

## Max Gluckman's objections to Sir James Frazer

This handout focuses on Gluckman's book *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society*. I may not have caught every criticism below, and note that Gluckman also praises Frazer.

**If-I-were-horse arguments.** Of anthropologists before the 1920s revolution, Gluckman writes: "...in many cases, they used a mode of reasoning which a great social anthropologist, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), called the 'if-I-were-a-horse' argument." (p.2) The term is potentially misleading. The anthropologist seeking to explain something done by natives, a ritual say, considered why he himself would do that and then attributed the same motivation to the native, presenting the action as rational and inevitable in the circumstances. Gluckman has two objections to such explanations: (i) they are used to explain the origins of rituals but we lack sufficient historical sources to verify these (p.6); and (ii) the same ritual, or one that looks the same, can serve different ends in different contexts (p.5). Attempts at magic, an example Gluckman gives, can serve different emotional and intellectual needs, in different societies say.

**Treatment of survivals.** Frazer posited a sequence of stages which societies evolve through, such as magical thought, religion, and science, with some remnant features from earlier stages. Gluckman complains that Frazer's treatment of survivals leaves "a great deal of associated behaviour unexplained." (p.7) I guess Gluckman's worry is that the surrounding activities/industries suggest this is not a mere remnant but has some function.

**Frazer's sources.** Gluckman makes criticisms of Frazer's use of sources (p.20). (i) He takes information from various sources on various societies – I take Gluckman to be implying a lack of sustained focus on any one society. (ii) He does not take into account the different interests and levels of understanding of the authors of these sources. (iii) The sources are often by travellers passing rapidly through many societies and with little competence in the languages spoken. (iv) These travellers focus too much on the bizarre – see below.

**Only the extraordinary.** Gluckman is critical of a focus which omits the ordinary and unexciting parts of tribal life, such as the daily round of agricultural tasks or the routine of domestic life (p.20), only telling us about fertility ceremonies and weddings and the like. But note that Frazer does have some material on this in the abridged *The Golden Bough* – on catching game (p.10) and disposing of hair after cutting it (p.193) – and perhaps more mundane matter in the twelve volume original!

**Morality of magic.** Gluckman criticizes Frazer for regarding belief in magic as held by primitives because they were faced with hazards over which they had little control – they sought control and their mistaken beliefs or actions relieved anxiety. Gluckman's criticism, inspired by Radcliffe-Brown's fieldwork (!), is that Frazer is unaware of how in some so-called primitive societies magical beliefs are concerned with reactions within nature to wrongful human emotions and actions and thus function to maintain morality (p.243).

## References

- Frazer, J.G. 1894. *The Golden Bough, Volume I*. New York: Macmillan.  
Gluckman, M. 1965. *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.