

PROFESSOR SIR EDWARD EVANS-PRITCHARD 1902—1973

“The work of the anthropologist is not photographic. He has to decide what is significant in what he observes and by his subsequent relation of his experiences to bring what is significant into relief. For this he must have, in anthropology, a feeling for form and pattern, and a touch of genius”...“The personality of an anthropologist cannot be eliminated from his work”. (Evans-Pritchard 1951 pp 82—4).

In September, British social anthropology lost its greatest figure; a godfather as noted for his humanity as for his scholastic genius. It was written recently (T.L.S. Dec. 3, 1971) that over social anthropology in Great Britain had reigned three chiefs or divine kings : Bronislaw Malinowski, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard ('E-P'). E-P ruled after the Second World War until his retirement in 1970 and from his throne in Oxford by word of mouth as much as printed works came the guidance that has pervaded anthropology in this country up until the present day. His was a lifelong struggle to provide a basis, both empirical and theoretical, upon which we could all relate our research so that we shall “in the search have achieved a deeper understanding of human society” (1963 p28). He was eminently successful in this but without losing his perspective on the particular people that he chose to study.

“An anthropologist has failed, unless, when he says goodbye to the natives, there is on both sides the sorrow of parting. It is evident that he can only establish this intimacy if he makes himself in some degree a member of their society and lives, thinks, and feels in their culture since only he, and not they, can make the necessary tranference” (1951 p79).

E-P approached his field-work in Africa not as the objective scientist but with a view to ‘understand’.

“He had his house built in one of Chief Gangura’s villages, and lived a most uncomfortable life, doing it deliberately to get close to the people he wished to observe...His sympathetic approach and friendliness endeared him to all, and his manner was an ideal one for persuading them to tell him anything he wished to know. He is a name that the Azande should never forget for the benefits he has conferred upon them” (Larken 1955 p64).

So he combined a love for the people he was studying with a unique ability to make Africa the focus for theoretical anthropology in England of the 1950’s, replacing both the Trobriand and the Andaman Islanders as the standard fieldwork guides for future research. All E-P’s field research was conducted in Africa — the most intensive and remarkable of which took place in the southern Sudan among the Nuer and the Azande between the years 1926 and 1939. Other research was undertaken among the Luo of Kenya (1937), the Anuak of the Sudan and during the War among the Bedu of Cyrenaica. His wealth of ethnographic data was such that he was still preparing fieldwork notes from the 1920’s and 30’s for publication in the 1970’s.

The history that E-P learnt as an undergraduate at Exeter College, Oxford was never forgotten in his later years as an anthropologist and contributed greatly to his stand against his mentor Malinowski. As one of the first and foremost of Malinowski’s students at the L.S.E., E-P learnt and accepted a strong emphasis on fieldwork. But after his own first exemplary study among the Azande he came to reject the synchronic functionalism that was expected from the Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown stable. The complexities of witchcraft, magic and oracles in the southern Sudan could not be successfully related, believed E-P, to every other aspect of Zande social organization if the result of the exercise was to understand Zande rationality. Armed with his researches among the Azande, Nuer and the Sanusi, E-P’s ideas became more entrenched in relating anthropology to the humanities (and particularly history) and further away from the pseudo-scientific base that the functionalists had adopted in reaction to 19th century evolutionary and diffusionist ideas. E-P contended that it was wrong to condemn the use of history by the 19th century anthropologists and only correct to condemn the way they used it. These ideas were expressed in his now classic 1950 Marett lecture and reiterated eleven years later in Manchester.

The analytical tools E-P used to interpret his field data became the tools used by most of the generation of anthropologists following him, and still today no serious fieldworker would tackle his chosen material before getting guidance from the Nuer and Zande analyses. The concept of ‘social structure’ for example is an idea taken for granted in anthropology today, despite its many ramifications, but was only seriously adopted following the comparative study of *African Political Systems* that E-P edited jointly with Meyer Fortes in 1940. Here was an attempt to apply the three

levels of abstraction he regarded as essential, and which later became pre-requisites for worthwhile theoretical anthropology: 1. to “understand the significant overt features of a culture and to translate them into terms of his own culture” 2..to seek by analysis “to disclose the latent underlying form of a society or culture” and 3. to compare “the social structures his analysis has revealed in a wide range of societies”.

E-P’s move away from the stance of his other mentor and predecessor at Oxford, Radcliffe-Brown, was partially fostered by his war-time experiences among the Libyan Bedu when he found it impossible to maintain “an objective study of human societies by the methods of natural science” (Radcliffe-Brown in E-P 1940 pxxiii) when considering a politico-religious movement in an historical context. The result was that, besides providing a particularly intelligible analysis of the Sanusi order, he showed that the tools of the historian and those of the anthropologist were not as diverse as the functionalists would have had us believe. His interest in historiography stayed with E-P throughout his life. His last book was *The Azande: History and Political Institutions* (1971), and he was working on a history of anthropological thought at the time of his death.

Personal experiences also influenced his deep and vivid interest in religion. He converted from Anglicanism during the War and became a devout albeit unorthodox Catholic. When discussing his faith and the problem of accepting the catechism last year, E-P wrote (1972) “If you want the pearl of no price you have got to take the oyster with it (it would seem, however, that some people like oysters”).

His influence on anthropology is well-known through his multitudinous works (a bibliography of which he prepared in collaboration with Professor Beidelman) but as important has been his role as a teacher. His charisma and intellect drew round him at Oxford a circle of anthropologists that have since spread to almost every department of anthropology in Britain and many abroad. For one who was happy in the isolation of the desert this ability to attract and maintain such an enormous following was remarkable.

With his death, anthropology, and many individuals, lost not only a unique friend, guide and inspiration but a kind, warm and generous man.

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