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theme group: Magic and religion in the Ancient Near East

Oral presentation by Wim van Binsbergen

of:

Tambiah, S.J. 1985, Culture, thought and social action: An anthropological perspective, Cambridge (Mass.)/London: Harvard University Press, chs 1 & 2

INTRODUCTION

One difficulty I have with this text is that, just because I am an anthropologist, I have been asked to present and perhaps even to defend a text which represents an anthropology which I do not particularly reject, but which I do not seek to emulate myself. I am in considerable agreement with Tambiah's ideas, but I do not like the method by which he arrives at them nor the way in which he puts them. This is not my kind of anthropology.

A glimpse of the classic core of anthropology

These two chapters are aptly chosen in that, in combination, they practically review, effectively criticise, and provide a thoughtful alternative, to what can be said to constitute the classic core of anthropological thinking on magic:

— Frazer: Frazer, J., 1955, The golden bough: A study in magic and religion, 3rd ed., New York/London: St Martins/Macmillan

— Mauss: Hubert, H., & M. Mauss, 1904, Théorie générale de la magie, Année Sociologique, 7: [pages] ; reprinted in Mauss, M., 1960, Sociologie et anthropologie, 2nd ed., Paris: presses Universitaires de France. (Lévi-Strauss, pupil of Mauss's;

Durkheim, teacher of Mauss, introducing the notion of the fundamentally arbitrary nature of the sacred — a notion with which Malinowski takes exception)

— Malinowski: Malinowski, B., 1948, Magic, science and religion and other essays, Boston: [publisher] ; and: Coral gardens and their magic, 1929. (Malinowski as the ‘first field-worker of anthropology’. Explain: Argonauts of the Western Pacific, kula (1922)

— Evans-Pritchard: Evans-Pritchard, E.E., 1972, Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande, London: Oxford University Press, reprint of the first edition of 1937.

severe historical and disciplinary limitations of the classic core in anthropology.

At the same time this creation of a central core of anthropological classical perspective is also the weakness of anthropology: in the attempt to consolidate itself as a distinct and respected discipline, such high walls were built around the young anthropology that time-honoured approaches to magic e.g. in religious studies, classical studies etc. could no longer penetrate. For anthropologists, the history of scholarship begins with Frazer, Malinowski and even Evans-Pritchard

It is significant, though, that when trying to proceed beyond this anthropological heritage, Tambiah no longer finds inspiration with anthropologists but has to rely, however critically, on such linguists, semiologists and philosophers as Ogden & Richards, Popper, Izutsu, Cassirer, Sapir, de Saussure, Jakobson, Cherry.

the apologetic strand: vindicating non-western Man

Part of Tambiah’s argument also reflects the apologetic orientation of much of anthropology: vindicating the inhabitant of exotic areas, freeing him from the colonialists’ perception of being irrational or pre-logical (Levi-Bruhl). In this respect it is significant that Tambiah is himself from South East Asia, and a prominent British anthropologist.

PARALLELS WITH MY OWN RESEARCH

There are parallels with my own research, e.g.

1. The dialectics between a mechanical (‘magical’) and personal (‘religious’) approach to the central concept of baraka, among the peasants of the highlands of Northwestern Tunisia
2. The problem of the therapeutic efficacy of African ritual

3. The struggle to arrive at an anthropology which is not just a projection of Western cultural and political imperialism, and which therefore is not subordinative but coordinative, and based on intersubjectivity and exchange

POINTS OF CRITICISM

Tambiah's is a fair presentation of anthropological thinking in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Today the sense of the classic tradition in anthropology has much declined, and there is far less of an animated discussion on magic than a few decades ago. In fact, I had to strain my mind to keep my attention to his argument, while familiarly anthropological it also sounded irritatingly antiquated. Yet at the same time these chapters remain very useful, delicate and subtle representations of the anthropological approach to religious c.q. magical phenomena. One only misses a bit the impact of neo-structuralism of the kind of Mary Douglas and after. More recent work would stress either the structuralist, or the parapsychological dimension, and would go for the magical experience and the literary evocation (Castaneda, Stoller, Van Binsbergen) in an attempt to find alternative solutions for the vindication problem. But in general Tambiah's texts give a good idea of what the standard anthropological stock in trade is when it comes to magic.

empirical basis.

The empirical basis as presented in the text is, after all, rather scanty and 'in vacuo'. That is why Tambiah does not seem to have enough of an appreciation for interpersonal variation, situationality, the problems of consensus in the production and reproduction of systems of thought, the role of social control and of material, visual elements (including those featuring in ritual) to anchor individual variation and keep it to a manageable minimum level

history.

It is as if these systems of thought have no history

the social and political context

There is too little, in these two chapters, on the social and political matrix, what Tambiah calls the outer frame. The argument revolves largely on the production and especially the associated thought processes of individuals. There is far too little on the conditions which reproduce, institutionalise, and thus perpetuate or alter these thought

processes. The analysis therefore remains very formal and smacks of the anthropology of an earlier period, inevitable (the first chapter is about 25 years old).

science and magic?

I am not convinced by the total divorce (as advocated by Tambiah) between science and magic. After all, some magic is under modern conditions replaced by science, also in Africa

magic, power and control

If magic is an idiom of control (but Tambiah suggests it is not), why not bring to bear other, social and political relations on the analysis?