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Source: *The British Journal of Sociology*, Mar., 1969, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Mar., 1969), pp. 69-84

Published by: Wiley on behalf of The London School of Economics and Political Science

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/588999>

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Understanding alien belief-systems¹

In this paper I wish to consider some problems in the interpretation of alien belief systems, which were suggested to me by my own field-work on the Aladura churches among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria (to which I shall refer) and by the analysis of other belief systems by social anthropologists, in ethnographies and in general surveys. To 'understand' human belief and behaviour is, despite its ambiguity, the universally agreed programme of these studies. Since we are social beings ourselves it might seem adequate initially if, when confronted with people with different social standards of what was right or true, we were able to encompass them in our mental system, to show how they had gone wrong, and to preserve and validate our own beliefs. It is in this sense that convinced Communists are able, to their own satisfaction, to show how those who disagree with them are the prisoners of their own social situation, and so to 'understand' them. Any successful ideology must be able to do this with competing belief-systems.

The understanding of sociology is rather different, however. Sociology models itself on biology to the extent that just as the biologist aspires to produce a theory to account for the forms of all organisms, none excluded, so the sociologist aspires to account for all belief systems. Since his own beliefs cannot occupy the same position as the objects of his study (though that is the ideal) he tries to isolate his beliefs *as a sociologist* from his beliefs as a member of society; he wants the 'content' of the understanding to be determined not by his own nature or the nature of his society but solely by the nature of the object of his study.

This is difficult because as a psychological phenomenon the understanding involves a relationship between a subject and an object; *we* must understand *them*. But just as with the natural world it eventually became clear that our purposes would be best served if we understood it as it was and not as we wanted it to be (so that the act of understanding, even if prompted by our worldly purposes, was best performed when it was well separated from what stimulated it),

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so also with the social world. Early attempts to understand social phenomena were so tied to the peculiar interests of the social world of the sociologist himself, that he only tried to understand what seemed odd, deluded, perverse or unusual; and his understanding consisted in showing how the odd, deluded, etc., came to be believed, in contrast to the true and usual—what his own society believed. There was not yet that separation of the act of understanding from the immediate pressure of the sociologist's own social world which is necessary for anything which can approximate to an understanding *sui generis*, a sociologist's understanding. The sociologist, because he is interested in social systems as a class, is also interested in belief-systems as a class; then they may be problematic in the light of his sociological theories, rather than just curious in the light of the current opinions of society. The criteria of the sociologist, in fact, must be separate from the common criteria of society. What he believes as a member of society may have to be suspended when he seeks understanding as a sociologist.

This has not yet come to pass. It is too often 'where the Westerner is inclined to be puzzled', as Dr. Beattie has put it, that the analysis of belief-systems tends to begin; hence his decision to talk about 'magic' and to account for 'magical' beliefs in a way which he does not account for beliefs which he, an English academic, considers non-magical.² It is natural enough to believe, in a culture such as ours, that the conclusions of the natural sciences must have an honoured place in the assumptions of social science, and that what they tell us to be true must be categorized apart from what they tell us is false. Professor Evans-Pritchard, whose work has tended to make this distinction superfluous and unwanted, stated firmly in his book on the Azande that 'Our body of scientific knowledge and logic are the sole arbiters of what are mystical, common-sense, and scientific notions. Their judgements are never absolute.'³

There are further divisions within the ranks of those who hold the views that I am opposing. Dr. Goody, in a detailed consideration of whether we ought to accept the agents' criteria of technical actions as a basis for analysis, concluded that the category of magico-religious behaviour (which would have to be explained differently) would have to be defined by the observer.⁴ This was seen by him, and by some other social anthropologists, as a return to the 'intellectualist, rationalist' position (as Firth calls it approvingly)⁵ of Tylor and Frazer, against which Durkheim and his followers rebelled. I am not concerned to take sides between these parties, for they both share the same rationalist assumption, that certain (untrue) beliefs call out for explanation in a way that other (true) beliefs do not. It is true that Durkheim asked, in a rhetorical way, 'How could a vain fantasy have been able to fashion the human consciousness so strongly and so

durably?’ and asserted that ‘primitive religions . . . hold to reality and express it’.⁶ But the reality of religious beliefs is something quite other than what their adherents suppose, and ‘the reasons with which the faithful justify them may be, and generally are, erroneous’. By this doctrine of symbolism Durkheim was able to retain the rationalist assumption while discarding its intellectualist version.

Understanding other people’s beliefs must begin with a detailed and true account in subjective terms, of what they do think. Here all agree, but here the agreement ends. For understanding is usually taken to be an answer to the question, ‘Why is this believed?’ The answers can be classified into those which are causal or historical, showing how something has come to be believed and those which are not. Causal accounts are not worth giving for the beliefs of individuals who have simply been taught what their social group holds, and cannot be given for the beliefs of people whose history is unknown; but they can and should be attempted for the beliefs of individuals who have not simply imbibed them by socialization, and for the generalized beliefs of peoples whose history is known. Causal explanations were given, legitimately, by Max Weber in his studies of the origins of the world religions, and illegitimately by the nineteenth-century anthropologists in their speculations about the causes of primitive religion. But to demonstrate the impossibility of their programme does not invalidate causal explanation in general. The understanding of most social anthropological literature is of another kind, for in so far as its material is pre-literate it must eschew causal explanation of generalized traditional beliefs altogether.

The legitimate explanation of belief-systems in terms of causes does not in itself commit the sociologist to saying whether they are true or not, as Evans-Pritchard has recently argued.⁷ He emphasizes, as I do, that the social scientist is not, as such, concerned with the validity of the beliefs he is studying, for that is the domain of the theologian or the philosopher of religion; if he does so he is ‘going beyond the legitimate bounds of his subject’. But Tylor, Spencer and the others, he argues, *because* they had theological (anti-religious) prejudices, attempted to explain religion in causal, historical, terms; they ‘were seeking for explanation in terms of origins and essences instead of relations; and . . . this followed from their assumptions that the souls and spirits of religion have no reality’.

Now it may be a true biographical fact about people in general, that they only do want causal or genetic explanations of beliefs which they consider false, and regard their own beliefs as somehow supra-historical, or even that Spencer and his fellows, if they had been religious men, would not have been the kind of sociologists and anthropologists they were; but this is not a logical connection. True beliefs as well as false ones are the product of social forces and their

origin is a perfectly legitimate concern for the sociologist; causal explanation is not to be restricted to what the sociologist's own society considers false. Indeed in view of the fact that, for example, mistaken cosmologies have at most times and places been more prevalent than our present 'scientific' cosmology, the origin of the latter, in time and place, demands explanation—because it is thus problematic. It is not legitimate for the scientist or rationalist to exempt his views from sociological analysis (which is what is implied by those who would base categories of sociological analysis on science's judgments) by saying, 'I hold these views simply because the evidence demands it'; we want to know why he, of all people, has come to interpret the evidence in this way. Conversely, to give a causal account of a belief is not to undermine its validity; it just is not relevant to it.

Evans-Pritchard linked causal explanations in his condemnation with quite another approach, the explanation of alien belief-systems in terms of 'essences'. Tylor and Spencer combined this with a genetic approach; they said how religion came about, and also what it 'really' was, in 'essence'; but the essentialist account may stand alone, as is more usual today. This approach, from Comte onwards, has had great appeal for rationalists who can see the social utility of religious or magical beliefs and who sympathize with those who hold them. They can argue that the *essence* of religion is this, or that religion is *really* about that, the unspoken assumption being that this or that can be provided by a secular substitute. 'Religion in Social Reality', the title of a chapter in Professor Firth's *Elements of Social Organisation* (originally given as a series of lectures endowed by a prominent Birmingham rationalist) expresses clearly the quasi-theological attitude of most essentialist accounts. We see the same in Durkheim and also in William James: theological special pleading envelops and incorporates a universal sociological or philosophical study of religion.

Once the absurdity of historical explanations of primitive social institutions was demonstrated, the explanation had to be for the on-going institutions which the anthropologist observed in the present. The observable consequences of religious practice were classified according to their shared and differing characteristics, in the form of a theory of the functions of religion. The *real* essence of religion was therefore what it contributed to the requirements of the social system; this was to 'explain' religion. One had then shown why an erroneous system of beliefs and practices continued to be practised, and this was what these rationalists most wanted to know.

The acutest problems of interpretation come with fields like 'magic'. One may read many formal definitions in anthropology books without being sure exactly what are the boundaries of the class of actions thus designated. Since what the commentator calls 'magic' will probably be termed 'medicine' in the language of the agents,⁸

it is clear that 'magic' always means those operations which the agents consider efficacious but which the scientific observer thinks deluded. How can we understand them? In most cases the question of how they arose is not answerable; but we can, in showing their real contribution to social life, see a partial reason against their discontinuance. And we can also show why individuals find them plausible and do them, by analysing their structure and showing how they relate to the various elements of the individual's experience (this is, it seems, what Evans-Pritchard means by 'relational studies'⁹). This is an exploration of the subjective world of the agent, and is only marginally concerned with conflicts between it and the 'real' world; it is only at this point that the observer may be forced to set objective, scientific, standards (his own) against those of the agent.

But the anthropologist or sociologist who classifies actions by their 'real' effects, rather than by their agents' intentions, continually faces the problem of why the actions are done, why the *agents* do them.¹⁰ He believes, for example, that rain-making ceremonies continue to be done because of their 'latent functions' (I do not deny these exist), such as creating cohesion in a segmentary society, rather than because they make rain, as the agents say. If we make rational beliefs to be of an entirely different order from those which science tells us are mistaken, we are certain to misrepresent the behaviour and thought of people who believe irrational things; and are hindered from understanding the rise of scientific thought. For all beliefs call for understanding whether their content is true or false.

These remarks may be better understood when we consider some recent writing on religious and magical systems. Some of this is concerned with explaining the rise of new religions (such as the independent churches of Africa), and some with offering an interpretation, in general terms, of (usually primitive) religion. Although these enterprises are subject to different conditions, they are often, in practice, combined or confused, so cannot be considered quite separately. We start with a case of the latter.

Dr. Beattie, in a textbook of admirable lucidity and evident orthodoxy,¹¹ has used the Parsonian dichotomy expressive/instrumental¹² to expound the nature of magic. Instrumental actions bring gratification by achieving external empirical goals, while expressive actions are done for themselves being 'not oriented to the attainment of a goal outside the immediate action situation'. The question arises whether actions are to be thus classified by their agents' criteria, or by the positivist sociologist's decision about how they in fact contribute to the social system (i.e. by their actual effects). We can all agree that the action of a Trobriander in digging his garden to grow yams is instrumental; and also that such religious activity as the singing of hymns to praise God, or the partaking of sacraments, or

the celebration of moral principles, is expressive. But the less a religion resembles the ethically directed, overtly symbolical, other-worldly Protestantism which Parsons has in mind when he talks of religion, the harder it is to fit it to his schemes. For a great deal of religious activity, and all 'magic', are believed by those who do them to be as effective as those practices which we, by our criteria, have designated instrumental. But Beattie states that all such actions are really expressive, and that to compare them with instrumental technical actions is quite misleading; 'Once the essentially expressive, symbolic character of ritual, and therefore of magic, has been understood it becomes easier to answer the question often asked; how is it that so many people believe in and continue to practise magic, without either noticing its ineffectiveness or attempting to test it empirically as they test their practical techniques.' Whereas Frazer and Levy-Bruhl explained behaviour which they found irrational and puzzling by a theory about the childish or the mystical mentality of the primitives, Beattie follows Durkheim and Parsons in saying that the 'real' significance of the action is quite other than what the agents suppose. Parsons, as Goody has observed, for all his emphasis on 'the actor frame of reference', deserts it at the first moment there is a clash between what the primitives think, and what the scientists think.¹³

The term 'expressive' is used because the action expresses, in the appropriate symbolic idiom, what is of social value—the health of the patient, perhaps, or the prosperity of the lineage; and secondly because the action may be an 'expression', or outcome of emotions in the individual. There are thus three linked elements: the expressive action, the object or condition of social value, and the emotion which is expressed or evoked.¹⁴ Magical 'rituals' continue to be done, Beattie would say, not because they answer the problems they are supposed to, but because they provide something instead, a feeling of satisfaction, so that the action becomes an end rather than a means. An action which, on its agent's criteria, belongs to 'adaptation' or 'goal attainment', is transferred by the sociologist to the boxes marked 'integration' or 'tension management'. Two alternative solutions to, say, the problem of sickness are postulated: one, the 'instrumental' sees the problem and tackles it by applying the proper technique; the other, the 'expressive', lessens the discomfort by providing a compensatory feeling of satisfaction.¹⁵

In writing about magic Beattie is most concerned to rebut the Frazerian view that magic is a misguided science, and that the object of a study of magic is to show the 'laws of thought' which underlie it.¹⁶ At least superficially a man who uses magic to cure a pain is about the same sort of activity as a man who uses scientific means to the same end. But Beattie argues that magic is 'a symbolic activity,

not a scientific one, and the elements used are selected because they are symbolically appropriate, not because they have been found by careful experiment to possess certain kinds of causal effectiveness'.¹⁷ Magic must be something other than what it seems to be since the agent is deluded in thinking it can work; it is 'expressive' and falls into the same 'ritual' category, with religion—something really done for itself, not for its results. We must conclude that, for Beattie, a savage applying a magical preparation to cure a sickness (a 'symbolic' activity) is much less like an Englishman applying medicine to cure an identical sickness (a 'scientific' one), than he is like a savage worshipping his ancestors; simply because (even if it is true) the satisfactions of worship and magic are solely intrinsic, while those of the Englishman's rational and instrumental behaviour are extrinsic.

This seems to me to be a *reductio ad absurdum*. Where does the confusion lie? Beattie writes as if the people whom the anthropologist observes, who use magical or scientific techniques, are themselves the inventors, or else test the techniques each time they use them. Of course a primitive man, when he uses 'magic' in the course of daily life, does not do so because *he* has found it 'by careful experiment to possess certain kinds of causal effectiveness'; but nor does the average member of a 'scientific' culture do this. The conditions affecting the regular use of a technique (which Beattie is here discussing) are quite different from the conditions of its origination. A primitive man does not use magical techniques 'because they are symbolically appropriate' (though they may have been devised for this reason) but because he thinks they work. It is one thing to say that the rationale behind magical practices (as a general class) appears to be symbolism, but quite another to say that the agent is doing a special kind of activity called 'symboling'. He is not; he is just doing what he believes to be instrumental. We misinterpret why men act if, from a consideration of what we believe the effects of the actions must be, we disregard the categories under which they act.

This readiness to abandon the actor's criteria whenever they conflict with what he believes leads Beattie to put forward an extraordinary argument in support of his contention that magic and religion are always expressive, and best comparable to a dramatic performance. At a time when the spirit medium cult in Bunyoro had been proscribed for many years, he got a medium to stage a trance. 'Nothing could have been plainer than that the medium was putting on an act. Attired in the appropriate (and very striking) cult apparel . . . he assumed the voice, gestures, and manners appropriate to the spirit supposed to be possessing him. But it seemed to me quite plain that neither he, nor (on this occasion) anyone else present was really deceived.'¹⁸ But we do not want to know about *staged* mediumistic trances, but about real ones. It is as if, in order to understand the

meaning of Holy Communion, one was to invite a group of agnostics to act it, and then to argue that it was just a kind of act! He quotes Jane Harrison to emphasize that Greek authors used 'the language of the stage' to describe the Eleusinian Mysteries. But the whole point about early classical drama is that it was not like ours; it was religion.¹⁹ The ethnocentricity implicit in this refusal to use the actor's own categories can go no further. The application of the categories of our own society means that activities which are quite different in their causes and social consequences—like magical healing and the praise of deities, or religion and acting—are put in the same sociological class.

Is there anything of sociological interest which we can say about religious beliefs in general, or about all that is vulgarly called 'religious'? Maybe so; but we must avoid prejudging the issue as Durkheim by a formal definition which incorporates a theory and which can so be used to exclude awkward evidence. The most salient fact about the things called 'religions' is that they vary so much—in themselves and in their relations with other fields of thought. If we insist on talking about 'religion' a neo-Tylorian definition, such as Horton has given, is perhaps the least tendentious; it does at least denote the phenomena without prejudging their 'essence'. But to talk of 'belief-systems' seems to me to be the best way of avoiding categories which are inextricable from our own views of religion and science; we must allow for 'religion' to be used for the strangest purposes (to us) and related in novel ways to the rest of the mental world.

The religion of the Aladura Churches of Nigeria is remarkable for its 'magical' this-worldliness.²⁰ The word *aladura* means 'praying' in Yoruba and their central doctrine is that God can answer all prayers; but prayers for healing are their especial concern. 'Divine Healing' as the Aladuras call their central tenet, is not essentially either expressive *or* instrumental, but both in different ways, being justified by two separate arguments. It is expressive in that by doing it members are doing right and glorifying God, for Divine Healing is God's Will for men—to this extent it is an end in itself, so that very keen members will stick to what is for Yorubas a difficult doctrine, even if results are not immediate. But it is also instrumental—for the members assert most loudly that it works, and is a safe, sure, cheap and effective method of healing; it is seen as a direct rival to other methods of healing, such as going to native doctors, using traditional medicines or attending a hospital or clinic. The concern with results from prayer is so important that many people shop around between different churches and prophets, and the attitude of resignation to unanswered prayers is only used as a remote residual explanation; people are more likely to forsake Divine Healing, at least for a while.

That it is legitimate to speak of the instrumentality of Divine

Healing (or pagan Yoruba 'magic') and to compare it with scientific medicine, may be seen from a consideration of either the theory or the action of healing. Beattie asserts that 'in no culture do people try out the efficacy of different spells or magical substances in the same way as they test the efficacy of different kinds of clay for pot-making'.²¹ Maybe not quite 'in the same way'; but a Yoruba sociologist has described how the traditional Yoruba healer, with his wide range of 'magical' medicines, does test their efficacy according to criteria of his own,²² and in any society where there are medicine men, healing prophets, or just doctors, some are more popular because they are believed to be better, and this fact implies social standards of excellence.²³ The important fact is not whether the techniques do or do not have the effects claimed for them, but whether people think they do, or act as if they did.

The rationales differ in their content—the power of God, *vis medicatrix naturae*, the four humours, the germ theory of disease—and it may be that the structures of 'magical' theories of disease do in fact differ systematically from scientific theories. But even here the scientific assumption that false theories need explanation in a way that the true do not, may mislead. Homoeopathy, a theory of healing which is by no means discredited, has a rationale very similar to what Frazer called 'Imitative Magic'.²⁴ The drawing of analogies ('symbolic action', Beattie terms it) is not a monopoly of magic, but a universal feature of thought, and directly causative of the insights of Kepler and Pythagoras.²⁵

As for the action-systems, the actual practice of healing, these are even more alike, differing only in the content of the criteria they embody. Whether the belief-system is judged 'magical' or scientific, there are in both cases failures which the theory can explain away: the patient did not have faith, the ritual was done wrong, the disease was worse than one thought, there were complications, or, occasionally, we just don't know. In most cases the failures do not shake belief in the validity of the theory, which has so many successes to its credit; and occasionally one set of 'magical' practices may be discarded for another because its credit is undermined. It is important to emphasize that these techniques are governed by criteria of reasonableness, and are not done in *any* situation. They are not done in situations where failure could not be accounted for; the Dinka do not pray for rain at the beginning of the dry season,²⁶ nor do the Aladuras 'tempt God', as they say. In the situations where 'magic' is used, it is always plausible to attribute success to it; and where 'science' is used there are always failures for which explanations are offered. The strongest claim of positivists—that they take account of physical parameters which do influence social action—is therefore seen to be of little importance; magic has already come to terms with the physical parameters.

The healing successes of Aladura prophets—which can be seen by the casual visitor to a big revival—are explained in various ways. The ordinary members often speak of the ‘spiritual power’ of the prophets, regarding it as a wonderful God-sent property. The leaders have more elaborate and worked-out explanations which tend, in rationalizing, to exclude the element of wonder and surprise. Some, the most learned in Biblical exposition, emphasize God’s promise to use His power, and the moral condition of the patient, and especially his faith—so much so that healing is seen as a necessary consequence of faith and faith alone. One very intellectualist pastor wrote of ‘supernatural’ cures, meaning ones where God had taken mercy on someone who did not have faith. This de-mystification might take another direction; the wonderful power might be explained by such scientific doctrines as Rosicrucianism, Pelmanism or hydrophathy, which have a surprisingly wide currency among literate Yorubas. In either case an explanation drives out wonder. The doctor’s patients, like the faithful at an Aladura revival, only understand the effective power of medicine or prayer in part. The specific ‘works like magic’ as we say.

Beattie’s analysis, deeply rooted in the positivist traditions of British social anthropology, presents a contrast to a recent study by J. W. Fernandez of African religious movements, which falls in a more psychological American tradition.²⁷ He argues that these sects are the products of deprivations and frustrations and can be classified according to how they deal with them along the expressive/instrumental continuum. They are instrumental where they face their difficulties in a ‘political’ manner, by a rational calculation of policies and by doing such things as opening schools or operating as improvement associations. But some also do things which Fernandez finds harder to understand, and these expressive activities are likened to the irrational adjustments of neurotics. Here we find them reducing ‘the frustrations of social domination and cultural depreciation by elaborating a compensatory universe’, so escaping ‘by symbolic displacement’ a distressing situation; we find ‘unrealistic promises and expressive practices’ and ‘a Weltanschauung is created irrespective of the reality in which the movement exists’. His interpretation starts from the seeming fact that certain African churches do things which are irrational (by his own criteria), but does not allow that ordinary reasonable men in societies where ‘unrealistic’ social criteria are prevalent are reasonable in accepting those ‘unrealistic’ beliefs. To use language drawn from clinical psychology is worse than confusing.²⁸ Societies are not like people, and to characterize a belief-system as irrational does not imply that those who adhere to it are, in any useful sense, irrational men.

Since Fernandez explicitly refers to the Aladuras in his survey let

us consider them. I find them hard to place in his typology, because they have many of the 'instrumental' features (such as owning schools and aspiring to be modern) as well as many expressive ones (they forbid medicines, hold emotional revival services, place great store by dreams and visions and their teaching sometimes has a millennial strain); there is little basis for the assumption (which Beattie seems to share) that the more something is instrumental the less it is expressive and vice versa. But are the so-called expressive actions so irrational? Fernandez adopts as a premiss the widely held view that the problems to which the sects are an answer are essentially political and stem from the 'colonial situation', as Balandier termed it.²⁹ If this were so, it would have to be admitted that Aladura practices were a very oblique and indirect answer, and might be called 'symbolic displacement'. But they are not, as can readily be seen if we explore the world-view of the founders in their own terms, without attempting to slot it into some category of ours, and then ask ourselves how the founders, being the kind of men they were and undergoing the experiences they did, came to hold these views. The Aladura churches are then seen to be a compelling answer to intellectual and emotional problems induced by a lethal influenza epidemic which the founders did not attribute to the colonial situation but to God. If one is a Yoruba member of the C.M.S., who formally believes the Biblical proposition that 'Whatsoever ye ask in my name shall be granted unto you' and who experiences a series of epidemics where hundreds of thousands die and where medicine is patently useless, it is perfectly rational behaviour to decline the use of medicine on the grounds that reliance on God alone will be the best protection, having seen and heard others testify to their safety (for the death rate seems to have been lower among Christians for a variety of reasons) and being able to rationalize sickness as evidence of sin. Only by refraining from applying our social prejudices can we understand their behaviour.

G. C. Homans, playing the role of honest broker between the theories of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, has interpreted magical behaviour as an irrational response to anxiety in a very similar way.³⁰ From Malinowski's statement that the Trobrianders use magic when their rational techniques fail them (which is a tautology since it is true merely by Malinowski's implicit scientific definition of magical acts) Homans argues that 'a sentiment that we call anxiety arises when men feel certain desires and do not possess means that make them sure of satisfying their desires', and that this results in magic. A man using magic is likened to an American lady who knowing she is going to miss her plane, says to relieve her tension, 'Oh, do something, can't you?' There is a similarity here to a remark of Beattie's, to the effect that magic is not the application of any kind of knowledge to a problem, but 'the acting out of a situation'.

Now *we* might expect the natives to be anxious in situations where we know their knowledge fails them; but the natives think that magic *is* rational and effective.³¹ So why should they be anxious since anxiety can only be caused from being consciously aware one can do nothing? There is no universal association between magical behaviour and the subjective condition of anxiety. 'Magical' faith healing is most successful when those who practise it, far from being anxious, are radiantly confident that it will work. Conversely we have all had acquaintances who are very anxious about techniques they know to be safe and rational, such as minor surgical operations. Homans' psychologism is quite mistaken in likening the situations in which men employ culturally ordained 'magical' techniques to the culturally unstructured situations where anxiety leads to individual irrationalisms.

It is, however, possible that Homans' argument is relevant to an understanding of the *origins* of magical beliefs—something to which Malinowski's material about how men use magic in an ongoing social system has, explicitly, no relevance. (This did not prevent Malinowski from making such a strikingly historical statement as the assertions that magic 'never originated; it never was created or invented. All magic simply *was* from the beginning . . . the essence of all magic is its traditional integrity . . . [it] can only be efficient if it has been transmitted without loss and without flaw from one generation to the other'³²—which could be refuted by the most cursory glance at the history of European magic, from Pliny to Paracelsus.) But there is no *a priori* reason to suppose, as Homans argues elsewhere,³³ that the reasons why individuals act in a regular, culturally ordained way are the same as the reason for that way being initially adopted. Even if we argue that an original piece of magical behaviour is a response to an 'anxiety situation', it is quite possible that anxiety based on acknowledged ignorance may lead to what even a scientist would regard as rational. Clearly any piece of novel behaviour must be psychologically determined, the product of an individual mind. But for that individual behaviour to become the prototype of regular behaviour, such as magic is, it must not only use cultural material, but make the transition from the creative individual to the group. How is this done?

Kluckhohn suggested that the only way in which 'fantasy' could become a socially shared myth was for a large number of people to suffer these 'symptoms' simultaneously.³⁴ 'When, however, changed conditions happen to make a particular type of obsessive behaviour or a special sort of fantasy generally congenial, the private ritual is then socialized by the group, the fantasy of the individual becomes the myth of his society.' This psychological account may seem to support the views of those who see religion as an irrational reaction to

events as compared with politics or science. But it applies equally well to any form of thought, especially innovatory, and Kluckhohn writes of 'the obsessive, the compulsive tendency which lurks in all organized thought'. What is an obsessive ritual from one standpoint may be a rare consistency, such as science aims at, from another.

It may be tempting to analyse prophets as madmen, and it has become a cliché to emphasize the unusual psychic dispositions of prophetic types, whether shamans or ethical prophets.³⁵ But this is only relevant to a consideration of how *this* individual came to have the revelation. In so far as prophets are innovators, they can be expected to be atypical of their fellows;³⁶ but their message, their explanation of events, not only uses cultural material but if successful, offers what their people accept as a superior rationalization of events. It is not necessary to argue, as Kluckhohn seems to, that the mental state of those who adopt a prophet's revelation as true, must resemble that of the prophet himself. The prophets who have contributed so much to the growth of the Nigerian Aladura churches were in many cases 'abnormal' men, given to trances and other dissociative conditions; but what they revealed was judged to be a valuable and working guide to life by many hard-headed and 'balanced' (or so it seemed to me) traders and clerks. A man may arrive at an answer to a problem by a bizarre route; but whether his answer is acceptable to others depends on its content, considered in the light of the cultural tradition and the social situation.

In saying that the behaviour of Cargo cultists or the adherents of African religious movements is rational, I am not saying that their beliefs are 'purely intellectual—a craving for a solution to a problem', as Jarvie has characterized Cargo Cults.³⁷ No one who has known religious enthusiasts could imagine their acting beliefs were the product of *mere* intellectual cravings. Conversely, the fact that 'Art and Religion spring from unsatisfied desire'³⁸ does not prove that the doctrines and beliefs which do emerge do not constitute a rational answer to a real problem, or that science and common-sense spring from different roots. Judged from the standpoint of sociology no behaviour is, properly speaking, irrational, for he who speaks of 'irrational' behaviour speaks not as a sociologist trying for once to hold himself neutral with respect to different evaluative and cognitive standpoints, but as a partisan of a particular social viewpoint, or as 'a publicist, a polemical writer of tracts for the times'.³⁹ The term 'magic' is, I suggest, best expunged from our sociological vocabulary altogether.

It may perhaps be objected that this approach is too anti-scientist, that sociology must be at one with the findings of its sister sciences, that it is hypocritical to pretend not to accept them, and so forth. This would be so if it were not for the curious dual nature of socio-

logy. For it is both a social activity itself, and something which, in order to study social activity, must set itself apart from its own social setting—our scientific culture which has given rise to it. Only thus will it do justice to alien kinds of thought. This dual character is noted by Winch when he says that a sociologist is more like an engineer studying other engineers than one studying the data of engineering.⁴⁰ But we must try to make these comparisons converge, by aiming at the latter situation. My thesis assumes the importance of Weber's principle of *Verstehen*, which in his methodological writings is linked with the principle of ethical neutrality. Weber meant that we must prevent the intrusion of our own ethical-evaluative assumptions; but in the study of alien belief-systems we must aim at a more difficult goal, a temporary suspension of the cognitive assumptions of our own society.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Professor Julius Gould, M. D. King, Daniel Lawrence and Vivienne Luton, colleagues at Nottingham, and also to Professor Maurice Freedman, for helpful discussion and comment while this paper was in draft.
2. J. Beattie, *Other Cultures*, London, Cohen and West, 1964, p. 203.
3. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1937, p. 12.
4. J. Goody, 'Religion and Ritual: the Definitional Problem', *Brit. J. Sociol.*, vol. 12 (1961), p. 142.
5. R. Firth, 'Problem and Assumption in an Anthropological Study of Religion', *J.R.A.I.*, vol. 89 (1959), p. 129.
6. E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, New York: Collier paperback edn., 1961, pp. 14-15.
7. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965, pp. 17, 121. This attack on causal, historical explanations seems to be a reversal of his earlier judgment that 'the claim that one can understand the functioning of institutions at a certain point in time . . . [is] an absurdity'; 'Social Anthro-
- pology: Past and Present', *Man*, vol. 50 (1950), p. 121.
8. E.g. Yoruba *ogun*, Zande *ngua*, Lodagaa *tii*, all refer to herbal potions as well as protective or success charms.
9. *Theories of Primitive Religion*, pp. 111-20.
10. Cf. the similar arguments of M. E. Spiro, 'Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation', in M. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, London, Tavistock, 1966, pp. 85-126.
11. *Other Cultures*, p. 204.
12. Cf. T. Parsons, *The Social System*, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1952, ch. IX and pp. 79 ff., 401 ff., using and developing concepts evolved by R. F. Bales, *Interaction Process Analysis*, Reading, Mass., Addison-Wesley, 1951, on which cf. discussion in J. Madge, *The Origins of Scientific Sociology*, London: Tavistock, 1963, pp. 431 ff.
13. Parsons, in spite of his claim in *The Structure of Social Action* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1937), p. 3, that with Spencer positivism was dead, or in his essay 'The Theoretical Development of the Sociology of Religion', in *Essays in Sociological Theory*, Glencoe: Free Press, 1954, pp. 197-211, that his own thought represented a natural con-

vergence between Weber, Pareto, Durkheim and Malinowski, it is clear that an essentially positivist concern for the social system has overcome the Weberian emphasis on the actor's standpoint.

14. This position is essentially that of Radcliffe-Brown in *The Andaman Islanders*, Cambridge: C.U.P., 1922.

15. The expressive/instrumental dichotomy can still be legitimately used if the intention of the actor, rather than the effect as the sociologist judges it, is taken as the guide—as by R. Horton, 'A Definition of Religion and its Uses', *J.R.A.I.*, vol. 90 (1960), speaking of 'communion' vs. 'manipulation', or by D. E. Apter, *The Politics of Modernization*, Chicago University Press, 1965, pp. 83–100, using 'consummatory' vs. 'instrumental' value-systems. Similar dichotomies are used by C. Geertz, 'Ideology as a Cultural System', in D. E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent*, Glencoe, Free Press, 1964, pp. 47–76, and by R. Linton, 'Nativistic Movements', *Amer. Anthr.*, vol. 65 (1943).

16. I. C. Jarvie and J. Agassi, 'The Problem of the Rationality of Magic', *Brit. J. Sociol.*, vol. 18 (1967), p. 55, discuss at greater length the issue between Beattie and Frazer; I agree with much of what they have to say, but feel it is a mistake to be so concerned with 'rationality'.

17. This is further developed by Beattie in 'Ritual and Social Change' (The Malinowski Lecture), in *Man*, *J.R.A.I.* (n.s.), vol. 1 (1966), where he cites L. A. White, 'Symboling: a kind of behaviour', *J. Psych.*, vol. 53 (1962), pp. 311–17. No word in sociology is used with more confusion and ambiguity than 'symbol'; cf. discussion by V. W. Turner, 'Symbols in Ndembu Ritual', in M. Gluckman and E. Devons (eds.), *Closed Systems and Open Minds*, Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1964, pp. 20–51.

18. Beattie, loc. cit., p. 71.

19. In so far as Greek drama was dramatic and religious, the relationship between them was inverse; for the

more important the actors and the dramatic aspect came to be, the less important was the chorus (whose religious hymns were initially the centre-piece) until it vanished altogether; compare early Aeschylus (say the *Suppliants*) with late Euripides (such as *Iphigenia in Tauris*).

20. For a fuller account of Aladura beliefs and practices see J. D. Y. Peel, *A Sociological Study of Two Independent Churches among the Yoruba*, Ph.D. Thesis, London, 1966.

21. *Other Cultures*, p. 215.

22. N. A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, Ph.D. Thesis, London, 1940, ch. XXX; the author was the first Yoruba to be awarded the Ph.D. Cf. also A. O. Ajose, 'Preventive Medicine and Superstition in Nigeria', *Africa*, vol. 27 (1957), p. 268; and R. Prince, 'Indigenous Yoruba Psychiatry', in A. Kiev (ed.), *Magic, Faith and Healing*, Glencoe: Free Press, 1964.

23. Cf. O. I. Romano, 'Charismatic Medicine, Folk-healing and Folk-sainthood', *Amer. Anthr.*, vol. 67 (1965), p. 1151, on Mexico.

24. On Homoeopathy and other unusual medical techniques cf. B. Inglis, *Fringe Medicine*, London: Faber and Faber, 1964.

25. On Greek thought, cf. F. M. Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae*, Cambridge: C.U.P., 1952, and G. E. R. Lloyd, *Polarity and Analogy in Greek Philosophical Thought*, Cambridge: C.U.P., 1966; on Kepler, cf. A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, London, Hutchinson, 1959. The whole question of the relation of African 'magical' thought to modern thought has been most excellently discussed by Robin Horton, 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science', *Africa*, vol. 37 (1967), pp. 50–71, 155–87.

26. Cf. R. G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961, p. 280.

27. J. W. Fernandez, 'African Religious Movements: Types and Dynamics', *Journ. Mod. Afr. Stud.*, vol. 2 (1964), p. 531.

28. This style of argument is well criticized by Mary Douglas, *Pollution and Danger*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, pp. 115–18.

29. Cf. G. Balandier, *Sociologie Actuelle de l'Afrique Noire*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de la France, 1955, ch. III. The reductionism which is so widespread in this area (i.e. religion must be 'really' about something which the sociologist himself can understand, such as politics) owes a great deal, indirectly, to Marx on Feuerbach.

30. G. C. Homans, 'Anxiety and Ritual' (1941), reprinted in *Sentiments and Activities*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963, pp. 192–201.

31. Horton, loc. cit. (1967), p. 168, writes of the 'chilling intuition that if his theory fails him, chaos is at hand' which he says the scientist does not feel, but which the practitioner of magic does. If we believe that the magician is skating on thin ice, we will naturally imagine that he has 'chilling intuitions' of failure; but does the magician himself perceive it? Conversely, does the scientist never dread the chaos which he may have to face if his theory is wrong?

32. B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday paperback edn., 1948, p. 141.

33. Homans, op. cit., p. 233, discussing the causes of cross-cousin marriage.

34. C. Kluckhohn, 'Myths and Rituals: A General Theory', *Harvard Theological Rev.*, vol. 35 (1942), p. 53.

35. As R. Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1935, pp. 191–4.

36. Cf. M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (1965), pp. 46–59 and D. Emmett, 'Prophets and their Societies', *J.R.A.I.*, vol. 86 (1956), p. 13.

37. I. C. Jarvie, *The Revolution in Anthropology*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964, p. 167.

38. Thus Malinowski, quoting with approval Jane Harrison, op. cit., p. 23; but such a judgment, in a functionalist context, is quite vacuous, for it applies equally to any other action, institution or belief whatsoever.

39. Thus speaking of the historian, R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1946, p. 77.

40. P. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958, pp. 86–91.