



## **The License in Ritual**

**Max Gluckman (1911-1975)**

**Abstract prepared by Ryan Stodart**

**Legacy:** Max Gluckman is well-known for his extensive research done in Africa, particularly concerning politics among the Zulu and Lozi, though he also studied a multitude of other cultures as well. He was a structural functionalist who studied not only government and how it pertained to society, but also religion, particularly religious ceremonies involving cultural taboos. In this article, he attempts to explain the cultural significance of rituals that seem rebellious, and understand what purpose they might have in that society. Gluckman was also a strong proponent against colonialism, and was heavily against utilizing anthropological data to help colonialism. He taught primarily at the University of Manchester, where he developed a method of thinking called the Manchester School of Thought, which provided his students with solid guidelines for conducting research and case studies.

**Theoretical Influences:** As a structural functionalist, Gluckman was heavily influenced by Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and Edward Evans-Pritchard, who are known founders of structural functionalism and its ideals. He was also influenced by Emile Durkheim, particularly concerning his idea of social cohesion: Gluckman believed that rituals were a mechanism used to hold societies together. Another major influence was Karl Marx and his concept that conflict is inherent in every society; however, while Marx believed that conflict ultimately lead to revolution, Gluckman believed that conflict lead to resolution.

**Theory:** Gluckman believed that ritualistic role-reversals serve to reinforce the established order; these rituals act to explain to the members of the society how the society is supposed to operate, by illustrating what not to do. He argued that these rituals are beneficial: they can be used to tell a ruler how he is supposed to act and what he is supposed to, they can be used to encourage a good, and even to bless a new home.

**Methods:** Gluckman performed extensive field research and took extremely detailed case studies to document his research (taking detailed case studies is one construct of his Manchester School of Thought). He was also known to employ statistics in his explanations to reinforce his concepts.

**Strengths:** One strength of Gluckman was that he offered an alternative perspective to Marx's conflict theory by suggesting that conflict is not always destructive, but that it can also be constructive. He also attempted to atone for the sins of past anthropologists by attacking ethnocentrism and colonialization, and pointing out their faults.

**Weaknesses:** Gluckman blatantly disregarded the psychological side of functionalism, despite the fact that both sides could offer a clearer picture as to the reason why people do what they do. He also assumed that society was static and did not account for changes, as well as focusing solely on the group as a whole and not at all on the individuals of the society (which I believe

ties in to his disregard of psychology).