

## **R.R. Marett's 1923 objections to Sir James Frazer's anthropology**

This is taken from Marett's 1923 review of two texts by Frazer and also one of Malinowski for *The London Mercury*; some criticisms are made when reviewing the latter. Note: Marett draws attention to the enjoyment that can be derived from Frazer's *The Golden Bough* references.

**Abridgement principles?** When reviewing the abridged edition, Marett makes the (mild?) criticism that we do not know why Frazer takes some examples and omits others from his twelve volume original.

**Unreliable traveller reports.** When reviewing Malinowski, Marett implies, or at least suggests, that it is unlikely that Frazer's sources are mostly reliable: "The number of documents, on which the student can confidently rely, as contrasted with the bewildering infinity of travellers' tales, is indeed slender." A possible reply by a Frazerian is that doubts about any one particular source are overcome by numbers: the number of travellers making reports of similar practices.

**Unreliable motive specifications.** There is a suggestion that Frazer would seek to support his explanations of the origins of rites by explanations offered by natives, and Marett thinks they should not have this privilege: "In regard to ultimate origins and motives the local anthropological society is as likely to be wrong as any other scientific body." Marett refers to Frazer's own unconscious motives two sentences before, when making a different objection, which suggests he takes explanations in terms of unconscious motives seriously.

**Magic and science.** On one account, magical thought is a faulty attempt to achieve scientific ends: it is to be replaced by science. That is Frazer's view, presenting magical thought as rational given the circumstances faced by primitive man. Marett, drawing from Malinowski, prefers the view that the sciences attempt to specify laws under normal circumstances – e.g. water will boil at 100 degrees Celsius under normal circumstances – whereas magic is an attempt to make sense of that which is outside the normal.

**Insufficient local generalization.** An oft-repeated criticism of Frazer's anthropology is that it treats similar-looking rituals from different peoples as the same, when they may arise from different motivations. When reviewing Frazer's book on belief in immortality, Marett *almost* makes the opposite criticism: "seven groups of them [Polynesians] are examined one by one so that their distinctive beliefs and practices in regard to the dead shall not be blurred by exclusive insistence on common elements... one would have welcomed a final chapter in which the greatest common measure of these decidedly homogeneous creeds and ceremonies was worked out." But Frazer is not criticized for denying commonality, rather for not stating it.

**Paradigm case problem.** Regarding the immortality book, Marett criticizes Frazer for taking Polynesian animism as providing "the clue to the whole religious life, including the characteristic institution of tabu." Is the worry that it is too different from some religious life elsewhere or that one local family of examples is too weak a basis for universal generalization?

## **Reference**

Marett, R.R. 1923. Anthropology. *The London Mercury* 8 (43): 106-108.