JASO 28/1 (1997): 56–62

C. G. SELIGMAN AND ETHNOLOGY IN THE SUDAN

GODFREY LIENHARDT

PROFESSOR Fortes has asked me to speak about C. G. (and necessarily also B. Z.) Seligman and ethnology in the Sudan. My eligibility for this invitation is that as a pupil and friend of Professor Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard, I first visited the Dinka of the Southern Sudan in 1947, when I had the opportunity of relating the Seligmans' reports to the realities observable some three decades or more after their pioneering journeys. Some aspects of that comparison I shall later very briefly mention. But also, although I never met Professor Seligman, I have other reasons for feeling that I have been at fairly close quarters with him.

For many years Miss Phyllis Puckle, who I am delighted to say has accompanied me here today, was secretary of the Institute of Social Anthropology at Oxford; and for a happy number of those years I lived in a flat in her house. Miss Puckle, as many people here well know, was secretary and friend to the Seligmans for a longish time. Living at close quarters with her, I could not feel myself at any great distance from the Seligmans, more particularly because Brenda Seligman paid us very occasional visits. Miss Puckle will not, I hope, mind if I mention one of

Editors' note: Text of a talk given at the Seligman Centenary Symposium organized by the Royal Anthropological Institute and held at the London School of Economics and Political Science on 28 June 1973. (Among the other speakers were Paul Howell—to whom Lienhardt refers in passing below—and Raymond Firth, whose talk on 'Seligman's Contribution to Oceanic Anthropology' was published in *Oceania* (Vol. XLV, no. 4 (1975), pp. 272–82).) Only very minor changes have been made to the copy of the text surviving in the author's papers, including those on it in the author's own hand. The footnotes and the references have been supplied.

my memories of those visitations. It was Miss Puckle's habit, when a visit had been announced, to hide away gifts of, for example, Chinese celadon—gifts from the Seligmans. For Brenda might well, on seeing again, and in another setting, some choice piece, conclude that it had not really been a gift but a long-term loan, and ask for it back. (How fortunate, for the Royal Anthropological Institute, that she did not do so with the Benin ivory.[1]) So although I did not meet C. G. Seligman, I had—and still have—a strong sense of Brenda's presence; and I must say that her immense interest in information from the Southern Sudan in the 1950s testified to a real feeling for it, for the most part represented perhaps in the Seligmans' writings, and also an abiding interest, more than merely scientific, in the ethnological knowledge of which the Sudan has since yielded so much.

At a meeting of the Association of Social Anthropologists in Oxford some considerable time ago, Brenda Seligman and I stayed up until nearly midnight in Halifax House—then a residential refuge for quiet lecturers—discussing the ethnology of the Southern Sudan. She was alive with observations and anecdotes: how, for example, when talking to the then king of the Shilluk she was treated with a regal, civil coldness until a praying mantis settled on her camera. This, she felt (how rightly I do not know), immediately broke through the royal reserve, since the praying mantis is an avatar of Nyikango, the first Shilluk king. In any case, her conversations that evening, carried on with me, a much younger person, with uncontrived intellectual equality, represented a combination of enthusiasm and scientific excitement—an intellectual raciness, one might almost call it—which I have always found exhilarating in the anthropological profession, and which my own teacher Evans-Pritchard had in such great measure.

At the end of the evening we went through the quiet house and I watched her arthritically climb the stairs to her room. At the top of the stairs she said goodnight; and then, in a piercing voice which must have disturbed the sleep of many a more humdrum inhabitant, declared like an anthropological Juliet from a balcony: 'I have always been convinced that Nadel utterly failed to grasp the significance of the tessellated pavements of the Southern Nuba.' Could dramatic commitment—and of a kind not so obvious in the Seligmans' writings—go further?

I started to consider for this talk the number of papers which the Seligmans contributed to the study of Sudan ethnology, but decided that to try to deal with them all would be pointless. Those interested may consult the bibliography in the substantial Festschrift presented to C. G. Seligman in 1934 (see Anonymous 1934).

1. *Editors' note:* Lienhardt is referring here to the famous 'Seligman Ivory Mask from Benin' (see Fagg 1957). The mask was sold for £20,000 in September 1957 (or January 1958, accounts differ) to Nelson A. Rockefeller's Museum of Primitive Art in New York. It may now be seen in that city's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The £20,000 'was applied by Mrs B. Z. Seligman to an endowment fund at the Royal Anthropological Institute...in memory of her late husband' (Linne 1958: 174; see also the inside front cover of *Man*, Vol. LXI (January 1961)). We understand from Jonathan Benthall, Director of the Royal Anthropological Institute, that this was the Institute's first major financial benefaction. The Seligman Fund is now part of the Institute's unrestricted capital endowment.

More interesting on this occasion are some of the contents of that volume, and the names of the editors who brought it together: E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Raymond Firth, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Isaac Schapera. In their preface, the editors wrote (and I apologize if, as is likely, other contributors to this symposium have referred or will refer to it):

> No administrator or theoretical worker on the cultures of Africa could do without the *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan*. Nor will anyone easily forget that [the book was] written in collaboration with his constant companion, Mrs Brenda Z. Seligman. The three volumes [they refer also to *The Melanesians of British New Guinea* and *The Veddas*] are the charter of Seligman's claim to be *primus inter pares* among the best field-workers of our times. As his pupils, the editors wish to express their profound indebtedness to Professor Seligman for the intellectual stimulus and personal kindness which he gives to all those who work with him. (Evans-Pritchard and others 1934b; see C. G. Seligman 1910; C. G. Seligman and B. Z. Seligman 1911, 1932)

Now, of course, contributors to presentation volumes are under no oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I doubt (though two of them are here to remove that doubt if they so wish)[2] if those four editors really thought of Seligman as a very great fieldworker. If they saw him as *primus inter pares*, they certainly had no intention that he should remain so for long. That charter, they must have felt, was mythical. And it would be wrong for me to omit here—as it would be wrong for me to dwell on it too—the fact that Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard has since that time drawn attention to many defects, by his own remarkable standards and those of most anthropologists today, in the Seligmans' fieldwork in the Sudan (see, for example, Evans-Pritchard 1971: 130, 150–74). Still, that very Festschrift does contain an article on Zande therapeutics, by Sir Edward (Evans-Pritchard 1934), which foreshadows one of his most famous contributions, not only to the social anthropology of the Sudan but to the social anthropology of all times, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Evans-Pritchard 1937). And that widely influential work, read with interest not only by anthropologists but by scholars as different as say, R. G. Collingwood and Michael Polanyi (see, for example, Collingwood 1938: 8 and Polanyi 1958: 287 ff.)—as, indeed, *Pagan Tribes*, was read by Arnold Toynbee (see, for example, Toynbee 1930: 313)—carries with it everywhere the name of C. G. Seligman, who wrote the Foreword—that Foreword with its opening sentence well-known at least to my anthropological contemporaries: 'Dr Evans-Pritchard has given us good measure, pressed down and running over' (Seligman 1937). And in his own Preface to that book, Evans-Pritchard wrote:

2. *Editors' note:* Lienhardt is referring to Raymond Firth and Isaac Schapera (Malinowski was dead and—according to Wendy James and others who were there—Evans-Pritchard was not present).

> I studied anthropology under Professor C. G. Seligman, and it was at his suggestion that I continued the ethnological investigations made in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan by Mrs Seligman and himself. I owe much to both of them. They initiated me into my Sudan research, raised funds for my expeditions, and gave me constant assistance, advice, and friendship throughout my labours. I am further indebted to Professor Seligman for his kindness in writing a foreword to this book. (Evans-Pritchard 1937: vii)

Of those social anthropologists who have worked in the Sudan, the late Professor Nadel was encouraged primarily by the then Civil Secretary, Sir Douglas Newbold, as Dr Howell has mentioned. But there are many, many of us who have followed in Sir Edward's footsteps (and therefore in those of the Seligmans) who must truthfully say that he, Evans-Pritchard, 'initiated us into our Sudan research, raised funds for our expeditions, and gave us constant assistance, advice and encouragement throughout our labours'. (Perhaps, on reflection, not too much advice.) And here, 'following in the footsteps' is not a mere metaphor. In the Sudan, and especially in the Southern Sudan, you had to walk. And walking, I am convinced, brought one into more comradely contact with the peoples one was supposed to be studying (but actually trying to please, part of the time anyway) than would otherwise have been possible.

Most social anthropologists will accept that by now the Sudan is one of the best anthropologically documented of countries, not only in quantity but in quality. The knowledge which the Seligmans started, piecemeal, to acquire and present with some of the limitations of an intellectual climate now very different from our own, has been added to by many more anthropologists, administrators, and Sudanese nationals, and continues to be so. It is true that the inspiration for this has come very largely from Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard, as indeed has the inspiration for much first-class work in other parts of the world. But C. G. Seligman in encouraging such a successor clearly saw what was needed there. The result has been not only a whole library of standard works on various peoples of the Sudan, which make them known (and, I find, make them liked and admired) far outside Africa, but a flourishing and scholarly Department of Social Anthropology in the University of Khartoum, for long built up by my friend and fellow-student of Evans-Pritchard's, Professor Ian Cunnison. *Sudan Notes and Records* is, of course, acknowledged as having been for long one of the very finest journals of its kind in the world.

I should like to return for a moment to the contributions to Sudan ethnology made by Sudanese nationals. It would be absurd, of course, to suggest that the Seligmans had any direct influence on this, but at least they, and their successors did not turn those who have the greatest stake in the country against the subject. In the period of decolonization, it has been common and understandable, in parts of Africa, for African intellectuals themselves to resent anthropology as a servant of colonialism, or as a study rooted in deeply patronizing attitudes towards its victims. I can speak perhaps best from my own experience. In the several years I spent in the Sudan, I was never once asked for any collaboration by the govern-

ment. Indeed, I think some of my friends in the Sudan Political Service would have despised any attempt on my part to assimilate to their role. They wanted me to be out in the villages, not hanging around their bungalows drinking their small stocks of cold beer while they were at the office or on trek. Indeed, they themselves, or some of them, would often have preferred, I thought, an anthropologist's existence to their own.

The result of this rapport between the people interested in Sudan society—colonialists, objectively speaking, though some of us in a sense certainly weren't—has been, I think, a more sympathetic attitude among Sudanese themselves to social anthropology than is found in some other parts of Africa. A generation hence, there will be a quite considerable number of Sudanese anthropologists. Sudanese retain a great interest in the systematic presentation of their own cultures to the rest of the world. It gives me personally the greatest pleasure, for example, that in my own particular field within the Sudan my friend Dr Francis Deng Majok has published two excellent works on the Dinka (Deng 1971, 1972), with a third (on Dinka poetry) soon to follow (Deng 1973). And even now my friend and student Mr Natale Olwak Akolawin is engaged in research among his own people, the Shilluk, whom (it cannot be denied) the Seligmans did so much to make famous.[3] (Famous not only amongst anthropologists either. Louis MacNeice came to cover the occasion of an election to the Professorship of Poetry in Oxford some years ago for the *New Statesman and Nation.* It was with some pleasure that I, as a Niloticist, read his article, since it began with a reference to the Shilluk (MacNeice 1961). To have got the Shilluk embroiled in such an election seemed to me to have put together two parts of our Oxford world, the one at home there, the other at home in the Sudan.)

So, just as there was no rivalry—indeed on the surface at least a kind of continuity between the Seligmans and Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard, and between Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard and those of us who have followed him to the Sudan—so there seems to be no rivalry between Sudanese scholars and ourselves. It has always indeed been one of Sir Edward's principles that the people who really know about themselves are the peoples themselves, and that theoretical constructs about them which are repudiated by those of them qualified to judge are useless. I think I can truly say of those of us who have worked in the Sudan that there has been a familial give-and-take so to speak, between ourselves and our Sudanese friends. For Seligman, in the manner of his time and upbringing, there certainly was of course a certain distance in this respect; but I think that he (like Miss Puckle, who has considerable experience of our African friends) would have welcomed the opportunity to talk in England, and with Sudanese people themselves, about customs and beliefs.

I have, it is true, once heard Sir Edward criticized by a Nuer. When I first arrived in Malakal I went to a small bookshop run, I think, by one of the

3. *Editors' note:* Unfortunately, Natale Olwak Akolawin had not completed his doctoral thesis by the time of his death in 1980.

missions.[4] A Dinka assistant there asked me what I was doing, and I told him (since Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* was on the shelf) that I hoped to write such a book about the Dinka. He said, to my surprise and alarm, 'But that is a very bad book.' I said it was considered to be one of the very best studies of a Sudanese people, and asked him why he disagreed. 'Because,' he replied, 'he says our country is monotonous.'

And now finally to the Seligmans' *Pagan Tribes*. The copy I am referring to is inscribed as follows to Miss Puckle: 'In friendship & with all thanks, Sligs, Brenda'; and has, further, in Sir Edward's handwriting, 'Presented by Miss P. H. Puckle'.[5] I once had a copy of my own. I digested it before I went to the Dinka, I interleaved it, I took it with me. Naturally, younger at that time, I wanted to contradict the Seligmans, and in some matters, of course, I could easily do so. But as I remember, some of my observations on the interleaved pages were merely carping, and what I got from it was certainly far, far more than what I, in the early stages, could add to it. I should have quite liked to check up on this; but alas, a Sudanese friend coveted it, and I gave it to him. For all I know, he may be now reading the book on the banks of the Nile where the Seligmans started their journeys, and be adding his own comments on his own people to mine and theirs. It would be in a tradition of scholarship and friendship to which C. G. Seligman also belongs.

4. *Editors' note:* Malakal is a town on the Nile in Southern Sudan.

5. *Editors' note:* This copy is still in the Tylor Library at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford (shelfmark G10.23b).

References

ANONYMOUS 1934. 'A Bibliography of Charles Gabriel Seligman from 1896 to 1934', in Evans-Pritchard and others (eds.) 1934a, pp. 381–5.

COLLINGWOOD, R. G. 1938. *The Principles of Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

DENG, FRANCIS MADING 1971. *Tradition and Modernization: A Challenge for Law among the Dinka of the Sudan*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

. . . 1972. *The Dinka of the Sudan* (Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology), New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

. . . 1973. *The Dinka and their Songs* (The Oxford Library of African Literature), Oxford: Clarendon Press.

EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E. 1934. 'Zande Therapeutics', in Evans-Pritchard and others (eds.) 1934a, pp. 49–61.

. . . 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

. . . 1971. 'Sources, with Particular Reference to the Southern Sudan', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, Vol. XI, no. 1, pp. 129–79.

EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E., RAYMOND FIRTH, BRONISLAW MALINOWSKI, and ISAAC SCHAPERA (eds.) 1934a. *Essays Presented to C. G. Seligman*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.

. . . 1934b. 'Preface', in their (eds.) 1934a, p. ix.

FAGG, WILLIAM 1957. 'The Seligman Ivory Mask from Benin: The Royal Anthropological Institute Christmas Card for 1957', *Man*, Vol. LVII, art. 143, p. 113 and plate J.

LINNE, S. 1958. 'Masterpiece of Primitive Art', *Ethnos*, Vol. XXIII, nos. 2–4, pp. 172–4.

MACNEICE, LOUIS 1961. 'That Chair of Poetry', *New Statesman and Nation*, Vol. LXI, no. 1561 (10 February), pp. 210–12.

POLANYI, MICHAEL 1958. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, London: Routledge.

SELIGMAN, C. G. 1910. *The Melanesians of British New Guinea*, Cambridge: University Press.

. . . 1937. 'Foreword', in Evans-Pritchard 1937, pp. xv–xxv.

SELIGMAN, C. G., and BRENDA Z. SELIGMAN 1911. *The Veddas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

. . . 1932. *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan*, London: George Routledge & Sons.

TOYNBEE, ARNOLD, J. 1930. Vol. 1 of his *A Study of History*, London: Humphrey Milford/Oxford University Press (under the auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs).