

Social anthropology summary: A.R. Radcliffe-Brown's objections to Sir James Frazer

A. Frazer on rites. Frazer would collect information from amateur fieldworkers about rites in other societies, both present and past, such as a rite which aims to cause rain. *Rational rite explanations*: he would explain a rite by considering why it would have been rational at some point for this rite to be introduced. *Method*: he seems to work out what is rational by putting himself in the place of the participant.

i. The insufficient data objection. Frazer often focused on primitive societies. One objection from A.R. Radcliffe-Brown is that we do not have sufficient data about the past of these societies to evaluate how their rites originated. He characterizes speculations about the development of so-called primitive institutions as worse than useless (1952: 3).

ii. The rite first objection. Radcliffe-Brown appeals to Loisy and the religious scholar W. Robertson Smith to *suggest* an objection. Frazer takes the reason – in the form of a desire (e.g. to make it rain) and a belief (doing this will make it rain) – to be prior to the rite. But in various societies about which we *do* have historical information, the rites appear prior to recorded reasons for engaging with them. Radcliffe-Brown objects that if one is going to make speculations about how primitive rites were introduced, despite insufficient data for some societies, the most justified way is to extend Robertson Smith's approach of taking participation in the rite to be prior to rationalizing beliefs (1952: 155).

iii. The stability of the rite objection. Radcliffe-Brown proposes studying the rite, not beliefs about why partake in the rite, contrary to Frazer, because beliefs are unstable compared to the rite. One person forms one rationalization of why they partake in the rite, while another person forms another rationalization (1952: 157). Also these are changeable.

B. Frazer's evolutionism. Frazer as a theorist was part of a trend in late nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropology known as evolutionism. He thought there were stages of development in the evolution of a society, with some societies still being in a primitive stage and also some parts of advanced societies still being in an earlier stage. He would present a stage-by-stage scheme for how societies evolve: for example belief in magic, then a religious belief system, then science. The insufficient data objection above was also applied to Frazer's evolutionism, but other objections are suggested

i. Refutation by action? Radcliffe-Brown's class background made him an outsider to the English academic system. He learnt Durkheim and lectured on the French social scientist. Perhaps by doing this, he was targeting some kind of evolutionism, because it entails that a person from Radcliffe-Brown's background cannot master advanced French social science. (I am loosely inspired by George Stocking's historical research here.)

ii. A hidden objection? Radcliffe-Brown writes of "what are called primitive or backward peoples," (1952: 2) which suggests some objection to those descriptions, used by Frazer.

Reference. Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.