

SIR EDWARD EVANS-PRITCHARD 1902-1973

AN APPRECIATION

EDWARD EVAN EVANS-PRITCHARD was born on 21 September 1902, in Sussex, the son of the Reverend John Evans-Pritchard. He attended Winchester College and then took his M.A. in Modern History at Exeter College, Oxford, in 1924. He took his Ph.D. in 1927 at the London School of Economics, with C. G. Seligman and B. Malinowski as his teachers. His thesis was based on the first field-work trip among the Azande of the southern Sudan, and he returned to the Azande for later work while also acting as Lecturer in Anthropology at the London School of Economics (1928-31). Between 1930 and 1931 he carried out field research among the Nuer of the Sudan, and from then until the war he worked among the Anuak, the Luo of Kenya, and the Ingassana. From 1932 until 1934 he was Professor of Sociology at Fuad I University in Cairo, and thereafter Research Lecturer in African Sociology at Oxford and also Honorary Research Assistant at University College London until the outbreak of war. From 1940 until 1945 he was on military service in the Sudan and in the Middle East, where he was able to do research among the Sanusi of Cyrenaica. In 1945 he took up the post of Reader in Anthropology at Cambridge, and in the following year became Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford and a Fellow of All Souls. He retired in 1970. He was knighted in 1971, and received many other honours, including the Viking Medal of the Wenner-Gren Foundation and Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur. He married Ioma Heaton Nicholls in 1939; she died in 1959, leaving him two daughters and three sons. He died in his home at Oxford on 11 September 1973.

Evans-Pritchard was the most distinguished British social anthropologist of his generation. He could never be described as an 'area specialist' in the sense in which that term is now used, nor does one think of him as being primarily an Africanist even though the greater proportion of his work handles African material. This is largely because the breadth of his concern invested the particular with a general interest to such a degree that social anthropologists, whatever their field, were immediately influenced. Nevertheless, it is proper in this place to record the particular debt owed to him by students of the African continent. This is most simply expressed when we say that it is impossible to conceive the development of social anthropology in Africa without Evans-Pritchard. The first and in a way anticipatory acknowledgement of this was Seligman's appreciation of the help that Evans-Pritchard had given him in compiling the classic *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan* (1932) and nothing is subtracted from Seligman's achievement when we say that Evans-Pritchard's subsequent publications indicate that he participated as an equal.

The *Pagan Tribes* was published when Evans-Pritchard was thirty-one years old; by that time he had completed his work among the Azande and he had already started his work among the Nuer; by the age of thirty-five he had completed the research upon which the bulk of his writing was to be based. It is true that the competition

was slight and that in an undeveloped subject a man could easily make his mark, but neither of these considerations can explain the continuing impact of Evans-Pritchard's work throughout his lifetime and its vitality after his death. To understand this one can only turn again to the earliest essays which reflect a degree of insight and a capacity for empathy amounting to genius in the young field-worker in his late twenties. This genius combined with the most rigorous field research assured Evans-Pritchard of his position among his contemporaries and his place in the history of African studies. These qualities are exemplified in *The Nuer* (1940), which shares with *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937), the claim to be his most influential monograph: he maintained consistently in later years that his analysis of the Nuer political system was not the product of reflection in the study but no more than a faithful report of what the Nuer had taught him. And indeed the influence of this work is due to the empathic genius of the field-worker rather than to the theoretical reflections in its concluding pages.

More generally Evans-Pritchard's abiding influence derives from his refusal to be limited in his interests by the prejudice of any particular theory, even the simplest which defines the social, or confines the social anthropologist to it: his guiding principle appears rather to have been that his interests should be guided by the interests of those whom he happened to be studying. His main contributions, substantial as they were, were not limited to the study of witchcraft, religion, and political systems but extended outwards to African history and African literature.

Evans-Pritchard embodied the conjunction of several intellectual lineages; by no means the least of these was a famous line of Africanists which included missionaries and explorers as well as scholars. This element in him is represented by the range of his earliest work with the Seligmans and in his abiding respect for and interest in Islam; it appears also in his writing, early and late, on the Azande in which an eager receptiveness to the ethnographic detail of particular institutions is the prime characteristic, and sociological theory comes second or is often implicit. The essays and volumes on the Azande constitute a whole but not a unity like the trilogy on the Nuer: nevertheless, they are infinitely richer in particularity and insight.

His work on the Nuer and the bulk of his writings in the immediately pre- and post-war periods represent another part of his complex inheritance—the sociological. In later life he did not welcome the suggestion that in this period he thought and wrote within the ambience of Radcliffe-Brown more than he had done or was to do later. Nevertheless, although the distinctive originality of his mind is never submerged, the works of this period are marked by a greater concern to render theoretical assumptions explicit; and it is not therefore surprising that they have been most generally influential. But the works of a great man cannot be neatly dated—*The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (1949) appeared between the first two volumes on the Nuer, and although *Nuer Religion* (1956) does reflect the change in his thinking about social anthropology and more generally human society it is still continuous with the earlier work.

The rock-bed of Evans-Pritchard's work underlying the diversity of his interests was the quality of his field-work which enabled him to take up notebooks that were thirty and forty years old and to write from them with authority. This ability related him via Seligman to the best tradition of British ethnography which sprang from the

Torres Straits expedition—no detail was irrelevant, no item of culture or its environment was to be left unidentified, no technique left unmastered: this was the counsel of perfection but Evans-Pritchard followed it more faithfully than any of his contemporaries and the resulting awareness of the infinite complexity of human cultures made him sceptical of general theories which, it seemed to him, did not take that into account.

He often expressed his belief that social anthropologists who had received their first academic training in another discipline bore the mark of the earlier formation and tended through the years to revert to it. He would cite his own interest in history as an example of this but the association between social anthropology and history that he claimed was no mere reversion: he had too much confidence in his subject for that. He allied himself with the discipline of his undergraduate years because the scepticism born of his own gifts pointed him in that direction. He accepted the dictum that ‘anthropology must choose between being history and being nothing’ only if it could also be reversed, and his confidence in that claim has been justified by his influence upon some of the most able British historians: *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* has become a central text for anyone who attempts to understand features of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thought in Europe, and *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* has had great influence on the work of historians of Islamic societies. The Azande book is also, one notes in passing, the one work of social anthropology to which philosophers have most occasion to refer.

Another strand of Evans-Pritchard’s scholarship must derive from his earliest years as the son of a parson in the Church of England. A religious training gave him the habit of a twofold appreciation that things must make sense, but the ultimate sense of things was of its nature mysterious. This habit informs or is at least congruent with the best of his work where the beliefs and actions of men are seen to be coherent and the premises of that coherence are exposed while at the same time the writer avoids any attempt at the final sociological reduction. It was characteristic of him that he did not himself propound ‘grand theory’ and he seldom took issue with colleagues on matters of ‘pure theory’. Critics expressed irritation with his preference for the implicit but we may be sure that he would have preferred to leave the abiding example of sound practice rather than the ephemeral glitter of a theoretical stance.

His respect for the mystery of the other in his professional work was reflected in his character by a considerable sense of privacy. Outside of his own family he would confide only when some chord of his complex personality met a response in another: thus throughout his life many friends could claim a unique intimacy with a part of him and yet remain intrigued by all that was held in reserve—and he was often most reticent where he was most seriously concerned. He taught his colleagues and students more by example than by precept and tolerated amongst those he trusted a wide range of opinion provided that this was supported by knowledge, subtlety, and intelligence: he was intolerant of the ‘knowing’, the brash, and the foolish.

Evans-Pritchard taught many Africanists and influenced many more, not only in the field of anthropology but also in history and folklore. This influence did not manifest itself in the emergence of a ‘school’ but rather in a common recognition of

the central and basic importance of ethnographic field-work without which theories are facile, and in a jealous regard for the standards of scholarship.

DAVID F. POCKOCK

NOTE: A complete bibliography of Evans-Pritchard's many writings, with a short biographical sketch, is to be found in *A Bibliography of the Writings of E. E. Evans-Pritchard*, edited by T. O. Beidelman, London, Tavistock Publications, 1974.

INFORMATION FOR CONTRIBUTORS

THE Editor is pleased to receive manuscripts for publication in *Africa*. Contributors are asked to follow the requirements set out below. This request is not intended as an example of unnecessary and distasteful regimentation, but is to avoid waste of time, energy, and money by the publications staff of the International Institute.

Length. Manuscripts should not exceed 6,500 words (excluding bibliography). A longer manuscript may be accepted provided the author gives a subsidy of £15 per additional 500 words.

Typing. Manuscripts should be typed double-space on quarto-size paper (English: 8 × 10 inches; American: 8½ × 11 inches).

Footnotes and references. Footnotes should be numbered consecutively and placed together at the end of the paper. References to publications should be placed in the text, in parentheses, and a bibliography provided at the end of the article. References in the text should be in the form (Forde, 1964: 102). References in the bibliography should be in the form:

for books: FORDE, D. 1964. *Yakö Studies*. London, Oxford University Press.

for articles: FORDE, D. 1950. 'Ward Organization among the Yakö', *Africa*, xx (4), 267-89.

Special characters. These should be avoided, wherever possible.

Tables, maps, diagrams, and figures. These should be placed separately at the end of the article, each on a separate sheet of paper and numbered. The number should also be placed in the text where the author wishes it to go.

Photographs. These should be numbered, with accompanying captions. Authors are usually asked for a subsidy for photographs.

Abstracts. Each article should have an abstract, of not more than 400 words, for translation into French or English as the case may be. Details about the author, for the section 'Notes on Contributors', should also be included.

Proofs. The printers now provide only page proofs, so that additional material cannot be added at this stage. Authors are sent proofs, to be returned as quickly as possible to the Editor.

Offprints. An author receives 25 free offprints; he may order more, on payment.

The editor reserves the right to make editorial revisions, but he will not make major changes without the author's approval.