Lecture 5: Power, Religion, and Ritual

¶ 5.1

Mapping the structures of human power and the mechanisms of human belief.

[Decisions]
[Order]
[Power]
[Governance]

Political Anthropology

Anthropology of Religion

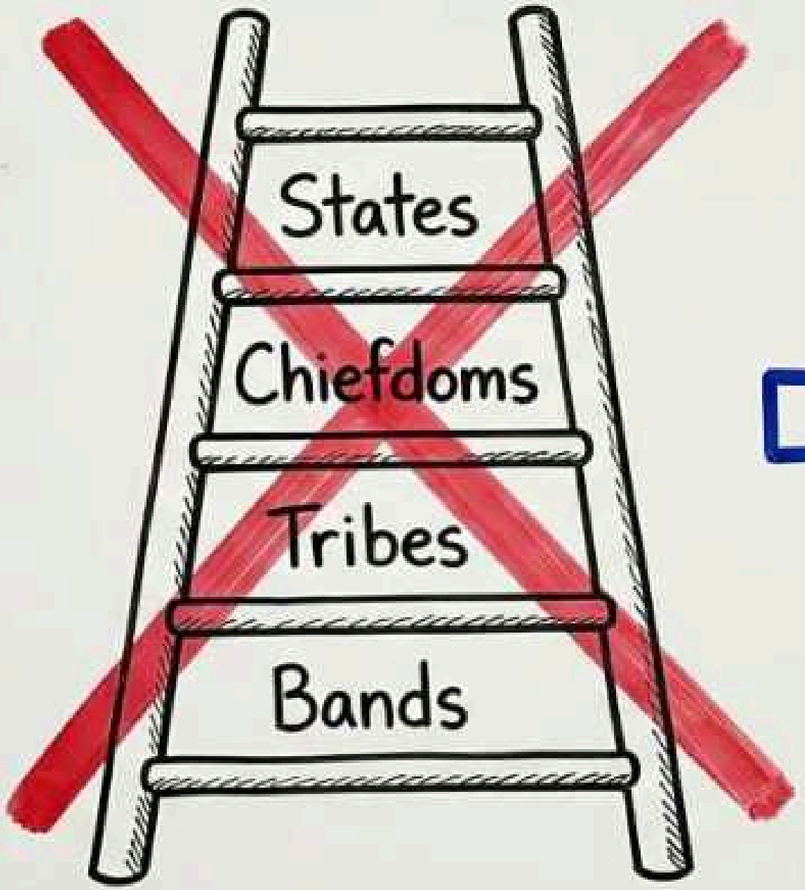


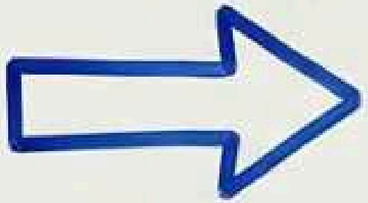
[The Sacred]
[Misfortune]
[Ritual]
[Milestones]

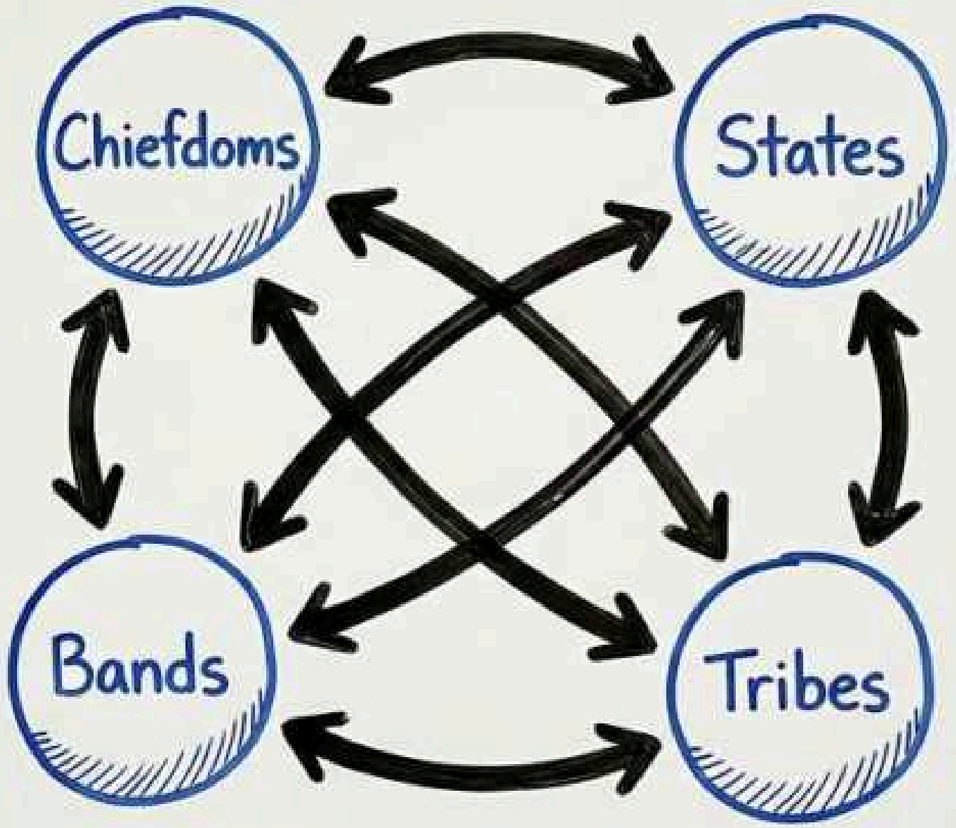


Elman Service (1962): Political Typologies

¶ 5.2







*Critique: This is not a rigid evolutionary ladder.

Real societies fluctuate fluidly between types based on historical conditions.

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Bands: The Architecture of Egalitarianism

¶ 5.3

Small, leaderless foraging groups.
Decisions rely on discussion; influence relies on skill.



Order is actively maintained by cutting boastfulness down to size (e.g., Richard Lee's account of the Ju/'hoansi).

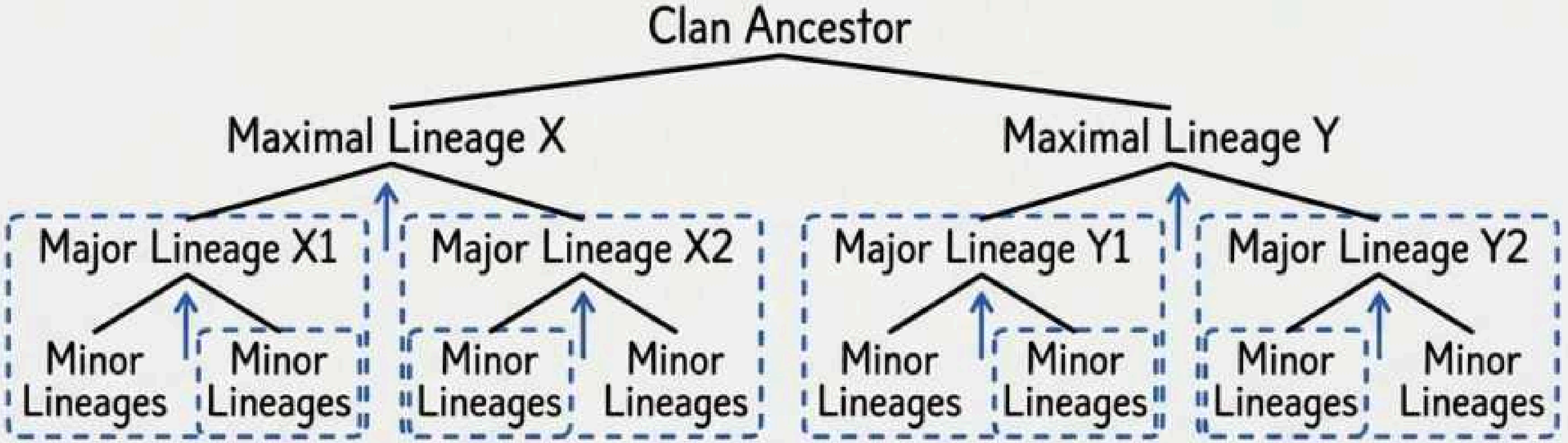
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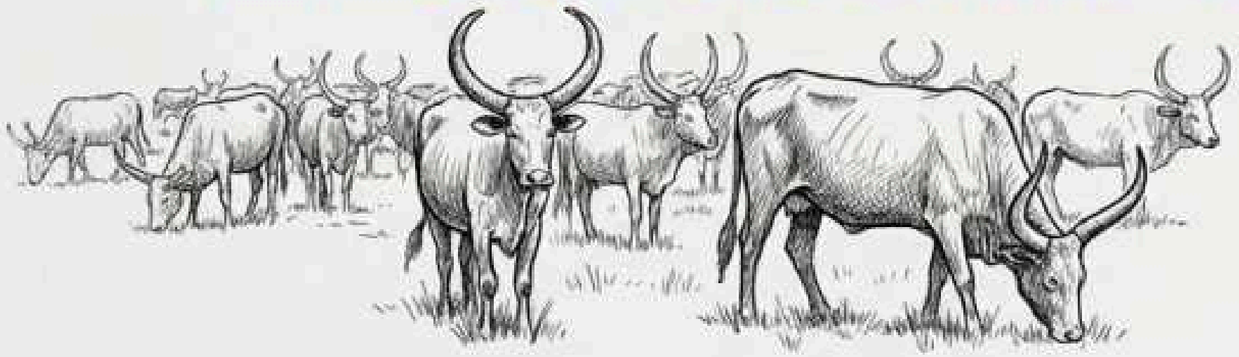
Tribes: Segmentary Lineage Systems

¶ 5.4

Larger, kinship-tied groups. Order is kept by balanced opposition without a central ruler.

(Lineage A ↔ Quarrel ↔ Lineage B) → Unite against (External Threat C)





Evans-Pritchard's Nuer: Internal rivals instantly unite when faced with an outside threat.

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Chiefdoms: The Introduction of Formal Rank

¶ 5.5

Sahlins (1963) contrasts two distinct typologies of power.

The Melanesian "Big Man"



Generosity + *Persuasion* = *Achieved Rank*

Self-made rank built on followers and feasts. Not inherited.

The Polynesian Chief



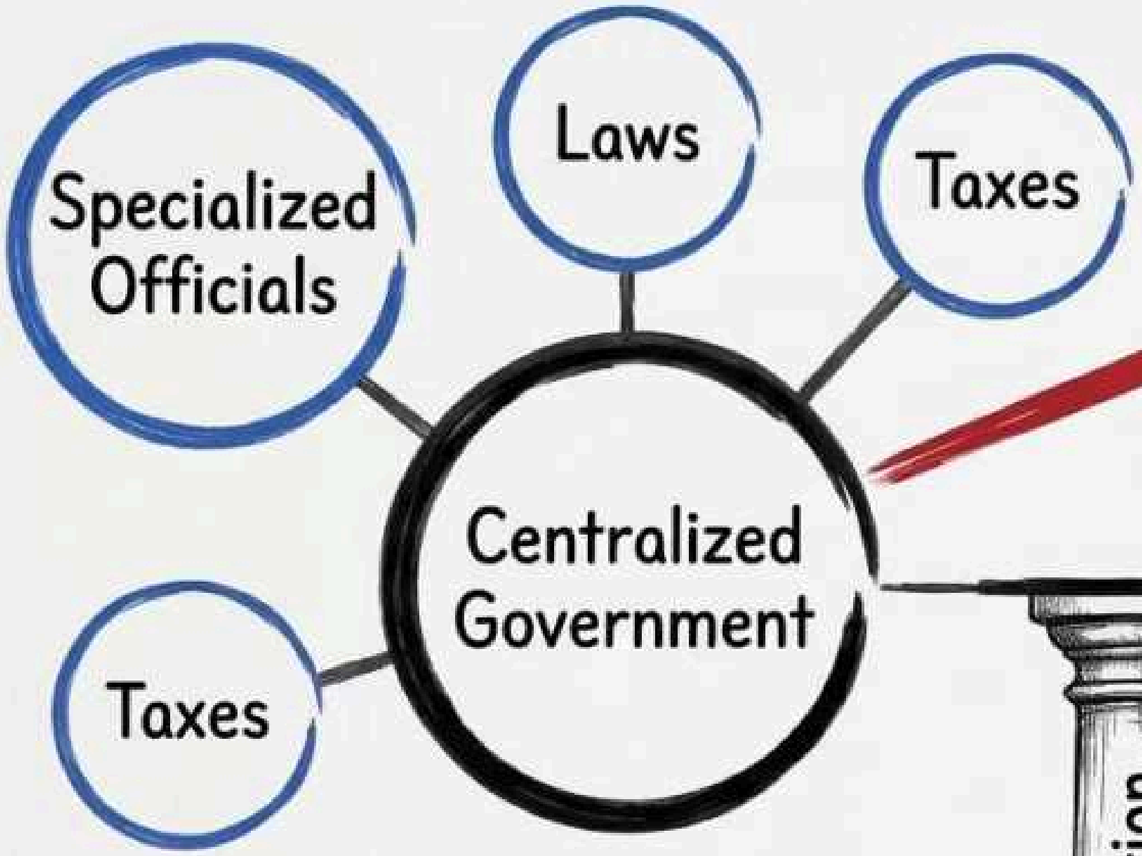
Divine Descent = *Ascribed Rank*

Divinely sanctioned rank built on inherited bloodlines. Sacred.

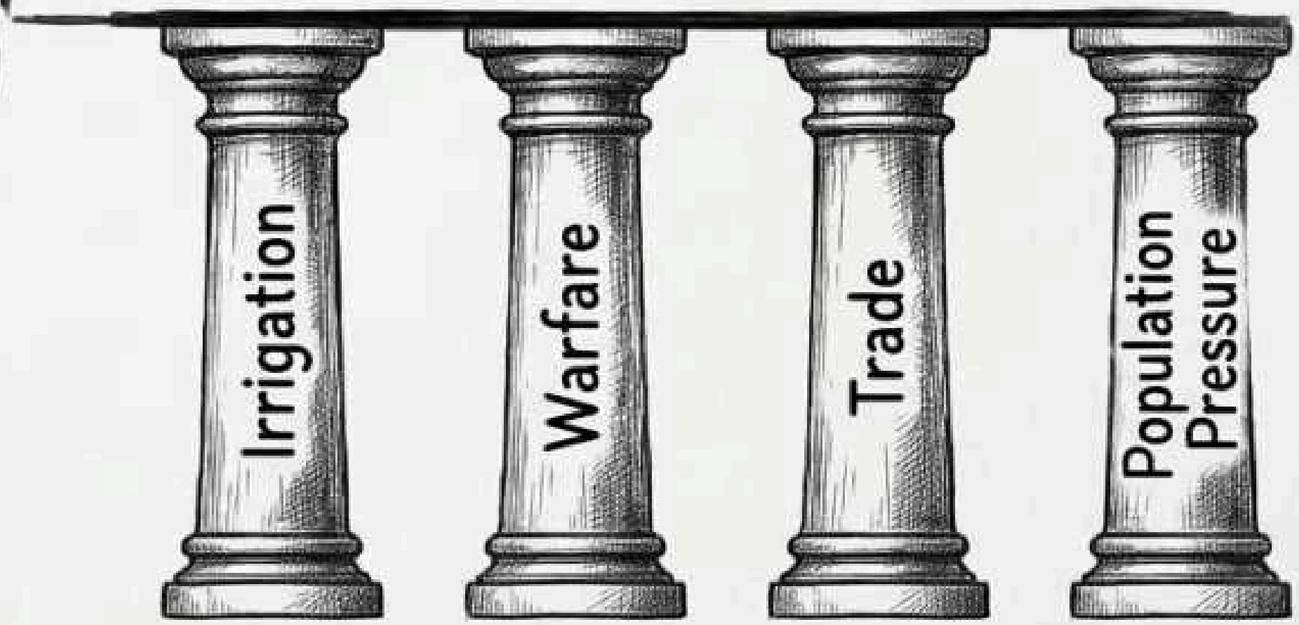
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States: Multi-Causal Origins & Centralized Control

¶ 5.6



"A claim to the legitimate use of force within a territory." — Max Weber



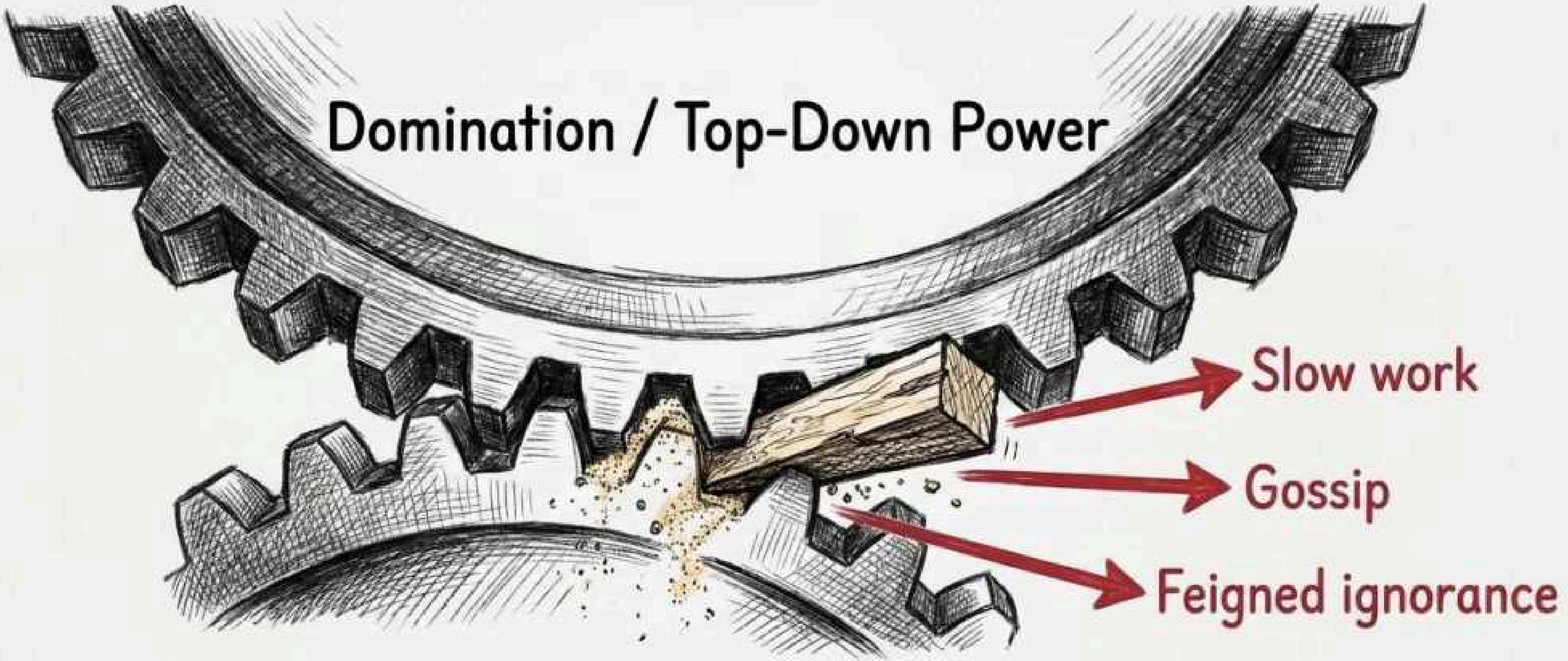
Power is institutionalized. Multiple factors combine to necessitate specialized bureaucracy.

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Power from Below: Weapons of the Weak

¶ 5.7

James Scott: Power is constantly contested through quiet, everyday acts of resistance.



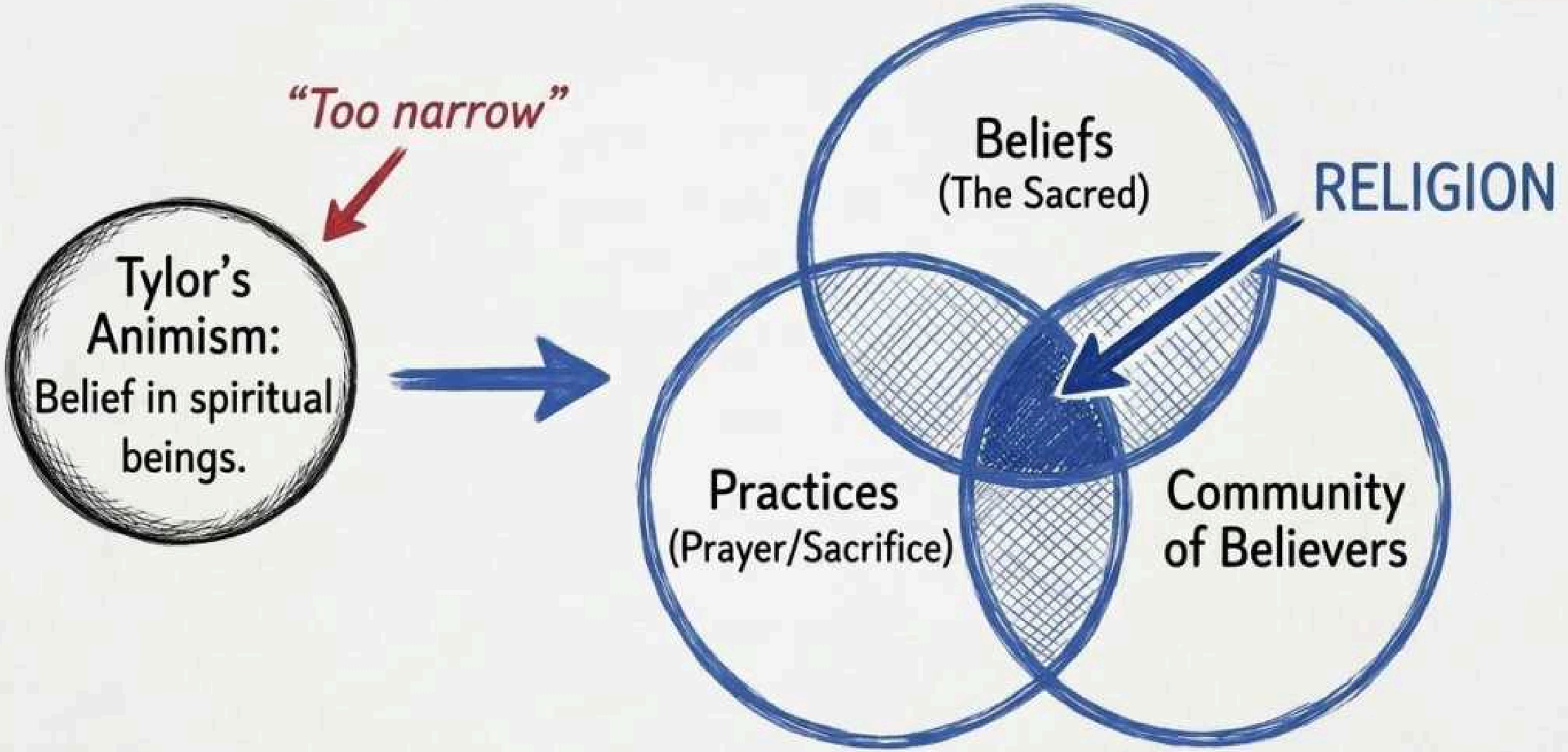
Ordinary people resist domination without coordinated rebellion.

Power is studied from below as well as above.

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Defining Religion: Beyond Minimal Definitions

¶ 5.8



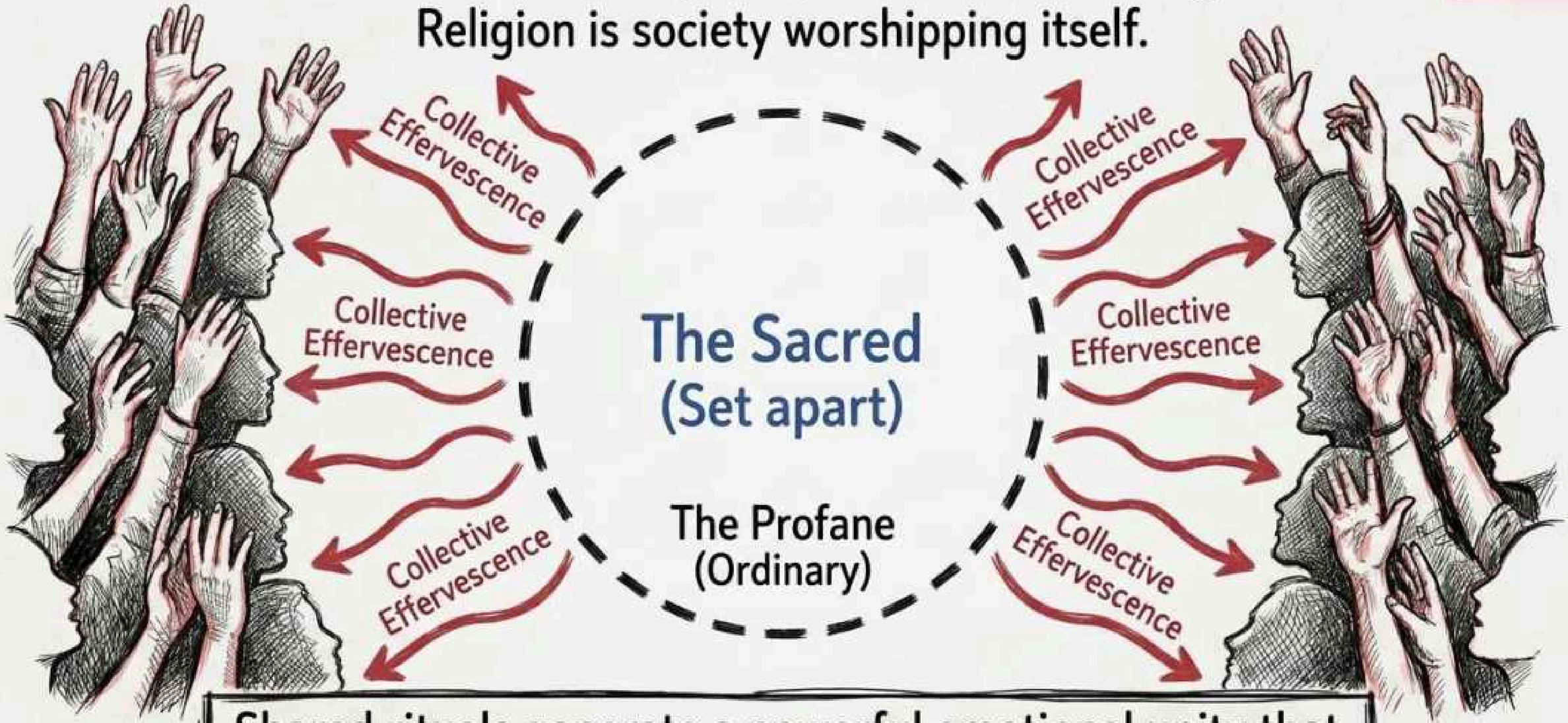
Modern anthropology recognizes religion as a holistic, cross-cultural triad.

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Emile Durkheim (1912): The Sacred Engine

¶ 5.9

Religion is society worshipping itself.



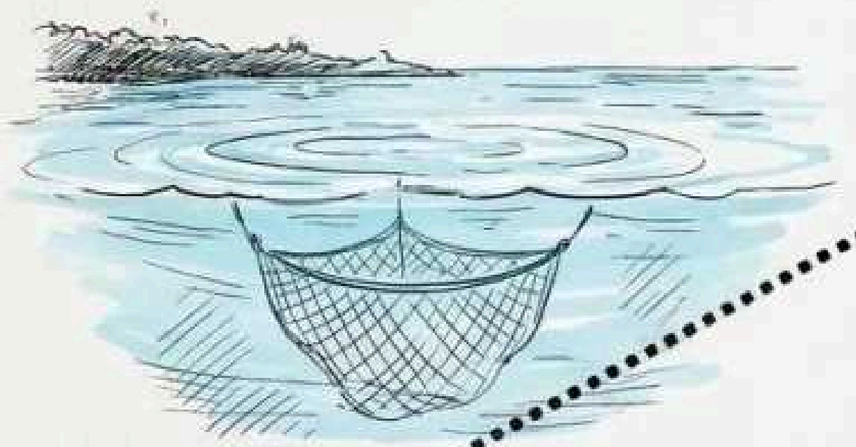
Shared rituals generate a powerful emotional unity that binds the group together and enforces moral rules.

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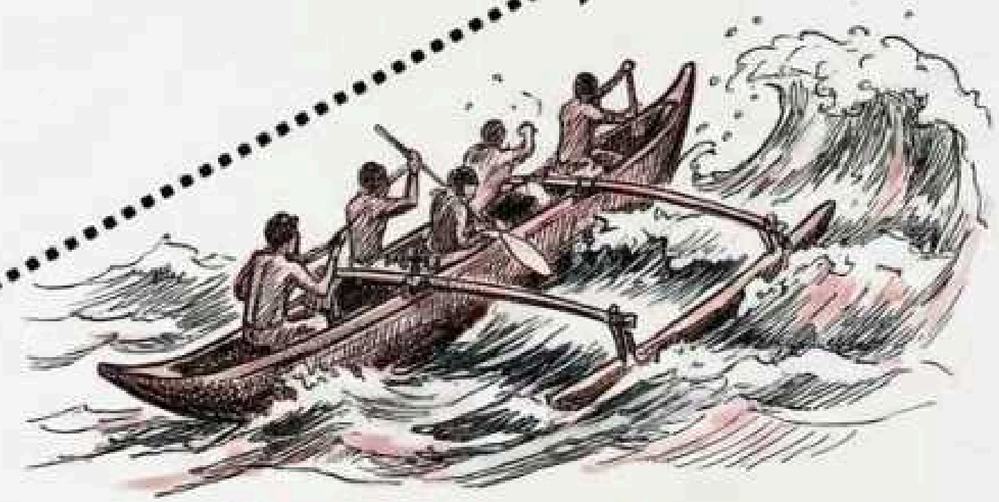
Malinowski: Magic, Risk, and Uncertainty

¶ 5.10

Magic is a psychological technology used to bridge the gap between practical skill and uncontrollable danger.



Safe lagoon fishing
(Practical skill suffices)



Open sea voyages
(Fear & uncontrollable outcomes)

Use of Ritual Magic

Environmental Danger / Uncertainty

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Evans-Pritchard (1930s): The Logic of Witchcraft

¶ 5.11

Azande witchcraft is an internally consistent, logical system used to explain the coincidence of misfortune.



[Cause 1: Physical (Termites)] + [Cause 2: Social (Witchcraft)] = **Specific Misfortune**

↓

Explains the "How"

↓

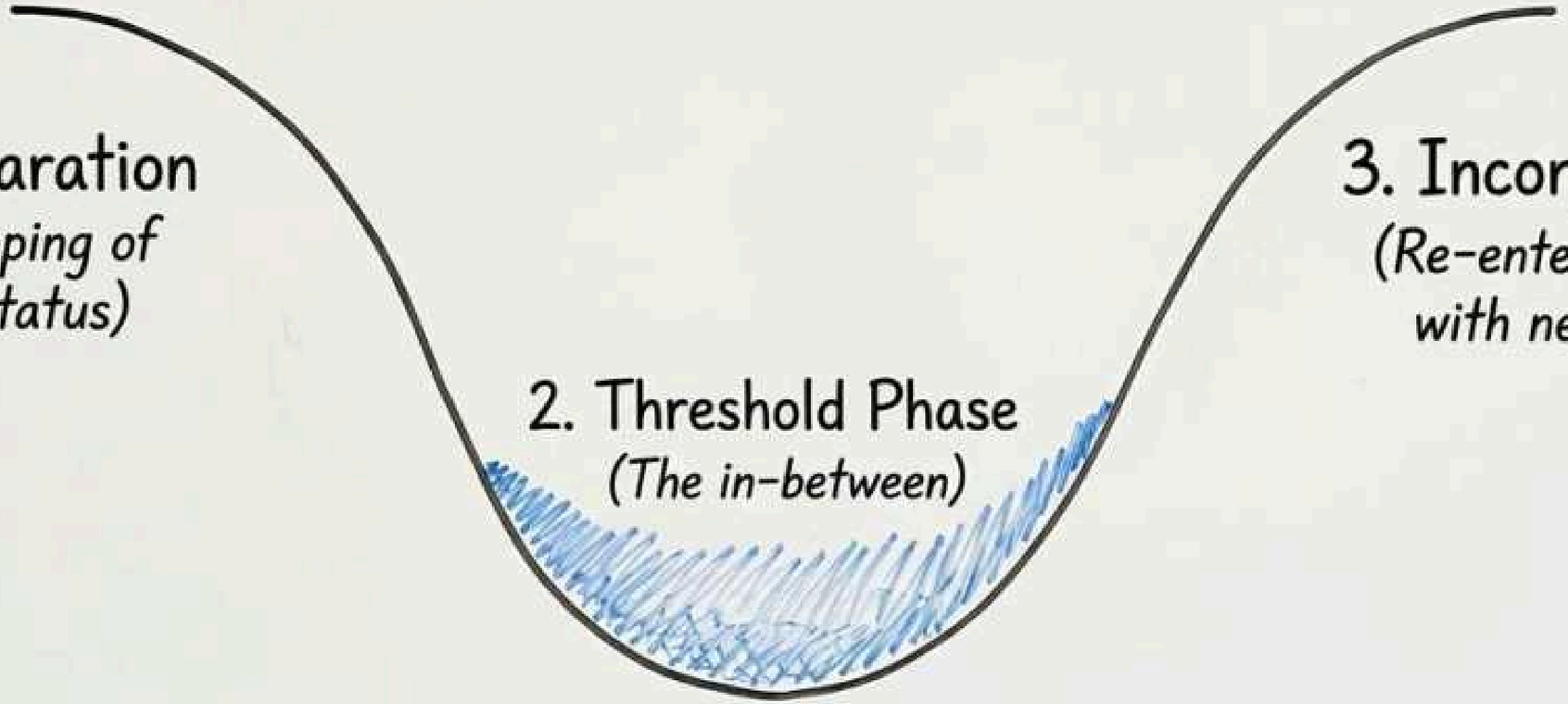
Explains the "Why"
(Why this person at this exact moment?)

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Arnold van Gennep (1909): Rites of Passage

¶ 5.12

The universal architecture of transition rituals—birth, coming of age, marriage, death.



1. Separation
(Stripping of old status)

2. Threshold Phase
(The in-between)

3. Incorporation
(Re-entering society with new status)

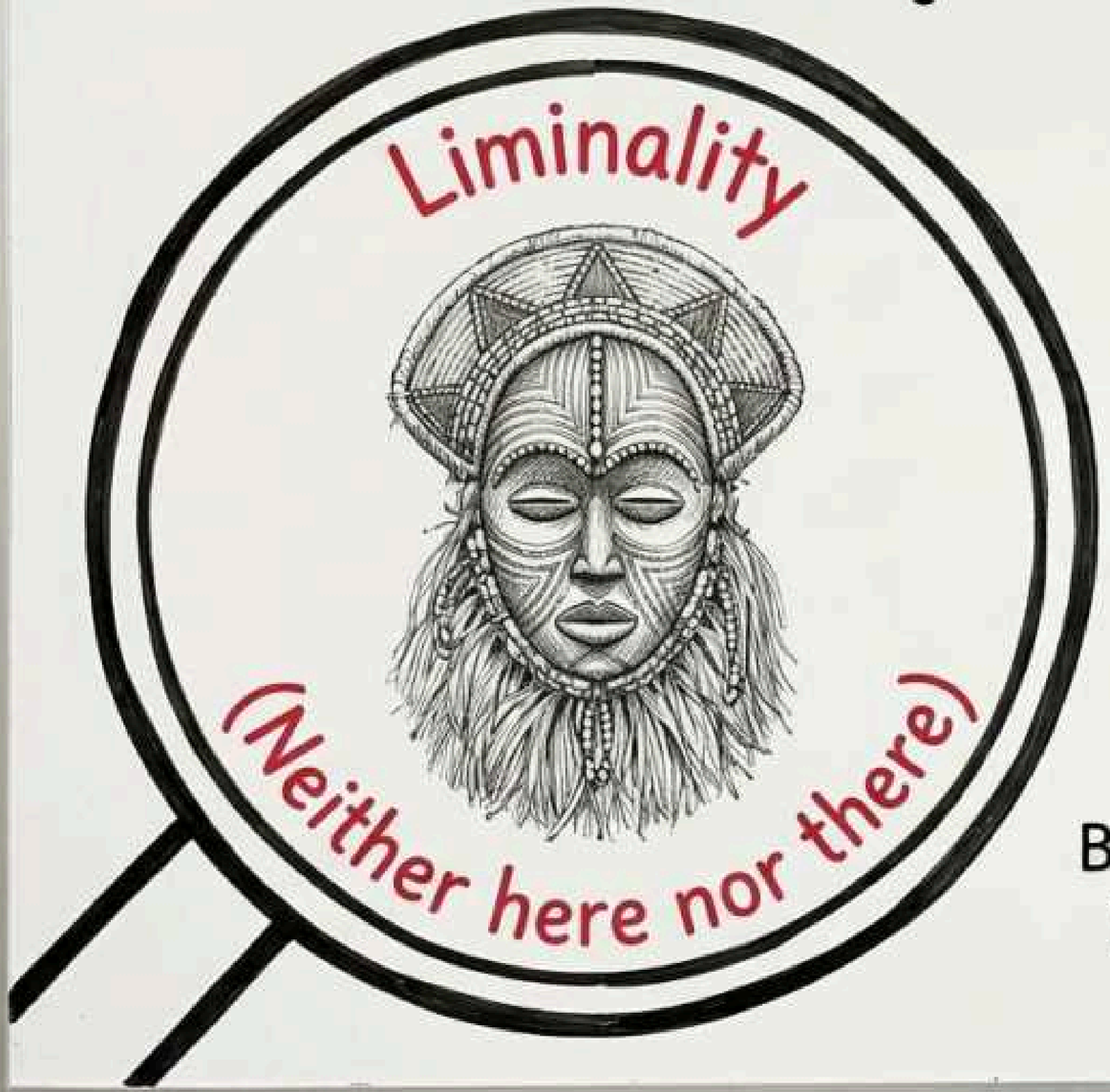
Social status is temporarily disassembled, suspended, and then rebuilt.

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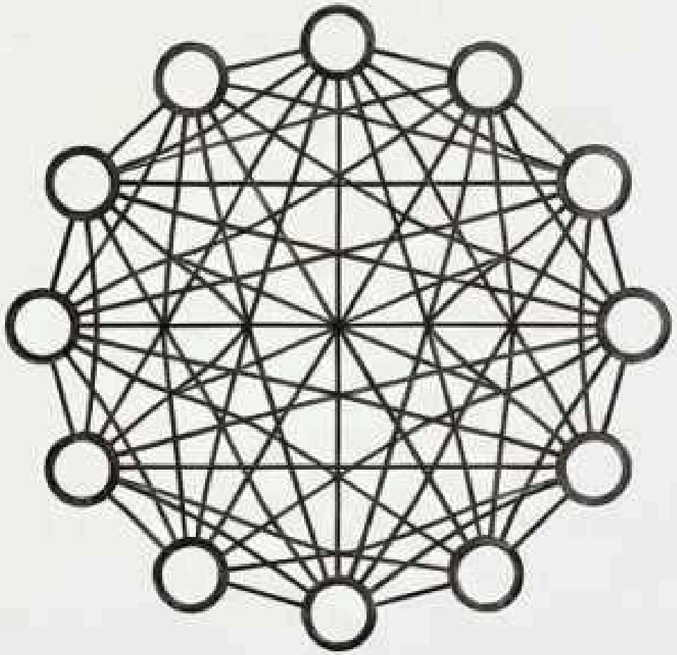
Victor Turner: Liminality and Communitas

¶ 5.13

Zooming in on the Threshold Phase.



Stripped Status → Communitas



Because initiates are stripped of status, they form intense, egalitarian bonds (communitas), visible in tribal initiations and modern graduations.

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The Function of Ritual

¶ 5.14

Ritual is not just passive tradition; it is an active mechanism that does cognitive and social work.

The Ritual (Black Box)

Symbols
Gestures
Fixed Sequences



Status Changed
Order Reaffirmed
Healing Enacted

1. What does it mean? | 2. What does it accomplish? | 3. Who controls the script?

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The Anatomy of Myth

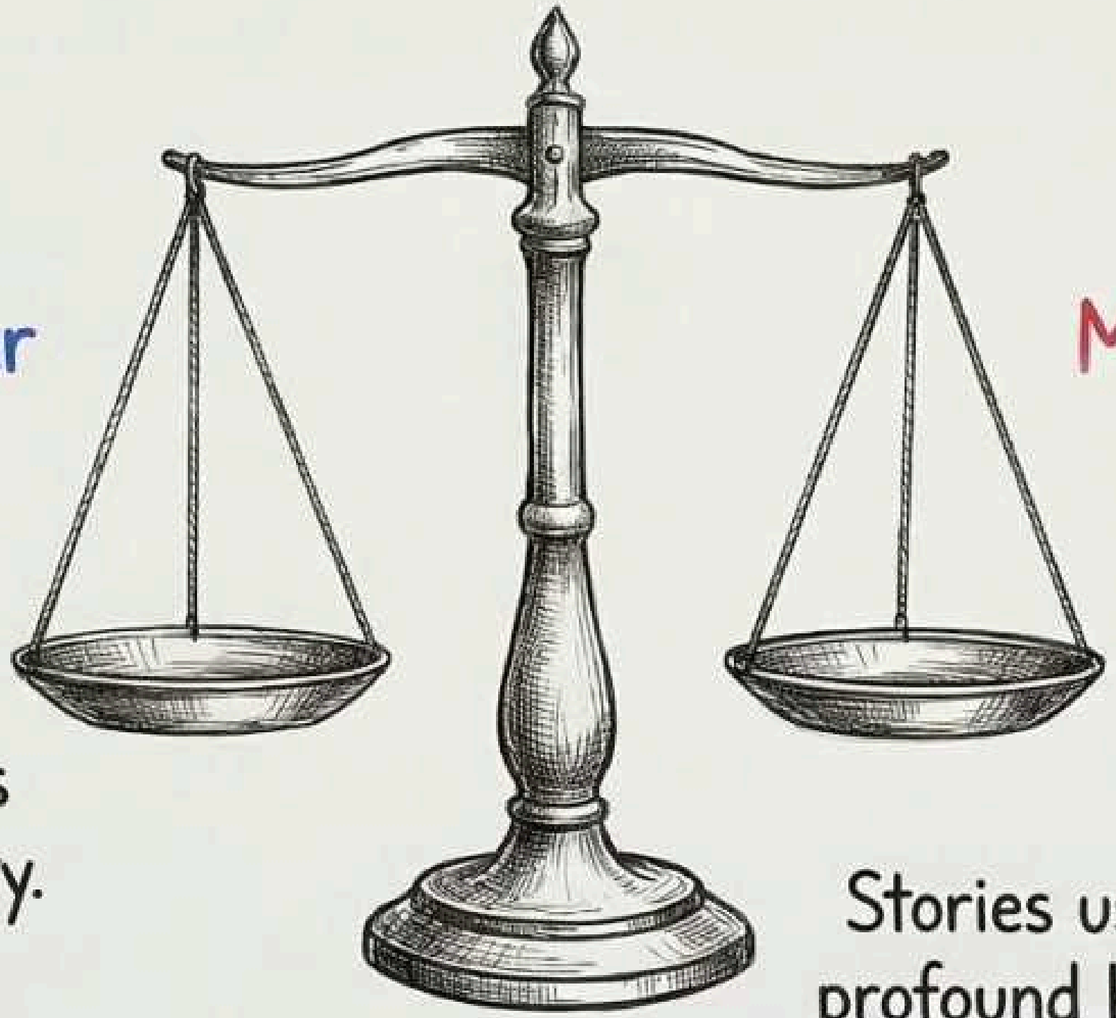
¶ 5.15

Stories that explain the world and serve as cognitive tools.

Malinowski

Myth as Charter

Justifies present social arrangements and validates society.



Lévi-Strauss

Myth as Structure

- Raw ↔ Cooked
- Nature ↔ Culture
- Life ↔ Death

Stories used to think through profound human contradictions.

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Religious Dynamics: Contact and Crisis

¶ 5.16

Tradition A (African) + Tradition B (Catholic) = Syncretism (Vodou/Santería)

Religions blend upon contact.

Loss of Land / Loss of Life → Existential Crisis → Revitalization Movement



e.g., Wovoka's 1890s Ghost Dance.
A prophetic search for renewal.

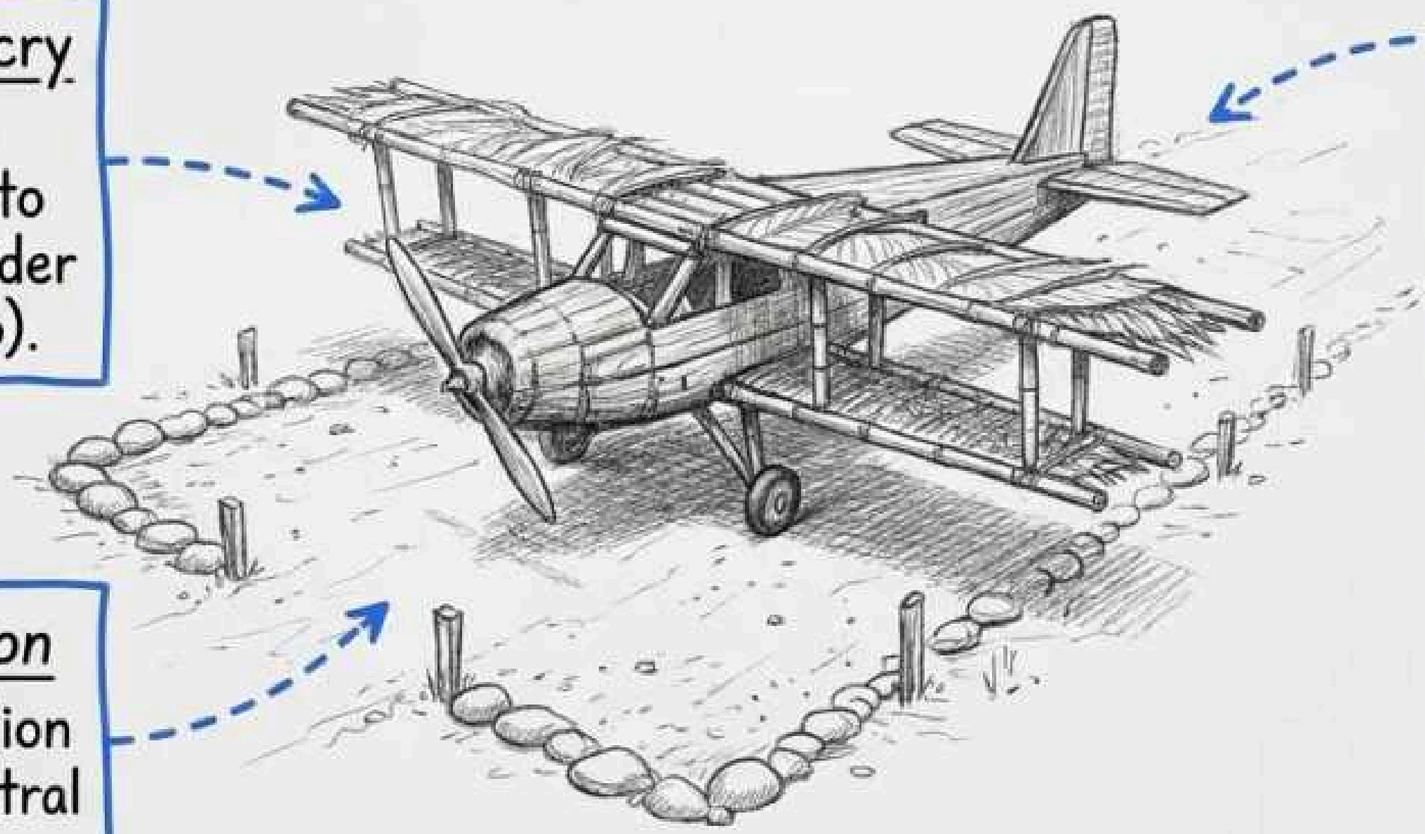
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¶ 5.17

Religion and Politics Entangled

Faith inspires both *obedience* and *protest*.

Physical Mimicry
Constructing infrastructure to command outsider wealth (*Cargo*).



Political *Logic*
A deeply thoughtful, logical effort to understand and master colonial power structures.

Spiritual Action
Ritual preparation to compel ancestral intervention.

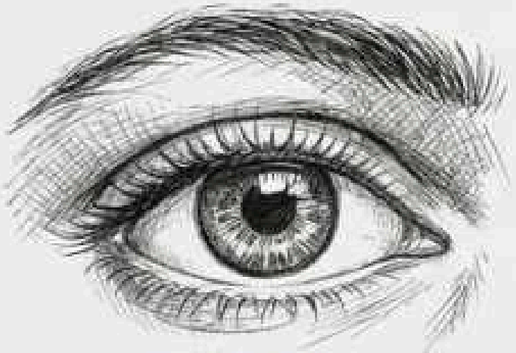
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¶ 5.18

Methodological Agnosticism

Respect for lived experience is the primary metric.

The Anthropologist's Domain





Domain of Believers & Philosophers

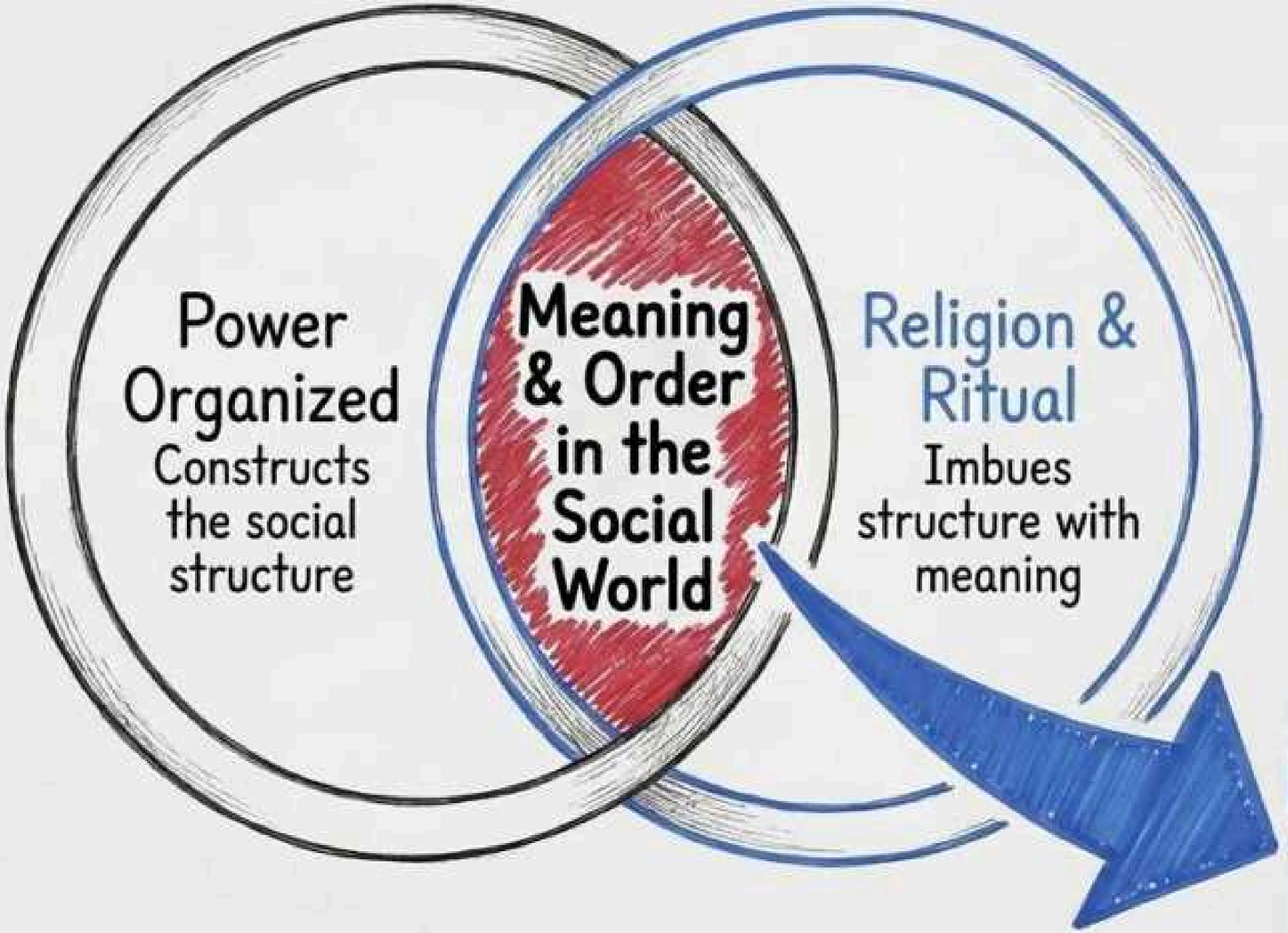


Anthropologists study how beliefs shape human lives without ruling on whether those beliefs are ultimately true.

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¶ 5.19

Synthesis: The Layers of Human Experience



NEXT LECTURE:
Identity, Inequality, Migration, and Global Forces

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