

Letter to the editor

Dear Sir

Dr Barbara Harris's review of my *Dry Grain Farming Families* contains so many errors of fact that I ask your permission to correct, as an example, a single instance. She says that in Karnataka I did not use the village land records but obtained all my figures from interviews. But such records indeed formed the *basis* of the statistics I published relating to land-holdings, although they were amended to some small extent where this was possible – e.g. where a father had redistributed his land to his sons though this was unrecorded in the records. There is no alternative but to use official records or to prepare one's own figures, using aerial photographs, as I did in Hausaland. In neither West Africa nor in south India is it possible to rely on farmers' estimates of acreages which, experience has shown, are invariably very inaccurate – a fact which has greatly hampered the study of rural poverty. Had the Karnataka land records not existed my book could not have been written.

Yours etc.

Polly Hill

Obituaries

PROFESSOR MEYER FORTES 1906–83

Professor Meyer Fortes, F.B.A., former William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology in the University of Cambridge, died in Cambridge on 27 January 1983 at the age of 76. He was actively engaged in writing and in scholarly discussion right up to his short, final illness, and his death constitutes an immense loss to social anthropology and to African studies.

Fortes was one of a number of important scholars who came to Britain from South Africa, and he played an important role in setting the course of development in many areas of social anthropology. He had originally come to Britain to work for a post-graduate degree in psychology, and he did pioneer work in this field on a range of topics including the relation between culture and the measurement of intelligence, and also on social factors related to juvenile delinquency. He himself has described how a chance meeting with Malinowski at the home of the psychoanalyst J. C. Flugel in 1931 resulted in an invitation to attend the Malinowski seminar at the London School of Economics. This was a major turning point in his career.

In his shift towards the field of social anthropology, Fortes was quite early on associated closely with the International African Institute and he was later to publish

some of his main works through the Institute. In January 1932, the journal *Africa* announced an imaginative and far-sighted 'Five-year plan of Research', which, with the help of the Rockefeller Foundation, was to be aimed at gaining a better understanding of the 'factors of cohesion in original African society, the ways in which these are being affected by new influences, tendencies towards new groupings . . .' and forms of cooperation between African societies and the western world. An important part of the programme was to be the recruitment of specially trained investigators who would consider Africans 'not as objects but as persons' who can 'only be understood by those who enter into personal relations with them as human beings'. Fortes was one of those appointed for this work, and it is hard to imagine a more felicitous choice.

Fortes went, of course, to the Tallensi area of northern Ghana, and his many books and numerous other works based on his researches there and in Ashanti some years later have been justly influential. Probably the best known of these are his *The Dynamics of Clanship Among the Tallensi* (1945); *The Web of Kinship Among the Tallensi* (1949); *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion* (1959); *Kinship and the Social Order* (1969); and his collaborative work with Evans-Pritchard *African Political Systems* (1940). He also published papers jointly with his first wife Sonia (d. 1956) who had accompanied him to Ghana on his first fieldwork and with Doris Mayer whom he married in 1960. In his writings he emerges as a meticulous field worker with a powerful analytic mind, a fertile conceptual imagination, a sharp eye for the actor's viewpoint, and an ability to make valuable use of a wide range of ideas first developed in other fields such as psychology. He was a firm believer in what he called 'the monographic method' in social anthropology in which the analysis of particular material could lead to insights of a broader relevance. Few other anthropologists have matched his own particular mastery of this difficult art. He described himself with some pride as 'a journeyman' anthropologist who did his best with the task in hand, and he also wrote good humouredly of himself as an 'unreconstructed positivist empiricist'. For him there were important realities 'out there' to be discovered and then understood; and if occasionally one felt that his gift for eloquent expression had helped him to assert rather than to demonstrate an argument, this had always to be placed in the context of his constant and often enough successful quest for ways to do justice, through the sensitive use of language, to the complexities of the lives of real people in real places which he perceived. Certainly our understanding of such major fields as family, kinship, descent, politics and religion in Africa and elsewhere has been deeply affected by his insights and his formulations in quite fundamental ways, as the writings of his students and others (some expressly dedicated to him or explicitly about his work) display.¹

In addition to his writings, Fortes contributed to the development of social anthropology and African studies in a wide variety of ways. He was a sometime member of the Council of the International African Institute and of the Council of the Royal Anthropological Institute where he also served a term as President. He became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1967. He held posts in London, Ghana and Oxford before moving to Cambridge and he also travelled widely as a visiting lecturer and teacher. For the many of us who were fortunate enough to get to know him as pupils and colleagues some of the strongest memories will be of things we learned from him in informal circumstances – a seminar, for example, or a casual

chat. Not long before he died he enchanted a large seminar audience in Cambridge with his comments and, appropriately, readings from his first Tallensi notebooks in response to an analysis and further development of some of his ideas on West African religion by Robin Horton. It was a delight to witness the combination he displayed of enthusiasm and modest pleasure in the fact that someone had been interested to follow and extend a path which he himself had cleared; and his comments were as instructive and insightful as at any time in his career. Innumerable anthropologists and other scholars are indebted to him for his encouragement in times of difficulty and for his help in seeing at least a little of what lies under the surface of human society. He asked little in return beyond commitment to research and teaching and to those one taught and those whose life one studied. The official representation of the Ghanaian High Commission at his funeral in Cambridge was a particularly touching and fitting tribute to his own commitment both to Ghana and to social anthropology.

NOTE

¹ See J. A. Barnes, *Three Styles in the Study of Kinship*, Tavistock, 1971, and J. R. Goody (ed.), *The Character of Kinship*, Cambridge, 1973. The latter contains a bibliography of the writings of Fortes up to 1971.

RAY ABRAHAMS

JAN VOORHOEVE 1923–83

African studies has suffered a grievous loss in the sudden and untimely death of Jan Voorhoeve, the Chairman of the Department of Linguistics at the University of Leiden. His work involved a unique combination of interests which he pursued with great energy and enthusiasm. One basic contribution was his work on Sranan and Saramaccan, two Creole languages of Surinam. To these he devoted the major portion of his earlier career. His activity here was not narrowly linguistic but extended to literature and culture in general. He wished to alter the low esteem in which the speakers of these languages held them and he contributed seminal to their survival and their use as literary media by founding with some young students an organization for Surinam language and culture.

In 1962 he went to the Cameroons and from this time dates his first studies of African languages. Two years later he returned to the Netherlands to join the newly founded Department of African Linguistics at the University of Leiden. In 1974 he went once more to the Cameroons to renew his linguistic fieldwork. He had been one of the organizers of the Grassfield Bantu Project, an international group interested in the basic problems involved in the historical status of a group of languages of the Northwest Cameroons which evidently had a special relationship to Banta proper which required further elucidation and raised questions of general theoretic interest.

Jan Voorhoeve's interest in theoretical linguistics grew in the course of his career. He found that the purely practical problems of orthography involved in Bible translation could not be solved without attention to the deeper problem of linguistic theory. His chief contributions in the area of theory grew quite naturally out of his basic descriptive work. These were on two main topics, the problems of tonal analysis which arose in his work in Saramaccan and which received further input