emotions, all practical activities, lead man into impasses where gaps in his knowledge and the limitations of his early power of observation and reason betray him at a crucial moment. The human organism reacts to this in spontaneous outbursts, in which rudimentary modes of behavior and rudimentary beliefs in their efficiency are engendered. Magic fixes upon these beliefs and rudimentary rites and standardizes them into permanent traditional forms.<sup>8</sup>

One word of explanation is needed here. The present paper is concerned with ritual so far as it arises out of the sentiment we call anxiety. But there is no implication that other sentiments besides anxiety do not give rise to ritual behavior.

There are other and more important criticisms which Radcliffe-Brown makes of Malinowski's theory of ritual. He wisely bases them upon a consideration of an actual case, the ritual of birth in the Andaman Islands. In order to follow his discussion, his material should first be cited:

In the Andaman Islands when a woman is expecting a baby a name is given to it while it is still in the womb. From that time until some weeks after the baby is born nobody is allowed to use the personal name of either the father or the mother; they can be referred to only by teknonymy, i.e., in terms of their relation to the child. During this period both the parents are required to abstain from eating certain foods which they may freely eat at other times.<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, this is an example of negative ritual—avoidance of behavior which under other circumstances might be proper—rather than of positive ritual, but the same problems arise in either case.

Radcliffe-Brown admits that Malinowski's theory might seem to be applicable as an interpretation of this body of ritual. For a woman, childbirth is always a dangerous process, in which tragedy may suddenly appear for inexplicable reasons. It is dangerous today; it was supremely dangerous under primitive conditions. Under these circumstances, the woman may feel

<sup>8</sup> *Science, Religion and Reality*, p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> *Taboo*, p. 33.

great anxiety, and the husband is naturally interested in the fate of his wife. But the husband and the wife perform certain rites and say that they are efficacious in warding off the dangers of childbirth. Therefore their fears are, to a certain extent, lulled.

Without explicitly rejecting Malinowski's interpretation, Radcliffe-Brown offers an alternative. He writes:

The alternative hypothesis which I am presenting for consideration is as follows. In a given community it is appropriate that an expectant father should feel concern or at least make an appearance of doing so. Some suitable symbolic expression of his concern is found in terms of the general ritual or symbolic idiom of the society, and it is felt generally that a man in that situation ought to carry out the symbolic or ritual actions or abstentions.<sup>10</sup>

Radcliffe-Brown presents this interpretation as an alternative to Malinowski's. The point to be made here is that the question is not one of either-or. The hypothesis is not an alternative but a supplement: both hypotheses must be taken into consideration.

In fact the problem which is raised is the ancient one of the individual and his society. Malinowski is looking at the individual, Radcliffe-Brown at society. Malinowski is saying that the individual tends to feel anxiety on certain occasions; Radcliffe-Brown is saying that society expects the individual to feel anxiety on certain occasions. But there is every reason to believe that both statements are true. They are not mutually exclusive. Indeed the writer has difficulty in believing that it should have ever come about that "in a given community it is appropriate than an expectant father should feel concern" if individual fathers had not in fact showed such concern. Of course, once the tradition had been established, variations in two directions would naturally be produced. There would be, on the one hand, fathers who felt no concern but thought that the expedient thing to do was to put on a show of concern, and on the other hand, fathers who felt concern but did not express it in the manner appropriate in the given society. But on the whole these persons would be few. The average citizen would feel concern at the birth of his child but also would express his concern in the traditional manner. The custom of the society would provide the appropriate channel of his sentiments. In short, a theory adequate to the facts would combine the hypotheses of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown.

A statement made by Malinowski in another connection is appropriately quoted here:

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

The tendency represented largely by the sociological school of Durkheim, and clearly expressed in Professor Radcliffe-Brown's approach to primitive law and other phenomena, the tendency to ignore completely the individual and to eliminate the biological element from the functional analysis of culture, must in my opinion be overcome. It is really the only point of theoretical dissension between Professor Radcliffe-Brown and myself, and the only respect in which the Durkheimian conception of primitive society has to be supplemented in order to be really serviceable in fieldwork, in theoretical studies, and in the practical application of sociology.<sup>11</sup>

Radcliffe-Brown makes a second and more important objection in applying Malinowski's theory to the ritual of childbirth in the Andamans. While a woman is expecting a child, and for some weeks after the birth of the child, both parents are required to abstain from eating certain foods which they may properly eat under ordinary circumstances, these foods apparently being dugong, pork, and turtle meat. Furthermore,

If the Andaman Islanders are asked what would happen if the father or mother broke this taboo, the usual answer is that he or she would be ill, though one or two of my informants thought it might perhaps also affect the child. This is simply one instance of a standard formula which applies to a number of ritual prohibitions.<sup>12</sup>

On the basis of this observation, Radcliffe-Brown goes on to make the following attack on Malinowski's anxiety theory:

I think that for certain rites it would be easy to maintain with equal plausibility an exactly contrary theory, namely, that if it were not for the existence of the rite and the beliefs associated with it the individual would feel no anxiety, and that the psychological effect of the rite is to create in him a sense of insecurity or danger. It seems very unlikely that an Andaman Islander would think that it is dangerous to eat dugong or pork or turtle meat if it were not for the existence of a specific body of ritual the ostensible purpose of which is to protect him from those dangers. Many hundreds of similar instances could be mentioned from all over the world.<sup>13</sup>

This attack on Malinowski's theory appears at first glance to be devastating. But let us examine it a little more closely. Put in simpler language, what Radcliffe-Brown is saying is that the Andaman mother and father do not apparently feel anxiety at the fact of approaching childbirth. They feel anxiety only when the ritual of childbirth is not properly performed. There is no doubt that similar observations could be made of backward peoples all over the world. It is true that their techniques do not allow them to control completely the natural forces on which their lives depend. Nevertheless when they have done their practical work as well as they know how and

<sup>11</sup> I. Hogbin, *Law and Order in Polynesia*, xxxviii. The introduction is by Malinowski.

<sup>12</sup> *Taboo*, p. 35.      <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

have performed the proper rituals, they display little overt anxiety. If anxiety is present, it remains latent. They are, as we say, fatalists. What Thomas and Znaniecki have observed of the Polish peasant seems to be true of most primitive peoples. They write:

The fact is that when the peasant has been working steadily, and has fulfilled the religious and magical ceremonies which tradition requires, he "leaves the rest to God," and waits for the ultimate results to come; the question of more or less skill and efficiency of work has very little importance.<sup>14</sup>

When the primitive or the peasant has done his practical work as well as he knows how, and has "fulfilled the religious and magical ceremonies which tradition requires," he displays little overt anxiety. But he does feel anxiety if the ceremonies have not been properly performed. In fact he generalizes beyond this point and feels that unless all the moralities of his society are observed, nature will not yield her fruits. Incest or murder in the camp will lead to a failure of the crops just as surely as will a breach of ritual. In the shape of famine, pestilence, or war, God will visit their sins upon the people. Accordingly when, in a village of medieval Europe, the peasants, led by the parish priest, went in procession about the boundaries of the village in the Rogation Days in order to bless the growing crops, they offered up prayers at the same time for the forgiveness of sins. This association of ideas is characteristic: nature and morality are mutually dependent.

As a matter of fact, the above observations are implicit in Malinowski's theory, and he was undoubtedly aware of them. He points to the initial anxiety situation, but he also states that ritual dispels the anxiety, at least in part, and gives men confidence. He implies, then, that anxiety remains latent so long as ritual is properly performed. Radcliffe-Brown's criticism does not demolish Malinowski's theory but takes the necessary further step. Once again, it is not an alternative but a supplement. Using the ritual of childbirth in the Andamans as an example, he asks what happens, or rather what would happen, if the ritual is not performed. And he shows that this occasion is the one in which the natives feel anxiety. The anxiety has, so to speak, been displaced from the original situation. But even granted that it has been displaced, Malinowski's general theory is confirmed by the existence of a secondary ritual which has the function of dispelling the secondary anxiety which arises from a breach of ritual and tradition. We call this the ritual of purification, of expiation.

In his description of the Australian Murngin, W. L. Warner sums up admirably what the writer has been trying to say. He writes:

---

<sup>14</sup> W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, I, p. 174.

The Murngin in their logic of controlling nature assume that there is a direct connection between social units and different aspects of nature, and that the control of nature lies in the proper control and treatment of social organization. Properly to control the social organization, the rituals must also be held which rid society of its uncleanness. The society is disciplined by threat of what will happen to nature, the provider, if the members of the group misbehave.<sup>15</sup>

In summary, it appears from the discussion of the theories of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown that at least seven elements must be taken into consideration in any study of the rituals we are accustomed to call magic. Of course, there are other elements which are not considered here. The seven are the following:

1. *Primary anxiety.* Whenever a man desires the accomplishment of certain results and does not possess the techniques which will make him certain to secure these results, he feels a sentiment which we call anxiety.

2. *Primary ritual.* Under these circumstances, he tends to perform actions which have no practical result and which we call ritual. But he is not simply an individual. He is a member of a society with definite traditions, and among other things society determines the form of the ritual and expects him to perform the ritual on the appropriate occasions. There is, however, evidence from our own society that when ritual tradition is weak, men will invent ritual when they feel anxiety.

3. *Secondary anxiety.* When a man has followed the technical procedures at his command and performed the traditional rituals, his primary anxiety remains latent. We say that the rites give him confidence. Under these circumstances, he will feel anxiety only when the rites themselves are not properly performed. In fact this attitude becomes generalized, and anxiety is felt whenever any one of the traditions of society is not observed. This anxiety may be called secondary or displaced anxiety.

4. *Secondary ritual.* This is the ritual of purification and expiation which has the function of dispelling secondary anxiety. Its form and performance, like those of primary ritual, may or may not be socially determined.

5. *Rationalization.* This element includes the statements which are associated with ritual. They may be very simple: such statements as that the performance of a certain magic does insure the catching of fish, or that if an Andaman mother and father do not observe the food taboos they will be sick. The statements may be very elaborate. Such are the statements which accompany the fundamental rituals of any society: the equivalents of the mass of the Catholic Church.

---

<sup>15</sup> W. L. Warner, *A Black Civilization*, p. 410.



6. *Symbolization.* Since the form of ritual action is not determined by the nature of a practical result to be accomplished, it can be determined by other factors. We say that it is symbolic, and each society has its own vocabulary of symbols. Some of the symbolism is relatively simple: for example, the symbolism of sympathies and antipathies. Some is complicated. In particular, certain of the rituals of a society, and those the most important, make symbolic reference to the fundamental myths of the society. The ceremonies of the Murngin make reference to the fundamental myths of that society just as surely as the mass makes reference to Christ's sacrifice on Calvary.

7. *Function.* Ritual actions do not produce a practical result on the external world—that is one reason why we call them ritual. But to make this statement is not to say that ritual has no function. Its function is not related to the world external to the society but to the internal constitution of the society. It gives the members of the society confidence; it dispels their anxieties; it disciplines the social organization. But the functions of ritual have been discussed elsewhere, and in any case they raise questions which are beyond the scope of the present paper.

Finally, a study of the theories of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown illustrates a common feature of scientific controversies: two distinguished persons talking past one another rather than trying to find a common ground for discussion, presenting their theories as alternatives when in fact they are complements. Such a study suggests also that the theory necessary for an adequate description of any phenomenon is often more complicated than the theories of the phenomenon which exist at any given time.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.