UNIT 6: ARGONAUTS OF THE WESTERN PACIFIC-B. MALINOWSKI*

Structure

6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to understand:

- a broad overview of the scope, focus and findings of ethnography on Trobriand Islanders;
- description of various methods used in the collecting of the ethnographic material;
- different spheres of Kula inhabitants;
- beliefs And Ideas among Trobrianders; and
- economic life of Trobriand tribal.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we shall undertake a study on the Trobriand Islanders/ Trobrianders of now modern Papua New Guinea. This is the classic monograph authored by Bronislaw Malinowski entitled Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea, first published in 1922.

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'Trobriand society is one of the 'holy places' in the anthropological cosmography', with Malinowki first putting it on the anthropological map. The Trobriands comprise mainly four islands- Kiriwina, Kitava, Vakuta and Kaileuna, off the eastern coast of New Guinea, which was first colonised by Great Britain, then came under the subjugation of Australia and finally became part of the nation-state of Papua New Guinea in 1975.

Malinowski lived as a native among the natives for many months together, watching them daily at work and at play, conversing with them in their own tongue and deriving all his information from the surest sources- personal observation and statements made to him directly by natives in their own language without the intervention of an interpreter'. Malinowski's work established participant observation as the most important method for anthropological fieldwork. Hence, for data collection researchers' observation and long-term involvement with the community life and participation in the cultural events become important. In this unit, we will try to understand ethnographic methods and practices primarily through the work of Bronisław Malinowski.

The main focus of Malinowki's book is the remarkable system of exchange, locally called Kula, among the Trobriand Islanders, which is economic or commercial only in part and which also examines the motives and feelings underlying this, with magic playing a very important role in it.

This unit explains the methods used in collecting the ethnographic material, the duties of an ethnographer, the mental charts that have to be calculated and formed to bring out the various realities of communities and inter-relationship, in particular in the trade practices, economic activities, political behaviour, and the importance of myths and legend which come out in various coastal population in south sea islands.

This unit also explains how an ethnographer has to do the profiling and depiction of the inhabitants according to the geographical location. In this context, profiling would include appearances and manners of the natives. Furthermore, the unit talks about different aspects of life, economic, social and political. The unit also talks about totems, myths and laws and the role of magic in regulating and controlling the tasks among the inhabitants. The clan system is also explained in detail. In this unit, ethnographic methods are explained in great detail through various practices in and around the kula system. For instance, different magico-religious ideas of the Trobrianders are explored.

In this unit, through an explanation of a particular cultural practice a clear distinction is made between the data which is collected through a direct involvement and participation and the ones collected through other means and sources. In this quest, underlies the assertion that researchers' honest exposition is essential to capture these details in ethnographic studies.

6.2 THE SUBJECT AND METHOD OF THIS INQUIRY

The coastal populations of the South Sea Islands, with very few exceptions, are, or were before their extinction, expert navigators and traders. Several

of them had evolved excellent types of large sea-going canoes, and used to embark in them on distant trade expeditions or raids of war and conquest. The Papuo-Melanesians, who inhabit the coast and the outlying islands of New Guinea, are no exception to this rule. In general, they are daring sailors, industrious manufacturers, and keen traders. The manufacturing centres of important articles, such as pottery, stone implements, canoes, fine baskets, valued ornaments, are localized in several places, according to the skill of the inhabitants, their inherited tribal tradition, and special facilities offered by the district; thence they are traded over wide areas, sometimes travelling more than hundreds of miles.

Definite forms of exchange along definite trade routes are to be found established between the various tribes. A most remarkable form of inter-tribal trade is that obtaining between the Motu of Port Moresby and the tribes of the Papuan Gulf. The Motu sail for hundreds of miles in heavy, unwieldy canoes, called *lakatoi*, which are provided with the characteristic crab-claw sails. They bring pottery and shell ornaments, in olden days, stone blades, to Gulf Papuans, from whom they obtain in exchange sago and the heavy dug-outs, which are used afterwards by the Motu for the construction of their *lakatoi* canoes.

Further East, on the South coast, there lives the industrious, sea-faring population of the Mailu, who link the East End of New Guinea with the central coast tribes by means of annual trading expeditions. Finally, the natives of the islands and archipelagoes, scattered around the East End, are in constant trading relations with one another.

There exists, however, another, a very extensive and highly complex trading system, embracing with its ramifications, not only the islands near the East End, but also the Louisiades, Woodlark Island, the Trobriand Archipelago, and the d'Entrecasteaux group; it penetrates into the mainland of New Guinea, and exerts an indirect influence over several outlying districts, such as Rossel Island, and some parts of the Northern and Southern coast of New Guinea. This trading system, *the Kula*, is the subject Malinowski described in this work, and it will be seen that it is an economic phenomenon of considerable theoretical importance. It looms paramount in the tribal life of those natives who live within its circuit, and its importance is fully realized by the tribesmen themselves, whose ideas, ambitions, desires and vanities are very much bound up with the Kula.

The Method: Before proceeding to the account of the Kula, it will be well to give a description of the methods used in the collecting of the ethnographic material.

As Malinowski noted that the Ethnographer has in the field, the duty before him of drawing up all the rules and regularities of tribal life; all that is permanent and fixed; of giving an anatomy of their culture, of depicting the constitution of their society. But these things, though crystallized and set, are nowhere formulated. There is no written or explicitly expressed code of laws, and their whole tribal tradition, the whole structure of their society, are embodied in the most elusive of all materials; the human being. But not even in human mind or memory are these laws to be found definitely formulated. The natives obey the forces and commands of the tribal code,

but they do not comprehend them; exactly as they obey their instincts and their impulses, but could not lay down a single law of psychology. The regularities in native institutions are an automatic result of the interaction of the mental forces of tradition, and of the material conditions of environment. Exactly as a humble member of any modern institution, whether it be the state, or the church, or the army is of it and in it, but has no vision of the resulting integral action of the whole, still less could furnish any account of its organization, so it would be futile to attempt questioning a native in abstract, sociological terms. The difference is that, in our society, every institution has its intelligent members, its historians, and its archives and documents, whereas in a native society there are none of these. After this is realized an expedient has to be found to overcome this difficulty. This expedient for an Ethnographer consists in collecting concrete data of evidence, and drawing the general inferences for himself.

Though we cannot ask a native about abstract, general rules, we can always enquire how a given case would be treated. Thus for instance, in asking how they would treat crime, or punish it, it would be vain to put to a native a sweeping question such as, "How do you treat and punish a criminal?" for even words could not be found to express it in native. But an imaginary case, or still better, a real occurrence, will stimulate a native to express his opinion and to supply plentiful information. A real case indeed will start the natives on a wave of discussion, evoke expressions of indignation, show them taking sides—all of which talk will probably contain a wealth of definite views, of moral censures, as well as reveal the social mechanism set in motion by the crime committed. From there, it will be easy to lead them on to speak of other similar cases, to remember other actual occurrences or to discuss them in all their implications and aspects. From this material, which ought to cover the widest possible range of facts, the inference is obtained by simple induction. The scientific treatment differs from that of good common sense, first in that a student will extend the completeness and minuteness of survey much further and in a pedantically systematic and methodical manner; and secondly, in that the scientifically trained mind, will push the inquiry along really relevant lines, and towards aims possessing real importance. Indeed, the object of scientific training is to provide the empirical investigator with a mental chart, in accordance with which he can take his bearings and lay his course.

The collecting of concrete data over a wide range of facts is thus one of the main points of field method. The obligation is not to enumerate a few examples only, but to exhaust all the cases within reach; and, on this search for cases, the investigator will score most whose mental chart is clearest.

His mental chart ought to be transformed into a real one; it ought to materialise into a diagram, a plan, an exhaustive, synoptic table of cases.

The method of reducing information, if possible, into charts or synoptic tables ought to be extended to the study of practically all aspects of native life. All types of economic transactions may be studied by following up connected, actual cases, and putting them into a synoptic chart; again, a table ought to be drawn up of all the gifts and presents customary in a given society, a table including the sociological, ceremonial, and economic definition of

every item. Also, systems of magic, connected series of ceremonies, types of legal acts, all could be charted, allowing each entry to be synoptically defined under a number of headings. Besides this, of course, the genealogical census of every community, studied more in detail, extensive maps, plans and diagrams, illustrating ownership in garden land, hunting and fishing privileges, etc., serve as the more fundamental documents of ethnographic research. An Ethnographer, who wishes to be trusted, must show clearly and concisely, in a tabularized form, which are his own direct observations, and which the indirect information that form the bases of his account.

Living in the village with no other business but to follow native life, one sees the customs, ceremonies and transactions over and over again, one has examples of their beliefs as they are actually lived through, and the full body and blood of actual native life fills out soon the skeleton of abstract constructions. He is able in each case to state whether an act is public or private; how a public assembly behaves, and what it looks like; he can judge whether an event is ordinary or an exciting and singular one; whether natives bring to it a great deal of sincere and earnest spirit, or perform it in fun; whether they do it in a perfunctory manner, or with zeal and deliberation. In other words, there is a series of phenomena of great importance which cannot possibly be recorded by questioning or computing documents, but have to be observed in their full actuality.

In the same way, in studying the conspicuous acts of tribal life, such as ceremonies, rites, festivities, etc., the details and tone of behaviour ought to be given, besides the bare outline of events. In observing ceremonies or other tribal events, such, it is necessary, not only to note down those occurrences and details which are prescribed by tradition and custom to be the essential course of the act, but also the Ethnographer ought to record carefully and precisely, one after the other, the actions of the actors and of the spectators. Forgetting for a moment that he knows and understands the structure of this ceremony, the main dogmatic ideas underlying it, he might try to find himself only in the midst of an assembly of human-beings, who behave seriously or jocularly, with earnest concentration or with bored frivolity, who are either in the same mood as he finds them every day, or else are screwed up to a high pitch of excitement, and so on and so on. With his attention constantly directed to this aspect of tribal life, with the constant endeavor to fix it, to express it in terms of actual fact, a good deal of reliable and expressive material finds its way into his notes. He will be able to "set" the act into its proper place in tribal life, that is to show whether it is exceptional or commonplace, one in which the natives behave ordinarily, or one in which their whole behaviour is transformed. And he will also be able to bring all this home to his readers in a clear, convincing manner. It is good for the Ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on. He can take part in the natives' games, he can follow them on their visits and walks, sit down and listen and share in their conversations.

Finally, let us pass to the third and last aim of scientific field-work, to the last type of phenomenon which ought to be recorded in order to give a full and adequate picture of native culture. Besides the firm outline of tribal constitution and crystallized cultural items which form the skeleton, besides

the data of daily life and ordinary behaviour, which are, so to speak, its flesh and blood, there is still to be recorded the spirit—the natives' views and opinions and utterances. For, in every act of tribal life, there is, first, the routine prescribed by custom and tradition, then there is the manner in which it is carried out, and lastly there is the commentary to it, contained in the natives' mind. A man who submits to various customary obligations, who follows a traditional course of action, does it impelled by certain motives, to the accompaniment of certain feelings, guided by certain ideas. These ideas, feelings, and impulses are molded and conditioned by the culture in which we find them, and are therefore an ethnic peculiarity of the given society. An attempt must be made therefore, to study and record them.

6.3 THE COUNTRY AND INHABITANTS OF THE KULA DISTRICT

The tribes who live within the sphere of the Kula system of trading belong, one and all—with the exception perhaps, of the Rossel Island natives, to the same racial group. These tribes inhabit the eastern most end of the mainland of New Guinea and those islands, scattered in the form of the long-drawn archipelago, which continue in the same south-easterly trend as the mainland, as if to bridge over the gap between New Guinea and the Solomons.

New Guinea is a mountainous island-continent, very difficult of access in its interior, and also at certain portions of the coast, where barrier reefs, swamps and rocks practically prevent landing or even approach for native craft. The easily accessible portions of the coast and the outlying islands would certainly offer a hospitable reception to immigrants of a higher stock; but, on the other hand, the high hills, the impregnable fastness in swampy flats and shores where landing was difficult and dangerous, would give easy protection to the aborigines, and discourage the influx of migrators.

The actual distribution of races in New Guinea shows the Eastern part of the main island and archipelagoes of New Guinea and the racial distribution of the natives. The interior of the continent, the low sago swamps and deltas of the Gulf of Papua —probably the greater part of the North Coast and of the South-West Coast of New Guinea, are inhabited by a "relatively tall, dark-skinned, frizzly-haired" race.

The Eastern Papuasians, that is, the generally smaller, lighter coloured, frizzly-haired races of the eastern peninsula of New Guinea and its archipelagoes now require a name, and since the true Melanesian element is dominant in them, they may be called Papuo-Melanesians.

The Papuo-Melanesians again can be divided into two groups, a Western and an Eastern one, which, following Dr. Seligman's terminology, we shall call the Western Papuo-Melanesians and the Massim respectively.

The Kula district lies at the easternmost end of the main island and the archipelagoes lying to its East and North-East. As Professor C.G. Seligman says: "This area can be divided into two parts, a small northern portion comprising the Trobriands, the Marshall Bennets, the Woodlarks (Murua), as well as a number of smaller islands such as the Laughlans (Nada), and

a far larger southern portion comprising the remainder of the Massim domain".

It is necessary to sub-divide this Northern Massim further into three groups, first, that of the Trobriand Islanders, or the Boyowans (the Western Branch); secondly that of the natives of Woodlark Island and the Marshall Bennets (the Eastern Branch); and, thirdly, the small group of the Amphlett natives. pg. 23-24

The other big sub-division of the Kula tribes is composed of the Southern Massim, of which, as just said, the western branch mainly concerns us. These last natives are smaller in stature, and with, broadly speaking, a much less attractive appearance than those of the North. They live in widely scattered communities, each house or group of houses standing in its own little grove of palm and fruit trees, apart from the others. Formerly they were cannibals and head-hunters, and used to make unexpected raids on their adversaries. There is no chieftainship, authority being exercised by the elders in each community. They build very elaborately constructed and beautifully decorated houses on piles. Such are the general characteristics of the Northern and Southern Massim respectively, given in a few words.

6.4 THE NATIVES OF THE TROBRIAND ISLANDS

The Trobriand Archipelago, also called Boyowa or Kiriwina. The appearance of the natives, their manners, their types of behaviour, may augur well or ill for the possibilities of rapid and easy research. The great variety in their physical appearance is what strikes one first in Boyowa. There are men and women of tall stature, fine bearing, and delicate features, with clear-cut aquiline profile and high foreheads, well-formed nose and chin, and an open, intelligent expression and besides these, there are others with prognatic, negroid faces, broad, thick-lipped mouths, narrow foreheads, and a coarse expression. The better featured have also a markedly lighter skin. Even their hair differs, varying from quite straight locks to the frizzly mop of the typical Melanesian. They wear the same classes of ornaments as the other Massim, consisting mainly of fibre armlets and belts, earrings cf turtle shell and spondylus discs, and they are very fond of using, for personal decoration, flowers and aromatic herbs. In manner they are much freer, more familiar and confident, than any of the natives we have so far met. As soon as an interesting stranger arrives, half the village assembles around him, talking loudly and making remarks about him, frequently uncomplimentary, and altogether assuming a tone of jocular familiarity. One of the main sociological features at once strikes an observant newcomer—the existence of rank and social differentiation. Some of the natives—very frequently those of the finer looking type—are treated with most marked deference by others, and in return, these chiefs and persons of rank behave in quite a different way towards the strangers.

When a chief is present, no commoner dares to remain in a physically higher position; he has to bend his body or squat. Similarly, when the chief sits down, no one would dare to stand. The institution of definite chieftainship, to which are shown such extreme marks of deference, with a

sort of rudimentary Court ceremonial, with insignia of rank and authority, is so entirely foreign to the whole spirit of Melanesian tribal life, that at first sight it transports the Ethnographer into a different world.

The next interesting thing to do, after we have sufficiently taken in the appearance and manners of the natives, is to walk round the village. In the coastal villages, placed on marshy ground and coral outcrop, the irregularity of the soil and cramped space have obliterated the design, and they present quite a chaotic appearance. The big villages of the central districts, on the other hands, are built one and all with an almost geometrical regularity. In the middle, a big circular space is surrounded by a ring of yam houses. These latter are built on piles, and present a fine, decorative front, with walls of big, round logs, laid cross-wise on one another, so as to leave wide interstices through which the stored yams can be seen. Some of the store-houses strike us at once as being better built, larger, and higher than the rest, and these have also big, ornamented boards, running round the gable and across it. These are the yam houses of the chief or of persons of rank. Each yam house also has, as a rule, a small platform in front of it, on which groups of men will sit and chat in the evening, and where visitors can rest. Concentrically with the circular row of yam houses, there runs a ring of dwelling huts, and thus a street going all round the village is formed between the two rows. The dwellings are lower than the yam houses, and instead of being on piles, are built directly on the ground. The interior is dark and very stuffy, and the only opening into it is through the door, and that is usually closed. Each hut is occupied by one family, that is, husband, wife and small children, while adolescent and grown-up boys and girls live in separate small bachelor's houses, harbouring some two to six inmates. Chiefs and people of rank have their special, personal houses, besides those of their wives. The Chief's house often stands in the central ring of the store-houses facing the main place.

In the circular street between the stores and living houses, everyday life goes on, that is, the preparation of food, the eating of meals, and the usual exchange of gossip and ordinary social amenities. The interior of the houses is only used at night, or on wet days, and is more a sleeping than a living room. The backs of the houses and the contiguous groves are the scene of the children's play and the women's occupations. Further away, remote parts of the grove are reserved for sanitary purposes, each sex having its own retreat. The baku (central place) is the most picturesque part, and there the somewhat monotonous colour scheme of the brown and grey is broken by the overhanging foliage of the grove, seen above the neat fronts and gaudy ornamentation of the yam-houses and by the decorations worn by the crowd when a dance or ceremony is taking place.

Half of the natives' working life is spent in the garden, and around it centres perhaps more than half of his interests and ambitions. The native can and, under circumstances, does work hard, and work systematically, with endurance and purpose, nor does he wait till he is pressed to work by his immediate needs. They produce this surplus in a manner which entails much more work than is strictly necessary for obtaining the crops.

Among the forces and beliefs which bear upon and regulate garden work, perhaps magic is the most important. It is a department of its own, and the

garden magician, next to the chief and the sorcerer, is the most important personage of the village. The position is hereditary, and, in each village, a special system of magic is handed on in the female line from one generation to another.

The garden magician, according to native ideas, thus controls both the work of man and the forces of Nature. He also acts directly as supervisor of gardening, sees to it that people do not skimp their work, or lag behind with it. Thus magic is a systematising, regulating, and controlling influence in garden work. The magician, in carrying out the rites, sets the pace, compels people to apply themselves to certain tasks, and to accomplish them properly and in time.

Chieftainship in the Trobriands is the combination of two institutions: first, that of headmanship, or village authority; secondly, that of totemic clanship, that is the division of the community into classes or castes, each with a certain more or less definite rank. In every community in the Trobriands, there is one man who wields the greatest authority, though often this does not amount to very much. This village headman is, as a rule, therefore, not much more than a master of tribal ceremonies, and the main speaker within and without the tribe, whenever one is needed. In the Trobriands there exist four totemic clans, and each of these is divided into a number of smaller sub-clan. From each subject village, he takes a wife, whose family, according to the Trobriand law, has to supply him with large amounts of crops. This wife is always the sister or some relation of the headman of the subject village, and thus practically the whole community has to work for him. The chief has the best sorcerers of the district always at his beck and call. Of course he also has to reward them when they do him a service.

Right across the political and local divisions cut the totemic clans, each having a series of linked totems, with a bird as principal one. The members of these four clans are scattered over the whole tribe of Boyowa, and in each village community, members of all four are to be found, and even in every house, there are at least two classes represented, since a husband must be of a different clan from his wife and children. There is a certain amount of solidarity within the clan, based on the very vague feeling of communal affinity to the totem birds and animals, but much more on the many social duties, such as the performance of certain ceremonies, especially the mortuary ones, which band the members of a clan together. But real solidarity obtains only between members of a sub-clan.

As regards kinship, the main thing to be remembered is that the natives are matrilineal, and that the succession of rank, membership in all the social groups, and the inheritance of possessions descend in the maternal line.

6.5 THE MAGICO-RELIGIOUS IDEAS OF THE TROBRIANDERS

In connection with their belief in the spirits of the dead, was that they are almost completely devoid of any fear of ghosts, of any of these uncanny feelings with which we face the idea of a possible return of the dead. All the fears and dreads of the natives are reserved for black magic, flying witches, malevolent disease-bringing beings, but above all for sorcerers and witches.

The spirits migrate immediately after death to the island of Tuma, lying in the North-West of Boyowa, and there they exist for another span of time, underground, say some, on the surface of the earth, though invisible, say others. They return to visit their own villages once a year, and take part in the big annual feast, milamala, where they receive offerings.

Disease, health, or death are also the result of magic or counter-magic. The Trobrianders have a very complex and very definite set of theoretical views on these matters. Good health is primarily of course the natural, normal state. Minor ills may be contracted by exposure, over-eating, over-strain, bad food, or other ordinary causes. Such ailments never last, and have never any really bad effects, nor are they of immediate danger. But, if a man sickens for any length of time, and his strength seems to be really sapped, then the evil forces are at work. By far the most prevalent form of black magic, is that of the bwaga'u, that is the black sorcerer, of whom there are a number in each district.

6.6 THE ESSENTIALS OF THE KULA

Having thus described the scene, and the actors, let us now proceed to the performance. The Kula is a form of exchange, of extensive, inter-tribal character; it is carried on by communities inhabiting a wide ring of islands, which form a closed circuit.

It is represented by the lines joining a number of islands to the North and East of the East end of New Guinea. Along this route, articles of two kinds, and these two kinds only, are constantly travelling in opposite directions. In the direction of the hands of a clock, moves constantly one of these kinds—long necklaces of red shell, called soulava.

In the opposite direction moves the other kind— bracelets of white shell called mwali. Each of these articles, as it travels in its own direction on the closed circuit, meets on its way articles of the other class, and is constantly being exchanged for them. Every movement of the Kula articles, every detail of the transactions is fixed and regulated by a set of traditional rules and conventions, and some acts of the Kula are accompanied by an elaborate magical ritual and public ceremonies.

On every island and in every village, a more or less limited number of men take part in the Kula—that is to say, receive the goods, hold them for a short time, and then pass them on. Therefore every man who is in the Kula, periodically though not regularly, receives one or several mwali (arm-shells), or a soulava (necklace of red shell discs), and then has to hand it on to one of his partners, from whom he receives the opposite commodity in exchange. Thus no man ever keeps any of the articles for any length of time in his possession.

The Kula is not a surreptitious and precarious form of exchange. It is, quite on the contrary, rooted in myth, backed by traditional law, and surrounded with magical rites. All its main transactions are public and ceremonial, and carried out according to definite rules. It is not done on the spur of the moment, but happens periodically, at dates settled in advance, and it is carried on along definite trade routes, which must lead to fixed trysting places. This partnership is a lifelong relationship, it implies various mutual

duties and privileges, and constitutes a type of inter-tribal relationship on an enormous scale. As to the economic mechanism of the transactions, this is based on a specific form of credit, which implies a high degree of mutual trust and commercial honour—and this refers also to the subsidiary, minor trade, which accompanies the Kula proper. Finally, the Kula is not done under stress of any need, since its main aim is to exchange articles which are of no practical use. The objects are cherished because of the historical sentiment which surrounds them

The exchange of these two classes of vaygu'a, of the arm-shells and the necklaces, constitutes the main act of the Kula. This exchange is not done freely, right and left, as opportunity offers, and where the whim leads. It is subject indeed to strict limitations and regulations. Two continuous streams will constantly flow on, the one of necklaces following the hands of a clock, and the other, composed of the arm-shells; in the opposite direction.

6.7 CANOES AND SAILING

A CANOE is an item of material culture, and as such it can be described, photographed and even bodily transported into a museum.

The canoe is made for a certain use, and with a definite purpose; it is a means to an end. Referring to its ownership, accounts of who sails in it, and how it is done; information regarding the ceremonies and customs of its construction, a sort of typical life history of a native craft— all that brings us nearer still to the understanding of what his canoe truly means to the native.

To the native, a craft is surrounded by an atmosphere of romance, built up of tradition and of personal experience. It is an object of cult and admiration, a living thing, possessing its own individuality. to the native his cumbersome, sprawling canoe is a marvellous, almost miraculous achievement, and a thing of beauty. He has spun a tradition around it, and he adorns it with his best carvings, he colours and decorates it. It is to him a powerful contrivance for the mastery of Nature, which allows him to cross perilous seas to distant places.

It is associated with journeys by sail, full of threatening dangers, of living hopes and desires to which he gives expression in song and story. In short, in the tradition of the natives, in their customs, in their behaviour, and in their direct statements, there can be found the deep love, the admiration, the specific attachment as to something alive and personal, so characteristic of the sailors' attitude towards his craft.

The canoe is constructed by a group of people, it is owned, used and enjoyed communally, and this is done according to definite rules. There is therefore a social organisation underlying the building, the owning, and the sailing of a canoe.

The natives firmly believe in the value of magic. In the case of canoes, the Trobrianders would be so firmly persuaded that a canoe built without magic would be unseaworthy,slow in sailing, and unlucky in the Kula,that no one would dream of omitting the magic rites

6.8 THE CEREMONIAL BUILDING OF A WAGA

The building of the sea-going canoe (masawa) is inextricably bound up with the general proceedings of the Kula. As we have said before, in all villages where Kula is practiced, the masawa canoes are built and repaired only in direct connection with it. That is, as soon as a Kula expedition is decided upon, and its date fixed, all the canoes of the village must be overhauled, and those too old for repair must be replaced by new ones.

To the native, the construction of the canoe is the first link in the chain of the Kula performances. From the moment that the tree is felled till the return of the oversea party, there is one continuous flow of events, following in regular succession. the technicalities of construction are interrupted and punctuated by magical rites. Some of these refer to the canoe, others belong to the Kula.

As to the magical ideas which govern the various rites. Here it must suffice to say that they belong to several different systems of ideas. The one based on the myth of the flying canoe refers directly to the canoe; it aims at imparting a general excellence, and more especially the quality of speed to the canoe. The rites of the other type are really exorcisms directed against evil bewitchment (bulubwalata) of which the natives are much afraid. The third system of magic (performed during canoe construction) is the Kula magic, based on its own mythological cycle, and although performed on the canoe, yet aiming at the imparting of success to the toliwaga in his Kula transactions. Finally, at the beginnings of the proceedings there is some magic addressed to the tokway, the malignant wood sprite.

The construction of the canoe is done in two main stages, differing from one another in the character of the work, in the accompanying magic, and in the general sociological setting. In the first stage, the component parts of the canoe are prepared. A big tree is cut, trimmed into a log, then hollowed out and made into the basic dug-out; the planks, boards, poles, and sticks are prepared. This is achieved by slow, leisurely work, and it is done by the canoe-builder with the assistance of a few helpers, usually his relatives or friends or else those of the toliwaga. This stage generally takes a long time, some two to six months, and is done in fits and starts, as other occupations allow, or the mood comes. The spells and rites which accompany it belong to the tokway magic, and to that of the flying canoe cycle. To this first stage also belongs the carving of the decorative prow-boards. This is done sometimes by the builder, sometimes by another expert, if the builder cannot carve.

The second stage is done by means of intense communal labour. As a rule this stage is spread over a short time, only perhaps a week or two—including the pauses between work. The actual labour, in which the whole community is energetically engaged, takes up only some three to five days. The work consists of the piecing together of the planks and prow-boards, and, in case these do not fit well, of trimming them appropriately, and then of the lashing them together. Next comes the piecing and lashing of the outrigger, caulking and painting of the canoe. Sail-making is also done at this time, and belongs to this stage. As a rule, the main body of the canoe is constructed at one

sitting, lasting about a day; that is, the prow-boards are put in, the ribs and planks fitted together, trimmed and lashed. Another day is devoted to the attaching of the float and binding of the outrigger frame and the platform. Caulking and painting are done at another sitting, or perhaps at two more, while the sail is made on yet another day. These times are only approximate, since the size of the canoe, as well as the number of people participating in communal labour, greatly varies. The second stage of canoe-building is accompanied by Kula magic, and by a series of exorcisms on the canoe, and the magic is performed by the owner of the canoe, and not by the builder or expert. This latter, however, directs the technicalities of the proceedings, in which he is assisted and advised by builders from other villages; by sailing experts, and by the toliwaga and other notables. The lashing of the canoe with a specially strong creeper, called wayugo, is accompanied by perhaps the most important of the rites and spells belonging to the flying canoe magic.

After the decision to build a waga has been taken, a tree suitable for the main log has to be chosen. Once the tree is chosen, the toliwaga, the builder and a few helpers repair to the spot, and a preliminary rite must be performed, before they begin to cut it down. A small incision is made into the trunk, so that a particle of food, or a bit of areca-nut can be put into it. Giving this as an offering to the tokay (wood sprite), the magician utters an incantation:

After the rite has been performed, the tree is fellen. After the tree is on the ground, the preliminary trimming is done on the spot. The branches are lopped off, and the log of appropriate length is made out of the tree. This log is cut into the rough shape of a canoe, so as to make it as light as possible, for now it has to be pulled to the village or to the beach. The transporting of the log is not an easy task, as it has to be taken out of the uneven, rocky raybwag, and then pulled along very bad roads. Pieces of wood are put on the ground every few metres, to serve as slips on which the log can more easily glide than on the rocks and uneven soil. 98. In spite of that, and in spite of the fact that many men are summoned to assist, the work of pulling the log is very heavy. The men receive food in payment for it. Pig flesh is cooked and distributed with baked yams; at intervals during the work they refresh themselves with green coco-nut drinks and with sucking sugar cane.

After the log has been finally brought into the village, and left on the baku, the main central place, the creeper by means of which it has been pulled and which is called in this connection duku,(the duku (the creeper used for the pulling of the canoes.) is not cut away at once. This is done ceremonially on the morning of the following day, sometimes after even two or three days have passed. The men of the community assemble, and the one who will scoop out the canoe, the builder (tota'ilawaga,"the cutter of the canoe") performs a magical rite.

After the recital of this long spell over the herbs and blade of his adze, the magician wraps up the dry banana leaf, thus imprisoning the magical virtue of the spell round the blade, and with this, he strikes and cuts through the duku (the creeper used for the pulling of the canoes. when the canoe is put on transversal logs (nigakulu), another rite has to be carried out. Some herbs are placed on the transversals between them and the body of the big canoe log. Over these herbs, again, another spell has to be uttered.

After that, for some days, the outside of the canoe body is worked. Its two ends must be cut into tapering shape, and the bottom evened and smoothed. After that is done, the canoe has to be turned over, this time into its natural position, bottom down, and what is to be the opening, upwards.

Before the scooping out begins, another formula has to be recited over the kavilali, a special ligogu (adze), used for scooping out, which is inserted into a handle with a moveable part, which then allows the cutting to be done at varying angles to the plane of striking. The rite stands in close connection to the myth of the flying canoe, localised in Kudayuri, a place in the Island of Kitava, and many allusions are made to this myth. After a short exordium, containing untranslatable magical words, and geographical references, the spell runs.

The canoe is now ready for the sea, except for the painting, which is only for ornamentation. Three more magical rites have to be performed, however, before it is painted and then launched. All three refer directly to the canoe, and aim at giving it speed. At the same time all three are exorcisms against evil influences, resulting from various defilements or broken taboos, which possibly might have desecrated the waga. The whole outside of the canoe is painted in three colours. Over each of them a special spell is chanted again, the most important one over the black colour. The canoe is now quite ready to be launched.

In the first stage of canoe-building, the rites are performed by the magician himself, with only a few helpers in attendance.

The rites of the second stage are attended by all those who help in piecing together and lashing. As to the attention and behaviour during the performance of the magic, much depends of course on whether the magician officiating is a chief of great importance or someone of low rank. A certain decorum and even silence would be observed in any case.

6.9 LIST OF GIFTS, PAYMENTS, AND COMMERCIAL TRANSACTIONS.

6.9.1 Pure Gifts

By this, as just mentioned, we understand an act, in which an individual gives an object or renders a service without expecting or getting any return. This is not a type of transaction very frequently met in Trobriand tribal life. It must be remembered that accidental or spontaneous gifts, such as alms or charities, do not exist, since everybody in need would be maintained by his or her family. Again, there are so many well-defined economic obligations, connected with kinship and relationship-in-law, that anyone wanting a thing or a service would know where to go and ask for it. And then, of course, it would not be a free gift, but one imposed by some social obligation. Moreover, since gifts in the Trobriands are conceived as definite acts with a social meaning, rather than transmissions of objects, it results that where social duties do not directly impose them, gifts are very rare. The most important type of free gift are the presents characteristic of relations between husband and wife, and parents and children. Among the Trobrianders, husband and wife own their things separately. There are man's and woman's possessions,

and each of the two partners has a special part of the household goods under control. When one of them dies, his or her relations inherit the things. But though the possessions are not joint, they very often give presents to one another, more especially a husband to his wife. As to the parents' gifts to the children, it is clear that in a matrilineal society, where the mother is the nearest of kin to her children in a sense quite different to that in our society, they share in and inherit from her all her possessions.

6.9.2 Customary payments, re-paid irregularly and without strict equivalence

The most important of these are the annual payments received at harvest time by a man from his wife's brothers. These regular and unfailing gifts are so substantial, that they form the bulk of a man's income in food. Sociologically, they are perhaps the strongest strand in the fabric of the Trobriands tribal constitution. They entail a life-long obligation of every man to work for his kinswomen and their families. When a boy begins to garden, he does it for his mother. When his sisters grow up and marry, he works for them. If he has neither mother nor sisters, his nearest female blood relation will claim the proceeds of his labour. The reciprocity in these gifts never amounts to their full value, but the recipient is supposed to give a valuable (vaygu'a) or a pig to his wife's brother from time to time.

6.9.3 Payment for services rendered

It has to be given each time the service is performed, but we cannot speak here of direct economic equivalence, since one of the terms of the equation consists of a service, the value of which cannot be assessed, except by conventional estimates. All services done by specialists for individuals or for the community, belong here. The most important of these are undoubtedly the services of the magician. The garden magician, for instance, receives definite gifts from the community and from certain individuals. The sorcerer is paid by the man who asks him to kill or who desires to be healed. The presents given for magic of rain and fair weather are very considerable.

6.9.4 Gifts returned in economically equivalent form

In this fourth class have been put such gifts as must be re-paid with almost strict equivalence. But it must be stressed that strict equivalence of two gifts does not assimilate them to trade altogether. There can be no more perfect equivalence between gift and counter-gift.

6.10 THE MEANING OF THE KULA

As said the Kula seems to be, to a certain extent, a novel type of ethnological fact. Its novelty lies partly in the size of its sociological and geographical extent. A big, inter-tribal relationship, uniting with definite social bonds a vast area and great numbers of people, binding them with definite ties of reciprocal obligations, making them follow minute rules and observations in a concerted manner—the Kula is a sociological mechanism of surpassing size and complexity, considering the level of culture on which we find it. Nor can this wide network of social co-relations and cultural influences be considered for a moment as ephemeral, new or precarious. For its highly

developed mythology and its magical ritual show how deeply it has taken root in the tradition of these natives and of what ancient growth it must be.

Another unusual feature is the character of the transaction itself, which is the proper substance of the Kula. A half commercial, half ceremonial exchange, it is carried out for its own sake, in fulfilment of a deep desire to possess. But here again, it is not ordinary possession, but a special type, in which a man owns for a short time, and in an alternating manner, individual specimens of two classes of objects. Though the ownership is incomplete in point of permanency, it is in turn enhanced in point of numbers successively possessed, and may be called a cumulative possession.

Perhaps the greatest, importance and which perhaps reveals best the unusual character of the Kula is the natives' mental attitude towards the tokens of wealth. These latter are neither used nor regarded as money or currency, and they resemble these economic instruments very little, if indeed there is any resemblance at all, except that both money and vaygu'a represent condensed wealth. Vaygu'a is never used as medium of exchange or as measure of value, which are the two most important functions of currency or money. Each piece of vaygu'a of the Kula type has one main object throughout its existence—to be possessed and exchanged; has one main function and serves one main purpose—to circulate round the Kula ring, to be owned and displayed in a certain manner.

The acts of exchange of the valuables have to conform to a definite code. The main tenet of this declares that the transaction is not a bargain. The equivalence of the values exchanged is essential, but it must be the result of the repayer's own sense of what is due to custom and to his own dignity. The ceremonial attached to the act of giving, the manner of carrying and handling the vaygu'a shows distinctly that this is regarded as something else than mere merchandise. Indeed it is to the native something that confers dignity, that exalts him, and which he therefore treats with veneration and affection.

Check Your Progress

1. Malinowski's work established ……as the most important method for anthropological fieldwork.
2. The Trobriand Archipelago, also called …….. or ……

6.11 LET US SUM UP

This unit develops your skill further as a keen researcher and observer. It takes you through the processes involved in ethnographic research and also explains how to make mind maps and tables to process the labyrinthine data that one comes across during the field study. It makes you aware of the need to meticulously feed data and conceptualise it under different relevant categories to make it more comprehensive. The need for ethnographic research to highlight various social, religious, political and economic patters and their interconnectedness is brought out in the unit. This unit also appeals to the researchers and learners to be sensitive to the sense of dignity of the natives and inhabitants of a region and cultural groups. In the field, the duty of the ethnographer is to clearly sketch all the rules and regularities

of tribal or cultural life as also explained by Malinowski and bring out the anatomy of their culture, depicting the constitution of their society. The unit explains the methods of observation and participation in detail in order to make sense of the reality in its actual context by giving importance to the inhabitants own meanings and interpretation of existence including their social, political, economic, religious and mythical accounts. The centrality of an ethnographer with rigorous efforts and duty as a researcher is emphasised in ethnographic researches like the ones mentioned in this unit.

6.12 REFERENCES

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6.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Participant observation.
2. Boyowa or Kiriwina

UNIT 7: COMING OF AGE IN SAMOA –MARGARET MEAD*

Structure

7.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- gain an understanding of the socio-cultural milieu at the time of the research and publication of the *Coming of Age in Samoa.*
- recognize the methodology of practicing Ethnography (classical to contemporary times).
- identify the theoretical ideas and critical issues of the text.
- demonstrate an understanding of the techniques employed by the Anthropologist.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Coming of Age in Samoa – A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization by Margaret Mead has made a significant impact in the reading of ethnographies. One of the seminal texts that paves the path for various theoretical ideas, for instance the nature vs. nurture or culture vs. biology debate, theories of personality, social conditioning, feminist anthropology, and several more. Even in contemporary times, *Coming of Age in Samoa* remains an influential and pioneering work that has generated interest among scholars with regard to the ethnographic enterprise and has also given rise to several controversies and debates over Mead's techniques of data collection and the validity of her arguments.

Margaret Mead travelled to South Pacific Polynesian Islands of American Samoa in 1925 to study the lives of adolescent Samoans and understand if adolescence was universally similar in terms of trauma and stress that had become an identifying characteristic of this phase of personality development. In her attempts to achieve an understanding about this

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phase, Mead also had an additional objective of finding whether the turmoil experienced by individuals during the period of adolescence was biologically determined or it was culturally cultivated by the community. To achieve these objectives Margaret Mead administered psychological tests among the Samoan community.

Coming of Age in Samoa was published in 1928 as Margaret Mead's doctoral dissertation. However, when Mead published the thesis as a book, it had been edited by her to include chapters that primarily dealt with the association these ethnographic findings had with child rearing practices and the period of adolescence in United States of America (Library of Congress, 2021). With the publication of her doctoral research Mead had gained a 'national reputation' of being an expert on 'primitive cultures' and came to be recognized as a sought-after Anthropologist by the common public. Moreover, Margaret Mead's reputation was not limited to the university and the academic circuits, instead she became a regular contributor to columns in popular magazines like *Vogue, Good Housekeeping, Seventeen,* and the *New York Times Magazine*. Her columns and articles focused on domestic concerns and issues related to an average American family life (Newman, 1996).

7.1.1 About the Author

Margaret Mead was born in Philadelphia on December 16, 1901. She was born in a family of educators and academics and during the course of her childhood Margaret Mead was taught to be a keen observer and remain cognizant of the social issues that concerned the early 20th century American Society. Mead was home-schooled by her grandmother who was opposed to the idea of intensive classroom deskwork. During her early years, she was trained in to the process of journaling and documenting details about her surrounding which included details about her neighbors, her family's medical records, and also descriptions about her locality. Mead was majoring in Psychology at Barnard College, New York, when she became influenced by Anthropologists Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict. It was then that Mead decided to pursue her doctoral research as an Anthropologist while she continued to pursue and supplement her dissertation work with her early training in psychology.

7.2 BACKGROUND OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN AMERICAN SAMOA

At the time of Mead's research America was under the grip of World War I which had affected families by displacing them and leading to their breakdown in some cases. As an emerging discipline, anthropology was engaged in an ongoing debate about nature vs. nurture with regard to the behavioral traits of individuals and the importance of biological pre-disposition. The discourses primarily focused on the contestation between biology and culture in shaping human personality. (Library of Congress, 2021). Consequently, the debate had significant impact on the contemporary social problems in a world war I affected America. This was also the time when the theories of Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud were gaining popularity among the scholars. Freud had proposed the existence of 'Oedipus complex'

among adolescent boys to explain their relationship with their parents and the general trends of gender socialization for both girls and boys (CEC, 2019).

The dislocation of families caused immense trauma to people and many members in the American academia became invested in looking at the impact of ruptured family ties on the personality of children. Around 1920s there were rising concerns about teenagers being in regular conflict with their parents. Scholars began questioning the parenting styles and practice of bringing up children in communities around the world in order to understand how parents overcame the trauma of adolescence faced by their children (CEC, 2019). When Mead left for American Samoa, her mentor Franz Boas instructed her to examine "*the psychological attitude of the individual under the pressure of the general pattern of culture"* and compare the attitude of Samoan adolescent women with that of American adolescents in terms of rebellious spirit that was often witnessed by the parents in America. Boas also advised her to refrain from an overall ethnographic study of the Samoans as the pressing issue in America was adolescent turmoil which required Mead's attention in terms of a cross cultural examination (Library of Congress, 2021). Furthermore, Margaret Mead was of the opinion that all the studies that focused on the adolescent behavior had been conducted by psychologists who did not document the natural surroundings and social phenomenon like an Anthropologist would as they had a tendency to focus on ideal lab like conditions while testing their theories. Consequently, Margaret Mead opined that an Anthropological assessment of adolescent behavior utilizing ethnographic techniques was needed. *Coming of Age in Samoa* is a seminal text of Anthropological studies because it marks the beginning of the paradigmatic shift from a strictly quantitative data collection techniques to qualitative assessment without the loss of empiricism (CEC, 2019).

Check your progress I

1. What was the objective of Margaret Mead's study in American Samoa?

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2. Explain Franz Boas's instructions to Margaret Mead while she proceeded for her fieldwork.

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3. Write a brief description of Margaret Mead.

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4. Explain the methodological shift witnessed during the 1920s by social scientists.

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5. Describe the social and cultural condition of America when Margaret Mead began her research.

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7.3 KEY ISSUES IN COMING OF AGE IN SAMOA

Based on her research in Samoa, Margaret Mead published two books, *Coming of Age in Samoa – A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* that was written in popular short book style that was not limited to readers from academic circles only. A more serious ethnographic account of the Samoans was published as *A Social Organization of Manu'a* in 1930 by Bishop Museum Press. At the behest of her publishers at William Morrow, Mead added a chapter in *Coming of Age* that was primarily focused on the outcome of her study in Samoa and its impact on the educationists in America (Kuper, 1989). Mead was known to write her daily accounts on her observations about the Samoans to Ruth Benedict and as a result she did not keep a field diary in Samoa. Most of her journal records are in the form of letters to Ruth Benedict and field bulletins for family and friends. As per the letters in Library of Congress archives, Mead's Samoan name was *Makelita* (Library of Congress, 2021).

Mead spent close to nine months in Samoa during which she studied 68 girls in several villages of the island communities. She reported that unlike an American teenager, Samoan adolescent girls did not experience turmoil and angst of teenage years and were capable of sexual adjustment. As a result, the transition from adolescence to adulthood was not marked with a period of stress or trauma. Adult Samoans were of a pleasing demeanor, devoid of aggression, and violence in their emotions (Kuper, 1989; Library of Congress, 2021). Thus, Mead concluded that the behaviour of American teenagers was culturally specific and did not have a physiological basis to it. She also believed that Samoan girls did not face the trauma of making difficult social choices in terms of peer groups and partners owing to the homogenous nature of the society. She urged American educationists to focus on a system of education that prepared the American adolescent population to make right choices in a heterogenous society like America that offered an array of options to the youth. Mead found the period of

transition among the Samoans, extremely comfortable as it was free from the '*strum and dang'* of the teen years in the western societies. The Samoan youth were recognized for their economic and domestic roles only when they attained the age of 15 or 16 years. In order to explain it further, Mead exemplified the lack of strict parental control among the Samoans especially with respect to the sexual behavior of the youth. As opposed to this liberal style of parenting, the American youth had to undergo strict regulations set up by the parents which was responsible for conflicts between the parents and the children (Mead, 1928).

From a methodological point of view, '*some critics of Mead's Samoan field study have objected to her choice of housing on the island of Ta'u, where she conducted her study of adolescent girls. She chose to live in the naval dispensary with an American family rather than in a Samoan household. In this previously unavailable letter to Ruth Benedict, Mead explains her decision and expresses concern that she may be "coddling" herself by not living in a Samoan household'* (Library of Congress, 2021).

7.4 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN READING COMING OF AGE IN SAMOA

The text popularized the method of participant observation while conducting Anthropological fieldwork. Shortly before Margaret Mead began her study among the Samoans, Anthropology had witnessed a major shift in its methodology of studying 'native communities'. Bronislaw Malinowski, during his stay at Melanesia, introduced the modern technique of 'doing Anthropology' through participant observation which required the researcher to learn the 'native language' in order to understand the 'native's point of view'. Mead found Anthropology to be much better in terms of pursuing the cause of 'simple societies' that did not have complex documented historical accounts recorded for them.

The ethnographic method employed by Margaret Mead included dialogues and discussions with her informants, which was a significant departure from the strictly scientific outlook of the researchers at the time. Moreover, instead of opting for a longitudinal study, Margaret Mead favored a more cross-sectional approach owing to paucity of time and resources. As a result, she interacted with girls of different age groups in order to understand their worldview and their behavior in the Samoan society. Mead intended to argue that the causes of adolescent trauma could be solely found in the social environment of the youth and genetics played limited or no role in determining the discord they felt during those years. Needless to say, Mead's observations yielded support for her cultural deterministic notions and she went on to theorize about the culture personality interrelationship. Mead notes that '*The Samoan background which makes growing up so easy, so simple a matter, is the general casualness of the whole society. For Samoa is a place where no one plays for very high stakes, no one pays very heavy prices, no one suffers for his convictions or fights to the death for special ends. Disagreements between parent and child are settled by the child's moving across the street, between a man and his village by the man's removal to the next village, between a husband and his wife's seducer*

by a few fine mats… In this casual attitude towards life, in this avoidance of conflict, of poignant situations, Samoa contrasts strongly not only with America but also with most primitive civilisations. And however much we may deplore such an attitude and feel that important personalities and great art are not born in so shallow a society, we must recognise that here is a strong factor in the painless development from childhood to womanhood. For where no one feels very strongly, the adolescent will not be tortured by poignant situations" (Mead, 1928; pp. 209-210). Admittedly, this was a comparative analysis of the Samoan society by Margaret Mead vis-à-vis the American society and despite the comparative nature of the research Mead still managed to remain a cultural relativist(Cultural relativism is the ability to understand a culture on its own terms and not to make judgments using the standards of one's own culture). She was of the opinion that the American society needed to overcome the feeling of cultural superiority over these communities. Mead is acknowledged for strengthening the idea of cultural relativism in a discipline fraught with comparative studies as a result of deeply embedded ethnocentrism among the practitioners of not just science but of social science owing to an evolutionary outlook towards the society.

According to Newman (1996) Margaret Mead is also significant in shaping the discourse on race in western 'white' liberal feminism. Newman considers Mead as an instrumental scholar who challenged the Victorian notion of sexual restraint among the 'civilized' white women and the black man's 'bestiality' in order to discourage any alliance between the two. Thus, making Margaret Mead an 'anti-racist' and an opponent of ethnocentrism. However, this did not restructure the western liberal feminist thought which was still racially biased but it did begin a conversation on the 'cultural bases' of differences among people and their behavior. Margaret Mead's research helped in challenging the notion of cultural superiority and the evolutionary racism of the American society. But, the research also reasserted the superiority of a white woman over her 'primitive' counterparts as she was still on a mission to civilize the 'savages' as a Anthropologist and explorer.

7.5 RECEPTION AND LEGACY OF MARGARET MEAD'S COMING OF AGE IN SAMOA

Despite such significant contributions to the academic discourses in Anthropology and other associated disciplines Margaret Mead's research of the Samoan adolescents has often been brought under scrutiny. One of the most frequent remarks being her tendency to romanticize with the Samoans. Furthermore, Mead had been criticized for her 'ahistorical' approach i.e., a systematic overlooking of the context in which Samoan adolescent girls behaved the way they did. It seemed preposterous to many scholars, that in the absence of a sound methodological framework, Margaret Mead went ahead and suggested changes in the lives of American teenagers and the parenting styles of American parents. Several Anthropologists and sociologists that followed her research, have questioned the validity and reliability of the data she collected and the techniques employed by her in doing so. In 1954, Lowell Holmes proceeded to the American Samoa, specifically the Ta'u islands to conduct a 'methodological restudy' of Margaret Mead's research. Holmes stated that despite the novelty of ethnographic techniques

like participant observation, Margaret Mead's research was quite reliable (Holmes, 1987).

The constant and regular debates surrounding Margaret Mead's research have instigated academic discourses on the subject of ethnographic techniques, reflexive methodology in ethnography, observer bias, feminist discourses and so on. According to psychology professor Alison Gopnik '*Mead's work was attacked, in a way that now seems transparently sexist and ideologically motivated, and the unfair charge that she fabricated her data still lingers in the public imagination. Her methods, as she herself recognized, were not as careful and rigorous as later anthropologists' – she and the other pioneers were more or less making them up as they went along – but there is no doubt that her observations of Samoa were genuine and accurate'* (Gopnik, 2019).

Dreger (2013) agrees that Mead had a political and theoretical agenda guiding her research and in drawing the conclusions following her research and comparing it with that of the American lifestyle, Mead fulfilled her own motives of sexual freedom and liberal values. In many ways, this progressive outlook of Margaret Mead challenged the morality of the American society and made her findings seemed slightly controversial and ahead of time despite the diverse and broad readership of the text.

Some of the most scathing criticism received by Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, came from Derek Freeman who, among other things gained prominence for re-evaluating the research and claims of Franz Boas and his students. In 1987, Freeman published his book refuting the research by Margaret Mead in Samoa entitled *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The making and unmaking of an anthropological myth*. This book was a culmination of Freeman's fieldwork in Samoan islands in 1940 where, as per his claims, he found many methodological gaps in the research conducted by Mead. Freeman learned to speak Samoan and stayed on the island for two years in order to empirically conclude his research. Freeman returned to the islands in 1965 with his family in order to carry out a more systematic study of the islands. He eventually travelled to the T'au islands to record the interviews of informants that had once interacted with Mead or who had been around when Mead was conducting her research. Freeman claims that even after four decades, some of the Samoans vividly remembered the kind of society American Samoa was at the time of Mead's arrival. Freeman ended up making several visits to the Islands and challenging the ethnographic research of Margaret Mead. He claimed that Mead had overlooked the problematic aspects of sexual aggression and violence among the Samoans and had 'generalized' her findings without proper validation (Freeman, 1987).

In his historical analysis of Mead's research, Freeman has termed Margaret Mead and Franz Boas's denial of the role of genetics in determining personality as an 'egregious anthropological error' in the light of the evidences presented by the Human Genome Project. Freeman also believed that the findings of Margaret Mead in Samoa were completely unscientific and in fact were nothing less than 'anthropological fiction' (Freeman, 2017; p.121).

It is noteworthy that following the criticism by Derek Freeman, several Anthropologists have come in support of Margaret Mead's research as they

believe that even Freeman could not be spared from observer bias and his own research was solely guided by the intent of finding gaps in Mead's ethnographic techniques, and methodology in general. Paul Shankman (2009 & 2013) who obtained access to Freeman's interviews with the Samoan Islanders, claimed that the political climate, and the conditions of Samoan islands had changed drastically in the four decades. Shankman believes that Freeman's 'trashing' of Mead's research in Samoa has led to irreparable damage to her reputation. Shankman noted that Freeman's data was obtained under completely different circumstances. For instance, he takes the example of Fa'apua'a, a significant informant of Margaret Mead, who was a devout Christian and ceremonial virgin when she was interviewed by Derek Freeman, called Mead a 'liar' because she was offended by Mead's perception of her sexuality. In general, a trend appeared among the educated Samoans that Margaret Mead had somehow misrepresented their community. According to Shankman, Derek Freeman seems to have banked on such beliefs of the Samoans, and saw himself as a brave "heretic," a man saving true science from Mead's mere ideology (Dreger, 2013).

Dreger (2013) further cites the book of Martin Orans '*Not Even Wrong: Margaret Mead, Derek Freeman and the Samoans'* published in 1996 to assert that Freeman may have reduced the efforts of Margaret Mead a little too much in claiming that she was misled by a bunch of adolescents merely joking about their sexual lives and teasing Mead about it by making casual references. According to Orans, Mead had collected data from 68 adolescent girls and not just Fa'apua'a, so her conclusions may not be considered as mere extensions of a joke. They were empirical in their own regard given the novelty of ethnographic techniques.

Check your progress II

Q6. Explain the ethnographic approach of Margaret Mead's research in American Samoa.

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Q7. Discuss the modern techniques of 'doing Anthropology' as propounded by Malinowski and Mead.

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Q8. Write a note on Derek Freeman's opinion of Mead's research and highlight other salient criticisms of *Coming of Age in Samoa*.

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Q9. Briefly discuss the contributions of the text *Coming of Age in Samoa* to the discipline of Anthropology.

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Q10. Discuss the key features of the text *Coming of Age in Samoa.*

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7.6 SUMMARY

In this unit, the reader is familiarized with the ethnographic text *Coming of Age in Samoa – A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* published by Margaret Mead in 1928. The text is based on Margaret Mead's research in the American Samoan islands and is a significant chapter in the history and development of Ethnographic methodology in the discipline of Anthropology. The unit includes a description of the text, the socio-cultural context in which the ethnographic text was written and published, and the methods and techniques employed by Margaret Mead. Since, *Coming of Age in Samoa* is dedicated to understanding the adolescent life of Samoan islanders especially their notion of sexual freedom and teenage turmoil, the text has been embroiled in several controversies and debates since its publication. Despite its inherent academic shortcomings due to the novelty of methods employed by Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* is a landmark text in the area of the study of simple societies and has contributed immensely towards knowledge building. As a result, the unit includes key theoretical ideas propounded by Margaret Mead, and her mentor Franz Boas.

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7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Refer to paragraph 1& 2 in the section 7.1
2. Refer to paragraph 2 in the section 7.2
3. Refer to paragraph 1 in the section 7.1.1
4. Refer to paragraph 1 & 2 in the section 7.2
5. Refer to paragraph 1 & 2 in the section 7.2

Check Your Progress 2

6. Refer to paragraph 1 & 2 in the section 7.4
7. Refer to paragraph 1 in the section 7.4
8. Refer to paragraphs 4 to 7 in the section 7.5
9. Refer to paragraphs 1 to 3 in the section 7.4
10. Refer to paragraphs 1 to 3 in the section 7.3

UNIT 8: RELIGION AND SOCIETY AMONG THE COORGS -M.N. SRINIVAS*

Structure

8.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will know:

- why this ethnographic work holds significance in Anthropology.
- the generic manner in which the book is written.
- the broad contents of each chapter of the book.
- the theoretical concepts that the book proposed.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Prof. M. N. Srinivas' book *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India (published in* 1952, Oxford: Clarendon Press) was a seminal work in the understanding of the Indian society. It challenged the, then prevalent concept of the Indian Caste system, as perceived by the dominant paradigm of western anthropologists, and brought forth a new intellectual framework for understanding Hindu society under the structural functional school of thought. It raised questions on notion of caste as static and unchanging, and brought the omnipresence of social change into focus.

Srinivas earned a double doctorate, first from the University of Bombay under the mentorship of Professor G. S. Ghurye and subsequently from the University of Oxford under the mentorship of Prof. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Professor Evans-Pritchard. His primary collection of field data (for this book) was for a two-year period under the research grant fellowship awarded to him in 1940, in sociology by the University of Bombay. Majority of data

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collected for this ethnographic description was collected from an ethnological perspective. Later, when he went to Oxford, Srinivas was advised by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown to analyse the same field data with a different theoretical lens, reflecting on the inter-relation between religion and society, instead of choosing a different topic of exploration. While the data collected for the book was from the field work conducted, Srinivas' understanding of the field came from his long association and belongingness to the geographical region of the study. Radcliffe-Brown reflects in the preface of the book that this gave him a better understanding of the Indian social reality as compared to a western scholar; however Srinivas' key reflections were for the caste reality in the south of India and then its subsequent association with the overall Indian Sanskritic Hindu ideas.

Radcliffe-Brown in the preface of the book reflects that "one major problem is that of the social function of religion-how religion contributes to the existence of society as an ordered and continuing system of relationships amongst human beings?" (Srinivas, 1952: vii). The book brings to light how religion is intertwined with the social life of people through everyday practices; ideas of purity and pollutions; auspicious and inauspicious; rites, rituals and festivals; inter-caste distance, exceptions and mobility; that create social structural solidarities which are layered as well as overlapping.

The book effectively uses secondary literature and previous scholarly writings of the area and people to map the regions history. It also displays a constructive use of oral tradition, folklores, ballads, metaphors, proverbs and local sayings to breathe life into the ethnography. The ethnography itself is an analytical description, where practice is continuously deciphered and contextualised with the topic under discussion and the larger frames of reference. Further, the ethnography admits to certain generalisations in an effort to simplify the understanding of concepts as well as practices, and also makes a continued effort to quote exceptions to the generalisations being made.

This book is a reflection of an ethnographic present, ie. it is written as an existing social reality; however, it has to be studied in a contextual time frame. Today, it forms a baseline archival work for a comparative analysis of the Coorgs across time, but it is reflective of theoretical concepts that were unique to the then academic sphere and hold relevance in contemporary times as well.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Let us now look at each chapter for its content and theoretical reflection, some key concepts and the manner in which it is written. As the work is 'frozen in time'* around the colonial and post-colonial period, this unit is also written in present-tense.

8.2 CHAPTER 1- INTRODUCTORY

The book begins with situating the Coorgs in their geographical locale vis-a-vis the terrain, topography, flora and fauna, pointing at its relative isolation and the fact that regimes of power through history, used this relative isolation to their advantage; and though there has been improvement in the

* As described by Pro. Andre Beteille, in the introduction of the reprint of the book in 2003, by Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

infrastructure of roads under the British rule, the accessibility to the area remains restricted. In this the Coorgs seem to be a distinct community in occupation of the forested mountains of Coorg for many centuries, and with a way of life of their own, as an agricultural community with rice as their main crop.

Inspite of isolation there is reflection on contact with neighbours and mobility (though difficult) for trade and pilgrimage, on a seasonal basis, over time. The chapter reflects on cultural diversity and contiguity within the small region of Coorg by marking out linguistic areas and shared commonalities between languages. It proposes the conception of the Coorg village in contrast with what is recognised as village in other parts of South India (ie. Kannada, Telugu, or Tamil country), which are cluster villages. The Coorg villages consist of households that are attached to their ancestral estate (with their associated satellite houses and hutments). The households live far from each other, on different hills with valleys in between, creating an illusion that the village lacks boundaries. However, the boundaries are recognised by the people of the village in their sense of unity against other villages, which were in the past entities of feud and by that virtues still carry a sense of rivalry. The significance of villages is apparent from the fact that the 1931 census reflects that majority of the Coorg population was rural in nature (majority being Hindus).

The chapter reflects on the 1931 census to (for the first time) bring forth the idea of social mobility, pointing out that the census enumeration found 44,585 Kodagi -speakers though the total number of Coorgs was only 41,026. Kodagi is spoken by Coorgs at home. As Coorgs are the dominant caste in the area, several castes and tribes have taken over the language, this is followed by an attempt to imitate Coorgs in dress, customs, and manner leading to the subsequent inclusion of non-Coorgs as Coorgs, as was the case in the 1931 census as well.

The Chapter traces the history of Coorg from the 9th century onwards through a close inspection of various volumes of the Imperial Gazetteer of India. It documents the rule of various Hindu kings (and their Chiefs and Nayaks) over different sections of Coorg; and subsequently the incorporation of Coors into i) land taxation, ii) as warriors in the *Raja's* (king's) troop and ii) an administrative system for resolution of disputes. The Coorgs stood strong with the Hindu kings, they rebelled against the Muslims in 1782, for this they were driven out of their land by Tipu Sultan in 1784; however, the Coorgs who had escaped were reinstated in 1799 when the British Occupied the land and handed over its management back to the Hindu king Vira Raja IV. At the time of reinstating the Coorgs were brought under the system of land tenure referred to as the *jamma*, which along with the allocation of hereditary cultivable land established a liability of military service on the Raja's troop. Many Coorgs held important position in the Raja's court and occasionally some members of the royal family married Coorgs. The closeness that the Coorgs enjoyed with the Rajas led to their adopting the Hindu ways (especially the Shaivite influence) and helped in the spread of the culture and religion. The Introductory Chapter thus establishes the historicity of the Coorgs and their indoctrination into the Hindu folds.

The chapter ends with the social change brought about by the shift in agrarian practices from the cultivation of rice towards coffee plantation. Some Britishers also took up coffee plantation in the Coorg region. This along with abolition of slavery by the British rule led to a flux in the social structure. The slaves were from the lower caste while the masters were from the higher caste. Due to better economic prospects the freed slaves chose to leave their associated household (inspite of there being folklores describing strong interpersonal relations between a slave and the master). This led to lack of labour in the Coorg ancestral land as well as a flux in the social structure. However, once an annual remuneration decided for the lower caste labourers the structure re-established itself.

8.3 CHAPTER 2-SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The second chapter introduces the concepts of Sanskritization, Horizontal Solidarity and Vertical Solidarity. The ideas propounded here are carried forward through the rest of the book.

The caste system was hitherto understood by scholars and the western world as a religiously sanctioned Brahminical overarching varna system of fivefold rigid/ unchanging hierarchy; with the Brahmins at the head, followed in order by the Kshatriyas the aristocracy or the warriors, Vaishyas the traders, Shudras the servants and labourers, and, lastly the Untouchables. This is challenged by the concept of Sanskritization. The ideas of social mobility which was pointed at in the first chapter was further emphasised through the reality that castes are in practice divided into sub-castes or *jatis* "which is a very small endogamous group practising a traditional occupation and enjoying a certain amount of cultural, ritual, and juridical autonomy" (pg. 24) in a linguistic region. Each *jati* identifies with a broad scale of hierarchy through the caste categories of the Vama system. This helps them define their own identity as well as the hierarchy of social groups from other regions. The subcastes of the middle rungs of the hierarchy (though prohibited in theory) have the possibility of upwards social mobility through the adoption of practices, customs, rituals, pantheon etc. of the higher caste. Moreover, dominant subcastes of a region can also claim superiority over other competing subcastes and over time proclaims higher status in the caste hierarchy. This process of upward social mobility has been called 'Sanskritization'. The term is preferred to 'Brahminization' as the upwardly mobile subcastes may not necessarily adopt vedic rites, as is evident from the Coorgs themselves. Chapter one constructs the incorporation of Coorgs into the Hindu fold through history including their adoption of the Hindu pantheon as Shaivites. Coorgs identify themselves as Kshatriyas (or the warrior caste) which was solidified by their association with the Rajas; through positions in their courts as well as military service in the Raja's troops. They are now indeed recognised as such, in the caste hierarchy. There are also various myths associated with Coorgs being descendants of caste intermarriages of the higher varnas of the Hindu caste system. However, the Kshatriyas of the varna system are entitled to perform certain rituals at which sacred verses (mantras) from the Vedas are recited by the priests, the Coorgs do not follow these practices during the naming ceremony of the child, marriages, or during ceremonies of death. Thus, inspite of having

a place in the caste hierarchy and a recognition in the overall religious system the Coorgs have not taken to certain 'caste associated' Brahmanical practices.

On one hand social groups outside of Hinduism have been assimilated into its folds and in the other the castes in the middle rungs try to move upwards in the caste hierarchy. "The tendency of the lower castes to imitate the higher has been a powerful factor in the spread of Sanskritic ritual and customs, and in the achievement of a certain amount of cultural uniformity not only throughout the caste scale, but over the entire length and breadth of lndia" (pg.30).

Caste has a tendency to stress horizontal ties that cut across territorial boundaries, this has been recognised under the concept of 'horizontal solidarity'. It unites members of the same caste living in different villages and distinguishes them from other castes in the same village. Sub-castes enjoy juridical autonomy (though this autonomy can be challenged in the courts, since the British regime). Every *jati/*sub caste, from a particular village or a group of neighbouring villages, constitutes a caste court which resolves internal disputes and punishes caste offences. Thus, the sub castes are well aware of their norms and values. As, mentioned earlier the *jatis* are endogamous and monopolise certain economic activities, the skills of which are passed down from generation to generation within the caste boundaries. These skills make them a part of an intersectional social structure ie. the caste hierarchical structure, which is vertical in nature.

The vertical hierarchy created by the caste structure governs the inter-caste relations through the concept of pollution. Contact of any kind, touching, dining (exchange of food and water), sex, and other relations between castes which are structurally distant results in the higher of the two castes being polluted. Pollution can only be overcome through purificatory rites. Contact is culturally defined and might include the maintenance of a prescribed physical distance. Inspite of this, castes occupying different hierarchies share an interdependence. An Indian village usually consists of a few subcastes which are mutually dependent and also possess certain interests in common leading to what is conceptualised here as 'vertical solidarity'. The Chapter presents the different sub-castes present in a Coorg village and their respective positions with respect to their traditional profession and subsequent social status. However, vertical solidarity is maintained, beyond the mere interdependency of economic needs, through ritual roles in both mourning as well as household and village festivals. The most prominent castes that the Coorgs interact with are the Brahmin or the priest, the *Kaniyas* who are astrologers, *Banna* is the caste which usually performs the rites prescribed by the *Kaniya;* further there are the blacksmith, carpenter, goldsmith, washerman and barber. These castes are again associated with their professional role; however, they also have special significance during festivities like the harvest festival were they provide ritually significant items to be used during the proceedings. The washerman provides ritually pure clothes for different occasions while the barber is indispensable because shaving and cutting of nails is important act of attaining ritual purity for the performance of rites (while the touch of the barber itself is defiling and needs purification). The *Meda* and *Poleya* are at the bottom of the caste

hierarchy. *Meda* provide artifacts like baskets, fish-traps, and receptacles of cane, vote reed, and bamboo; and are essential for Coorg festival, dance or hunt, where they beat their tom-tom. *Poleyas* are servants attached to the *okka* as household servants or agricultural labourers. The castes and professional categories mentioned here are blanket terms and consist of a number of sub-castes. These inter-caste relations are managed through prescribed annual remunerations at the time of harvest.

Sometimes ritual occasions stress the structural distance that prevails between the castes. However, some ritual roles place individuals from a lower caste, temporarily, in a superior position vis-a-vis the high castes. Further, some rites/rituals involve imperative participation and responsibilities of castes with which a social distance is maintained under usual circumstances, thus minimizing the structural distance.

It is important to note that horizontal and vertical solidarity are continuously negotiated to maintain a societal balance. Chapter 6 reiterates this when it mentions that "A village is a multi-caste association and the unity of the village always demands that caste-ties are checked sufficiently to prevent their overflowing the village and that unity with other castes occupying different positions in the hierarchy is stressed" (pg. 200-201).

This chapter continues to explain the social structure of the Coorgs vis-à-vis their inter-caste relations, the primary household (or the *okka*) and larger social groups like the neighbouring household or *okka* with whom friendship ties are maintained, the village and the *nad* (a group of villages). Within the inter caste relationship the chapter defines the role and services of each caste that the Coorgs interact with and draws a brief sketch of the ritual roles/significance that these castes play in various occasions within the Coorg household and the village. The Coorg household is described in relation with its ancestral affiliation and recognised through the bond of agnatic men, attached to the ancestral land, under the headship of a senior; whose wife takes on the responsibility and the management of the household and its women. Coorg being a warrior community (historically) based their relations on friendships and rivalry, in this there is recognition of neighbouring and friendly *okkas* with respect to a household, while the village is the smallest and most important of the territorial groups, and the *nad*, consisting of several villages is the next bigger group. This is also highlighted in Chapter 6 ie. "the widespread prevalence of feuds between villages and between *nads* tended to emphasize the unity of the village and check the segmentary action of caste" (Chapter 6, pg. 201). While historically created as an administrative unit, *nad* corresponds to the sentiments of the people. The chapter displays the system of authority within the *okka*, village and *nad* and the honour associated with their membership and protection. This honour is propagated through its identification within rituals and epitomised through folklore.

These units of solidarity introduced in this chapter are revisited again in the different chapters that follow.

Check Your Progress I

1. What are the key concepts that are introduced in Chapter two that form the mainstay of the book?

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2. Which are the prominent castes that the Coorgs interact with?

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8.4 CHAPTER 3 AND 4 -THE RITUAL IDIOM OF COORGS: THE RITUAL COMPLEX OF MANGALA AND CONCEPTS OF POLE AND MADI

The third Chapter begins with the observation that "Every society has a body of ritual". These rituals might consist of individual acts, or a whole body of acts (ritual complexes) that repeat themselves either constantly or frequently and at times occasionally. The two chapters trace the rituals within the social life of the Coorgs, beginning from the routine practice of salutation to more customary occasions as well as festivals. Chapter 3 reflects on significant occasions of life cycle referred to as *Mangala* which include marriage, the ear boring ceremony (representing social adulthood of males), building of a house, conferring of a bravery honour etc., all of which are performed on an auspicious day and thus recognisable as auspicious occasion. These occasions are marked by certain ritual complexes or *murta.* The Chapter continues to describing the mangala in detail, especially marriage. In this, chapter cites the ritual complex as a whole with respect to the household structure, the ceremonial rites, role of various household members, the role and significance of other castes and so on.

The chapter also brings out the ritual recognition of auspicious and in auspicious in various realms of life. It speaks of auspiciousness and in auspiciousness with reference to direction (south being inauspicious), place (kitchen, central hall, and south-western room of the ancestral home), food (rice and milk), cloth (cotton and silk), colour (black, white and red), marital status (married woman and a widow), animals (cobra and crow). It also speaks of sacredness or ritual purity which is usually attained through purificatory rites. Purity and pollution is further explained through occasions attached to pollution ie. women in their periods, the birth of a child and death, which are considered to be defiling. The chapter describes the whole ritual complex around auspicious and inauspicious occasions in a comparative frame. Within the auspicious occasions there are certain rites that bring the individuals central to the rituals in contact with lower castes leading to a state of pollution and thus in need of purification. Similarly, both an auspicious occasion like marriage as well death, demand certain rites that require a state of higher ritual purity. This highlights the fact that even in an occasion of pollution, performance of rites requires ritual purity.

The third chapter keeps shifting between the descriptive nuances of various auspicious and inauspicious occasion, in this it might be a little difficult to follow from time to time.

Chapter 4 elaborates on the concept of ritual purity of *madi*, and ritual impurity/pollution or *pole*. These concepts systematize and maintain the structural distance between different castes. One of the most important Untouchable castes are the Poley and Holey as both of which actually have the word *pole* attached to them. The chapter brings forth the realisation that the state of pollution is relative in nature. A lower caste individual is impure/polluted with reference to a higher caste, however within himself he is in a state of relative purity. Thus, an individual of any caste, under normal circumstances, is in a state of relative purity, with reference to his own caste. He has to gain ritual purity in order to perform certain rites, through prescribed purificatory acts. However, if the individual comes in contact with some one of a lower caste, whether in the state of ritual purity or normal state they get polluted, and have to undergo purificatory rites. Thus, "Ritual impurity, normal ritual status, and ritual purity form a hierarchy".

Further, Ritual purity might include aspects of physical purity or cleanliness, however mere physical cleanliness does not lead to ritual purity which is a culturally prescribed concept. Similar, parallel is also drawn with respect to death and mourning, which distinguishes grief from mourning. The mourning rites and mourning period are ritually prescribed thus an elderly death sees an elaborate ritual and long mourning period as compared to an infant. However, this does not necessarily represent the grief associated with the death.

The chapter builds on the ideas of purity and impurity through death rituals. This is especially significant as the state is of pollution but the individuals performing necessary rites have to be in a state of ritual purity. In this abstinence attached with ritual purity which include dietary restrictions, attire, contact with other caste, spouse etc. Such abstinence is also key to the ritual status of other auspicious occasions as well.

8.5 CHAPTER 5- THE CULT OF THE OKKA

"The *okka* or the patrilineal and patrilocal joint family is the basic group among Coorgs" (pg. 124). "Membership of an *okka* is acquired by birth, and the outside world always identifies a man with his *okka*" (pg. 124). "People who do not belong to an *okka* have no social existence" (pg. 124), thus if a child is born outside of a wedlock the elders of the community encourage the (allotment of) membership of the child in either the father or the mothers *okka*.

Chapter 5 brings out the relevance of the *okka* in the life of an individual. The *okka* has a continuity with the ancestral realm, where an individual after his death joins the 'body of apotheosized ancestors'. The ancestors are believed to look over the ancestral land, and are worshiped and propitiated from time to time. The ancestral land which is owned by the *okka* is held has a combined property and efforts are made to ensure that the land is not divided/split across generations. Thus, if the size of the household becomes too large, some members might construct and move to a subsidiary house on the land but the property remains combined. Every okka has a head, who is a senior agnatic male. The head of the household is responsible for delegation of duties and responsibilities among the men of the household. The household headman's wife is the mistress of the house and women

of the *okka* operate under her guidance and supervision. The *okka* is the official unit that finds recognition in the Coorg society and it must provide representation through its members in various activities related to the village and the *nad*.

The *okka* is an exogamous group and the marriage of its member is decided by the *okka*. The women post marriage become members of their conjugal *okka* however, they retain a symbolic membership in their natal okka as well. This chapter describes the legal aspects of marriage with respect to the rights of the woman and ritual of *sammanda* that fortifies these rights. There is a description of the rights and responsibilities related to different types of marriage, eventualities in case of widowhood or divorce, marriage for the continuity of an okkas which does not have any male descendants, the respective identity of children born and so on. There is also a reflection on the preference for levirate and cross-cousin marriage and how this leads to a solidarity between *okkas*. This is especially significant as women's relationship with reference to daughter-in-law with mother-in-law and sister-in-law's is seen strained relationships that might lead to a fraction in the *okka*. This relational struggle between has been referred to by Prof. Srinivas in his previous work 'Marriage and Family in Mysore' (1942). The chapter also reflects on the significance of the friends of the *okka* and continues to the next chapter which represents the village festival as the case example of social solidarity.

8.6 CHAPTER 6-THE CULTS OF THE LARGER SOCIAL UNITS

The village-deity has a significant role in the social life of the Coorgs. Inspite of being referred to as a village deity, the deity in question might be a combined deity of more than one village. The temples of these deities are simple and less ornate as compared to the Hindu temples; and the priest of the village deity may or may not be a Brahmin. There are times when the temple of the village deity might also consist of an outer sanctum of deities belonging to the lower caste. Thus, the religious pantheon is also representative of the social reality of castes. Most village festivals worshipping their deities take place around the same time, but among villages that hold key festivities, there is an understanding that their festivities will be prime on alternate years. The members of every caste in the village, including the Poleyas, attend the meeting or the village-assembly facilitating the decisions related to the festivities, and everyone in the village has to observe certain rules and restrictions during the festival. The festival might at times require the Poleyas to remain indoors and out of view for a period of time, emphasising the social distance between castes. Different *okkas* have designated duties at times of the festival and the *Bannas* and *Maleyas* (castes) officiate as oracles and dancers; and are responsible for the sacrifice of animals. In case of the village temples that have a brahmin priest the rituals related with animal sacrifice is officiated by a non-brahmin priest post which the vicinity is purified and the brahmin priest takes over the proceedings of the rest of the rituals. The festivities are marked by competitions between various villages. There are designated parts of the festivities where the Poleyas join in, ensuring vertical solidarity through a combined celebration. The Poleyas

are usually the receivers of an annual remuneration and goods from the Coorgs, during the festival they make token returns which, while negligible economically, stress on the goodwill prevalent between the various sections of a village community. The festivals of village-deities, the village harvest festival etc. usually culminate with a dinner for the entire village. The village dinner is rightly called 'village harmony', as it maintains and increases the harmony of the village. Chapter 6 describes the village festivals in great details, including the popular festivals, the local deities and their hinduised version, the associated rituals and the inter-caste roles. This takes us to the absorption of local deities in the larger pantheon of Hindu deities in the next chapter.

8.7 CHAPTER 7- HINDUISM AND CHAPTER 8 -RELIGION AND SOCIETY

Hinduism like any other religion is not static. It both influences and is influenced by the political and social forces of the time. The process of Sanskritization has continued to entrance outlying group into the folds of Hinduism through the Sanskritic deities assuming different forms in their travels all over India as well as local deities assuming Sanskritic labels and forms. This leads to the spread of Sanskritic rites, and the increasing Sanskritization of non-Sanskritic rites. Sanskritic Hinduism provides certain common values to all Hindus; and the possession of common values knits people together into a community. In case of the Coorgs this is exenterated by their visits to regional shrines and temple and the comparison of Kaveri to Ganga in terms of a pious river.

The complete absorption of any group of people into the Hindu fold is indicated by their becoming a caste. Further, as is mentioned in chapter 2, once the group becomes a part of the caste hierarchy it tries to sanskritize itself further through upward social mobility by the adoption of the customs and rituals of the higher caste. This explanation has been illustrated through various examples in Chapter 7.

Chapter 8, 'Religion And Society' sum up the book by reiterating the Coorg social life and the significance of ritual in its every nook and corner, and the myths and folklores that continuously sanskritize the local deities into the Hindu pantheon. The book however has a bit of an abrupt end.

Check your Progress II

3. What is an *Okka*?

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4. How does the process of Sanskritization has continued to entrance outlying group into the folds of Hinduism?

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8. 8 LET US SUM UP

This book brings out the reality of how deeply religion is intertwined within the Coorg social life. With Coorgs as the focus of the ethnography the book builds of the structural functional reality of horizontal solidarity and vertical solidarity. It takes a retrospective historical approach to bring forth the ideas of social change and sanskritization which the book elucidates is a continuous process. There are times that some parts of the book are repetitive, but it is essential to create a common bridge between what was placed in a different chapter setting to a greater elaboration of the same idea in another chapter. In this, the book continuously keeps rereferring to what has been said in order to bring things into context, and remains a must read towards understanding a thorough descriptive ethnography.

8.9 REFERENCE

Srinivas, M. N. 1952. *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

8.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. The key concepts introduced in Chapter two, that form the mainstay of the book, are of horizontal solidarity, vertical solidarity, Sanskritization and social change.
2. The most prominent castes that the Coorgs interact with are the Brahmin or the priest, the *Kaniyas* who are astrologers, *Banna* or the caste which usually performs the rites prescribed by the *Kaniya;* the blacksmith, carpenter, goldsmith, washerman and barber and the *Meda* and *Poleya*s. The *Meda* and *Poleya*s are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. The castes and professional categories mentioned here are blanket terms and consist of a number of sub-castes. Vertical solidarity is maintained with these castes beyond the mere interdependency of economic needs, through ritual roles in both mourning as well as household and village festivals.
3. The *okka* or the patrilineal and patrilocal joint family is the basic group among Coorgs. It is an exogamous group attached to an ancestral land. The membership of an *okka* is acquired by birth, and the outside world always identifies a man with his *okka*. Coorgs who do not belong to an *okka* have no social existence.
4. The process of Sanskritization has continued to entrance outlying group into the folds of Hinduism through the Sanskritic deities assuming different forms in their travels all over India as well as local deities assuming Sanskritic labels and forms. This leads to the spread of Sanskritic rites, and the increasing Sanskritization of non-Sanskritic rites. Sanskritic Hinduism provides certain common values to all Hindus; and the possession of common values knits people together into a community. The complete absorption of any group of people into the Hindu fold is indicated by their becoming a caste.

UNIT 9: MUKKUVAR WOMEN: GENDER, HEGEMONY AND CAPITALIST TRANSFORMATION IN A SOUTH INDIAN FISHING COMMUNITY - KALPANA RAM*

Structure

9.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, one should have a clear understanding of:

- the position of women in Mukkuvar society
- the dichotomy of gendered power vis-a-vis economic independence
- domestic unit building and power creation
- sociological understanding of the feminine

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Ethnographies are a very interesting window to the study of society. Being intensely descriptive and explanatory, ethnographies tend to create the world seen by the researcher just like that to the reader. The work by Kalpana Ram does just this. We can imagine the Mukkuvar society unfolding in front of us as we read the work.

The work on Mukkuvar Women by Kalpana Ram is a (in her words) "to write of difference". On reading the ethnographic study, this becomes quite apparent as the Mukkuvar community and the existence of women within this community is marked by several differences from the common parlance.

She describes the Catholic fishing community in a very realistic fashion when mentions about the bus from Nagercoil to Colachel. With paddy fields on one side of the road, along with groves of jackfruit, tapioca, mango etc. this is a fertile land area with much cultivation. Women can be seen outside

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their homes pounding rice into a meal or selling vegetables aiming for a bit of money or waiting for water in long queues. The ethnographer stayed in a coastal village with a social worker and studied the place for over eighteen months to gain familiarity about the place and people. It is through the house to house survey that the researcher collected information like age, educational levels, size of families, the residential frame, marital alliances, health conditions etc. This survey then became the way of entering into fruitful conversations and dialogues with the Mukkuvvar men and women over the period of time.

The way power is exercised within this coastal community is quite interesting. The contestation of power exists in different spaces like the men and women, the Mukkuvars and the Catholic Church and the Mukkuvars and the Hindu Brahmanical society. The female autonomy and solidarity exists within this framework as well as also in the division of labour on basis of gender. There are specific versions of domesticity within this fishing community that are different from the conventional knowledge.

9.2 UNDERSTANDING MUKKUVAR SOCIETY

Let us first understand some of the folk based etymologies for the caste name Mukkuvar. According to AK.Iyer (1909), The word 'Mukkuvar' is connected with the Canarese 'Moger'; both the words come from the same root, which means 'to dive'" (1909:266). The centrality of occupational specialisation is evident here.

9.2.1 The existence of the community

On seeing and understanding the Mukkuvar community, it becomes quite apparent that caste settlement is more than simply a geographical phenomenon. With endogamous system of marriage, migratory trips for work are common here. The migration occurs also because of pilgrimage purposes.

The understanding of women and power is generally painted by the nineteenth century dated materialism where the ideologies of femininity was more restrictive and a burden for the women of upper strata. This was a paradox to the freedom that seemed to have existed in the lower economic classes and castes.

This kind of a materialism has led to difficulties in understanding the non-propertied classes and their depictions. The entire metric of culture and problems associated with it somewhere became the exclusive domain of the upper classes only. For all others, the problems became restricted to only being economic ones. The important question to be asked that the researcher upholds is that the economic imbalances do not occur without any cultural significance.

One of the most interesting factors about the division of labour that the researcher points out is the barring of utilisation of resources of the ocean by the women. They could do so only through the men. In fact they may not practice the most lucrative occupation that defines the community- fishing. The so-called egalitarian Mukkuvar society then gradually unravels the differences existing within the fragments.

9.2.2 Locating women within the Mukkuvar community

The women within the Mukkuvar community are restricted to the domestic domain largely. Even when out, they maintain their physical distance from the men. This entire distancing and freedom is intricately planned as it differs with age and marital status of the women. While the younger women who are unmarried face much stricter surveillance; the women over forty, widows enjoy much freedom of movement.

The space dominated by the women remains the domestic space as well as the areas around it like the wells etc. On the contrary, the male space is the sea, beaches etc. where the boats and professional work takes place. In fact many men sleep on the beach under the open sky and do not return to their homes many times. The men, moreover need no justification of their presence through their duties of work. Their ways of entertainment and lazying around are also quite apparent. They can freely move and access the village square, toddy shop, shady groves and can also visit cinema houses or teashops that exist in the larger town of Colachel. In short, the public venues are all openly and easily accessible to them. This is in sharp contrast to the women who rarely access the public spaces or loiter around. Their movement outside is marked only by work. For entertainment and other purposes they may sit at the porch of their homes or the sandy lanes outside the houses. The distancing from the sea becomes a significant reason for lack of cultural capital among women.

Though the exclusion of women from fishing and their debarring from trade can be explained in economic terms; this would lead to banishing of the existence of social processes that are the reified structures creating such disparities. The space and access to space cannot thus simply be explained in economic terms but deserves a detailed social explanation and analyses also.

9.2.3 Women and the existence of sacred

According to popular beliefs here, women are also regarded as dangerous to men. The danger they may cause again depends on the age and social position that they have in society. The supernatural frame relegates women as being a threat to men's pursuit of their labour, mainly fishing activities. It is considered that a woman crossing a man's path going on work turns the sea as rough and crazy. They must thus stay out of sight of men when the latter are moving out for work. This was the reason that the researcher realised that the young girls avoided taking these sort route to the village as that lied in front of the beach. Any wrongful or incorrect conduct by the women became the reason for any kind of turbulences faced by the men at the sear and especially for their safety and upkeep. Such references can be found in popular novels like *Chemmeen by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai*. Here the man is entrusted with the girl rather than the other way round. The chastity of women and their prayers that bring men safe from the sea. In the novel, the heroine's mother tells her daughter that "Purity is the great thing, child. Purity. The strength and wealth of the fisherman lie in the purity of his wife ... My child, you must not be the cause of the ruin of the sea-front" (1962:5).

Within Mukkuvar catholicism the female principle dominates both the good and evil side. The figure of Mary exists on the good side while the evil is the Hindi goddess Issakai and her companions. The feminine principle is generated marked as a rendition in support of the male principle. This struggle can be co-related to the relationship of Sanskritic and non-brahmanic traditions. For instance, in support of Lords Vishnu or Siva, Parvati or Lakshmi become the submissive ones who do not have the freedom to inflict anger on mankind. This conception in short is phallocentric wherein the male control is stressed and the feminine is regarded as troublesome.

According to Hart, "The religion of the early Tamils as 'an animistic one in which divine forces were conceived of as immanent within actual objects and as potentially harmful. These divine forces, called *ananku,* were for the most part not personified as gods." (1975:42-43). This again links the divine power to the feminine. In fact, for Hart, the Tamil popular view of 'Ananku' that is connected with woman can be understood as "the origin of many pan-Indian customs which have to do with women". The challenging powers of the women to extend the lives of their husbands is itself evident of the culturally acquired powers of the women.

It is in the worship of the village goddess in contemporary Tamil Nadu that the early conception of femininity and divinity survives in its least altered form. As the centre force of the village the goddess contrasts the divine from the demonic. In her powerful form, she is a fusion of the two. According to Brubaker, the connection between the divine goddess and the disease is a complicated one. In his words, "Epidemic disease, then, is something the goddess suffers, something she is, something she inflicts, and something she combats. In other words, the relationship between the goddess and this paradigmatic threat to her people takes every possible form" (Brubaker 1979:130). It is quite apparent that the confusions, tensions & complexities surrounding the goddess are innumerable. However, it must be remembered that the Mukkuvars are aware of the non-sanskritic goddess, Bhagvathi Arman also and regard her as the evil figure.

The struggles and dialogues over construction of cultural meaning and autonomy, all revolve around the representations of the femininity. There thus exist different conceptions of gender and religion amongst Mukkuvar relations. The polyphonic existence of culture with multiple possibilities exist because of such diversity of meanings that exist. These meanings get manipulated in conscious an unconscious ways by the feminine. This replicates in the diverse relations that Mukkuvars establish with the different strands of the Tamil cultural matrix.

Check Your Progress I

1) The ethnographic study on Mukkuvar women is done by:
   a) Ursula Sharma
   b) Kalpana Ram
   c) Tiplut Nongbri
2) The Mukkuvar community is mainly involved in:
   a) Fishing

b) Tourism

c) Food processing

3) Women are regarded as ———— to men:

a) significant

b) wise

c) dangerous

9.3 THE STAGES OF A WOMAN'S LIFE

There are ways in which female body changes and is supposed to be kept with age. For instance, in case of hair, hair may be kept short for young girl. As the age grows, the hair must be oiled and plaited. Also, after puberty, and especially after marriage, the hair must be tightly made into a bun. The hair are left open only after bath when they should be dried. Other than bath, if the hair are left opened, they signify wrath and disorder. This may symbolise the grief that comes with widowhood, any kind of anger or sexual passion. Even pan-Indian epics use this trope of imagination to represent power. The 'gender-coding of space', which less politely comes down to restrictions on the female use of space, now emerges as part and parcel of the more general concern with containing women through the regulation and regimentation of the materiality of their bodies.

The Hindu value system explicitly showcase menstruation rites. Within the Tamil society, the first menstruation is considered to be auspicious and is celebrated. This is of much significance to the mukkuvar female. In Tamil society, it is all the menstruation stages that are marked by rituals. While the first one is about celebration, the others represent seclusion. The seclusion also carries major fears and overtones of pollutions, absence from public worship, debarring from domestic cooking and so on. Such practices that involve seclusion are absent from the Mukkuvar society. It is among the Mukkuvars that women go out for work, attend the church service and carry on regular lives during menstruation also. Though, here too, differences occur. Some Mukkuvars do follow the measures of Tamil Hindu society in an aim of looking as equivalents to them.

Among Mukkuvar women menstruation is called '*maatha viLLakkam'* or the monthly cleansing. It is important to remember that the Mukkuvar society does not exist in isolation. The lack of restrictions owing to pollution are often connected to the economic demands of a society that requires women to go out and work. However, this is majorly erroneous (Ferro Luzzi 1974:128). This can definitely be understood only as an analyses between the fisher people as an unbound caste and the rest of the society. The Mukkuvars devalue the entire caste and this is what can explain their devaluation towards the norms of pollution and purity that exists in other castes. Within the lower caste communities like the Mukkuvars themselves, the women become symbolically similar to the untouchables within he sanskritic paradigm.

Such implications of the inter-relation between woman and the untouchable is also discussed by Krygier. According to him, "the Brahmanic *upanayana* rite of initiation for boys is restricted to the twice-born upper castes; there is

no initiation rite for girls either. Only twice-born castes can study the Veda; women similarly are not allowed to read the Veda or to worship any deity with Vedic mantras" (1982:78-79). The Sanskriti feminine view seems to be impervious within the Mukkuvars but the non-sanskritic view also has a subterranean existence only.

9.3.1 Domestic unit as a step towards power

According to Levi-Strauss, women become the means of exchange between groups that are opposed yet complementary. This extends within the Mukkuvars as here the women form the central nucleus of the male kins according to Beck (1974). As a 'vital link in a set of interlocking kin' (Wadley 1980), the girl's fertility is not only of importance to the families of her cross-cousins, but also secures her own position within her natal family. The marriage among the Mukkuvars takes place between daughter and sons who are within the same village or at least in nearby villages that turns the life of a woman into a highly consolidated one between her marital and natal households.

One thing quite noticeable about the feminine construction of power in Mukkuvar society is the way power is played by confinement of women. On the one hand while they do not have economic resources and access to public spaces; on the other hand they derive their power over men from this exclusion and confinement to domestic spaces. There is an enormous amount of psychic and mysterious powers that are endowed over when by the men. In addition to this, women becomes powerful in terms of the innumerable responsibilities they uphold.

The domestic domain is regarded as the space where women exercise power. The women here are considered to be the supreme entity who also act as a connection between different generations, between different households as a source of continuity. In fact marriages of daughters are arranged in close vicinity by the coastal people so that they can be supporters for their life especially in cases where sons are not very dutiful. In words of the researcher, "The daily uncertainties of male-based fishing operations are compensated by the elaborate monetary redistribution of resources organised by women who are in charge of the daily reproduction of labour power and familial social relations."

The importance of female position becomes even more stressed due to the sexual division of labour in fishing societies. Here, the women become the practitioner of land-based activities taking place in the Mukkuvar community. The management and expenditure of cash as well as the entry parallel economy based on credit functions is run by the woman. This is important for the Mukkuvars as it helps in balancing out the fluctuations that keep occurring in the male-dominated economic set-up. The women here along with the economic power, uphold functions of nurturing and taking care of the health, maintenance and reproduction of the domestic unit. In this manner, their role transcends the simple confinement of the domestic realm. Their attempts and persistent effort in maintaining the unit, contacting healers, arranging marital alliances lead them to move all around the coastal belt and also reach the interiors of the district. Thus, the pillars of

the Mukkuvar community- health systems, village environment and others are the responsibility of women.

The idea of female skate is understood as manifested within the girl even before the age of puberty. The virginal daughters are considered to entail certain unknown auspicious powers. It is this virgin daughter who is not entirely sexual. Also she is not the sakti of the sexually matured woman. These powers and control emerge only beyond marriage and consummation leading to motherhood. In short, the chaste wife and doting mother makes the completion of a woman's spiritual duties and cultivate her inherent auspicious sakti.

The female body is a strange space with several complexities. It is regarded as being more disorders in comparison to the male. There is an invitation to supernatural attention here. Apart from the female body, it is the infant that also belong to the realm of the vulnerable. However, the infant is so deeply dependent on the motherly body, that it lacks any control of its own. The physiology of the female body itself creates transitions - puberty, with its dramatic flow of blood which subsequently recurs every month, pregnancy and childbirth - which are times of great ambiguity and change. They constitute the cracks and weak points in the relation between humanity and the malign powers. Kenneth David (in Wadley 1980) has analysed binding as a recurring theme in the life cycle rituals of Tamil women. The situation of seclusion occurs within the Mukkuvar woman's life at different stages. This seclusion or restriction within four walls happens at stages like the first menstruation that occurs and then the twelve days after childbirth.

Check Your Progress II

1) Elaborate about the stages of a woman's life and the parameter of power.

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2) What do you understand by the relationship of women and the existence of sacred?

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3) Explain the domestic unit as a centre of power for women.

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9.4 LET US SUM UP

It must be remembered that the women do not play role in the economic work related with fishing and thus, do not have access to cultural capital associated with this occupation. Despite such debarring, the women

exercise control over resources that directly or indirectly are the factors for male dominance. It is because of the profession that men have to be away from lands for a long period of time, and the women become the mediators between the temporal rhythms of production and reproduction in fishing society. Because of long gaps, the economic contribution of men becomes quite sporadic. During some great catches, the money flow increases but during the downfall of fishing season, there remains lack of money and economic flow. In contrast to such intermittent money supply, the social production of domestic unit is even and continuous. As this lands in the purview of the women, they thus take care of maintaining the units despite lack of money or so.

In Mukkuvar society, it is the social and economic activity which helps explain the common apprehensions of femininity - expressed most directly in the religious and ritual spheres - as powerful and possibly dangerous to patriarchal control. Equally, such practices reinforce the special affinity women feel for those religious deities that are specifically responsible for the local environment and the female world of social reproduction.

The social and ritual bonds are both utilised by the Mukkuvar village women through the social structures and systems like marriages, kinship, neighbourhood and so on. Financial transactions occur here also thereby blurring the distinct gap between the domestic and extra-domestic domains. This is necessary for daily existence and survival of households.

Check Your Progress III

Mark the following as True or False

1) Women play a very important role in fishing occupation.
2) Women exercise immense power in terms of domesticity.
3) Within Mukkuvar catholicism the female principle dominates both the good and evil side.

9.5 REFERENCE

Ram, K (1991) Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community. Allen & Unwin.

9.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1) b 2) a 3) c

Check Your Progress II

1) Units paragraph 9.3
2) Units paragraph 9.2.3
3) Units paragraph 9.3

Check Your Progress III

1) False 2) True 3) True