

**Contributor: Paul Basu**

### **Thomas, Northcote Whitridge (1868–1936)**

Thomas, Northcote Whitridge (1868–1936), anthropologist, folklorist, and linguist, was born on 7 May 1868 at The Cross, Oswestry, Shropshire, the eldest of four children of John Whitridge Thomas (1839–1914), draper and borough finance clerk, and his wife, Flora (1840–1907), daughter of the Revd Thomas Northcote Toller, minister of the Toller Congregational Church, Kettering. At a young age Thomas went to live with his maternal aunt, Catherine Toller, and her husband, John Askew Roberts, who were childless. Roberts had been proprietor of the *Oswestry Advertiser* and had a keen interest in Cambrian folklore and antiquities. When his aunt and uncle died within days of each other in 1884, Thomas inherited their comfortable house, Croeswylan, aged just sixteen.

In 1887, following his secondary education at Oswestry grammar school, Thomas was admitted as a sizar student at Trinity College, Cambridge. He read history, graduating with third-class honours in 1890, and was conferred MA in 1894. The degree to which Thomas was acquainted with J. G. Frazer at Trinity is unclear, but it was evidently while studying at Cambridge that he decided to pursue a career in folklore studies and anthropology. He would later acknowledge the Shropshire-born folklorist Charlotte Burne with guiding his ‘first ... steps into the paths of anthropology’ (N. W. Thomas, *Kinship Organisations and Group Marriage in Australia*, 1906, v).

When Thomas left Cambridge in 1894, anthropology had yet to be established in British universities. Consequently, he enrolled at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, where he studied ‘primitive religion’ under Léon Marillier. Among Thomas’s contemporaries in the so-called ‘Fifth section’ at the École Pratique were Marcel Mauss and Arnold van Gennep. Having completed two years of supervised study, Thomas combined his knowledge of Welsh folklore with his learning in anthropological theory and was awarded his diploma for a dissertation entitled ‘La survivance du culte des animaux au Pays de Galles’ in 1897.

The closing years of the nineteenth century found Thomas living in Kiel, Germany, where he pursued his research, largely through correspondence, on European folk superstitions relating to animals. Following E. B. Tylor’s theory of survivals, he argued that such superstitions provided evidence of totemism in prehistoric Europe. At this time Thomas also published the bilingual ‘wordbook’, *Die Seemannssprache*, a glossary of English and German naval terminology.

Thomas relocated to London in 1900 to take up the position of assistant secretary and librarian of the Anthropological Institute. He also became involved with the Society of Psychical Research, probably through his acquaintance with Andrew Lang. He was appointed as its secretary in 1901. The next few years were intensely active ones for Thomas as he became established at the centre of British anthropological networks. Between 1900 and 1909 he published numerous articles in academic journals and wrote, edited, or co-edited more than ten books. These included significant contributions to anthropological debates of the period, such as his monograph *Kinship Organisations and Group Marriage in Australia* (1906), but also popular works such as *Crystal Gazing* (1905) and *Thought Transference* (1905), as well as

book series such as *The Native Races of the British Empire* that he edited and to which he also contributed a volume, *The Natives of Australia* (1906).

Thomas's interest in west Africa seems to have been piqued through his editorial work on R. E. Dennett's *At the Back of the Black Man's Mind* (1906), an account of Vili and Bini customs based on Dennett's enquiries while working in the Congo and Southern Nigeria. A 1908 article concerned with the social dimensions of African markets indicates the direction in which Thomas's research was developing. That same year an opportunity arose for Thomas to provide editorial advice to the Colonial Office concerning a report it wished to publish on 'native customs and laws' in British West Africa based on questionnaire data gathered by colonial administrators. The quality of the data was poor and Thomas advised against publication. Instead, he suggested that the collection of such information would be better entrusted to an expert 'familiar with modern anthropological methods' (Thomas to R. Antrobus, 19 Aug 1908, TNA, CO96/480, T.30351/08). Thomas let it be known that, if required, he would be prepared to undertake this work himself.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, anthropology was fast becoming established as a modern 'scientific' discipline in Britain and its proponents lobbied government repeatedly, promoting its value to colonial governance. Civil servants in the west African section of the Colonial Office were receptive to Thomas's advice regarding the benefits of employing a trained anthropologist, and after receiving positive references from E. B. Tylor, J. G. Frazer, and C. H. Read, it was agreed that he would be engaged to conduct an 'experimental' anthropological survey to test these claims. Having previously expressed interest in the value of anthropological work, Sir Walter Egerton, governor of Southern Nigeria, assented to funding the survey from the protectorate's budget. In this way, Thomas became the first formally appointed government anthropologist in Britain.

Thomas elected to make a study of 'the Edo-speaking peoples of Nigeria' and, between January 1909 and March 1910, he travelled extensively in regions that had only recently been brought under British control. Presenting his work at the conclusion of the survey, he was commended on 'the thoroughness of his enquiries' and the value of his findings 'both for administrative and scientific objects' (Royal Anthropological Institute to R. Antrobus, 21 June 1910, TNA, CO520/99, M.I.19009/10). Thomas's appointment as government anthropologist was thus extended, although this was always on a tour by tour basis and he did not become a member of the Colonial Service staff. Between 1910 and 1915, he completed a further three anthropological surveys, two in Igbo-speaking regions of Southern Nigeria (1910–11, 1912–13), and a final tour in Sierra Leone (1914–15). During this period, when he was on tour in west Africa for between twelve and fifteen months at a stretch, he also married (at Chelsea register office on 7 July 1910) Alice Evans (1888–1965), daughter of Elijah Evans, farmer; they had two daughters, Flora and Mary.

Beyond instructing the anthropologist to focus on matters of a 'practical nature', the colonial authorities in west Africa largely left it to Thomas to determine his own itineraries and research activities. While this led the Nigerian historian Adiele Afigbo to remark that Thomas's surveys 'ranged like a rudderless ship over the whole sea of general ethnography' (Afigbo, 34), it is evident that Thomas was diligently enacting what was then considered to be best practice in anthropological research, following guidelines set out in *Notes & Queries on Anthropology*. Methodologically, the emphasis was on documentation and collecting, whether specimens of

language or folk-tales recorded on phonograph cylinders, physical appearance and dress captured in photographs, observations of cultural practices jotted down in notebooks, or examples of local manufacture assembled in ethnographic collections. Only a small part of the materials amassed by Thomas was represented in the multi-volume reports and numerous articles that he published between 1910 and 1920, and the remarkable scope of his work has only become apparent through a belated engagement with the archival legacies of the surveys.

Despite the energy that he brought to the role of government anthropologist, Thomas had a difficult relationship with colonial authorities in west Africa. Egerton's successor as governor of Southern Nigeria, Sir Frederick Lugard, believed political officers in the Colonial Service were better placed to collect intelligence of use in the implementation of indirect rule than an academic anthropologist. Furthermore, since the colonial governments in west Africa were required to cover the not insubstantial cost of the surveys, the question was continually raised as to whether the benefits of the investigations justified the expense. It became clear that the kinds of data gathered by Thomas were rarely able to inform colonial administration directly, and on the occasions he was asked to advise on a specific issue, his understanding of—and sympathy for—local cultural practices and social structures resulted in recommendations that often ran contrary to the political objectives of the colonial authorities and were dismissed.

In 1913, after the completion of Thomas's third tour in Southern Nigeria, Lugard let it be known that he would not continue supporting the initiative. Consequently, the Colonial Office proposed that Thomas's next survey take place in Sierra Leone. The governor, Sir Edward Merewether, consented, but Thomas's work was again frustrated by poor relations with the colonial administration. By the time Thomas's Sierra Leonean tour ended in April 1915, financial constraints caused by the First World War had already resulted in severe reductions in colonial expenditure, and, under these circumstances, Thomas's appointment as government anthropologist was terminated.

After delivering the manuscript of his Sierra Leone report, Thomas was engaged in civilian war service. A fluent German- and French-speaker, he was enlisted, in March 1918, by the Secret Intelligence Service into its 'vice-consular scheme' in Switzerland. His career in espionage was short-lived, however, and between October 1918 and May 1919 he was back in London and employed by the petrol control department of the British Board of Trade. Although he gave lectures on African languages and phonetics as part of the 'Tropical African services' course at the Imperial Institute in the early 1920s, he failed to secure a more substantial academic position. He spent the last years of his life in professional obscurity, withdrawing first to his native Oswestry, and then to rural Worcestershire. He died at Grove Cottage, West Malvern, on 21 March 1936.

Historians of anthropology have been quick to dismiss the significance of Thomas's work and inclined to reproduce reports of his eccentricity, insubordination, and 'rum' character. He was, however, a pioneer in Africanist anthropology who took seriously the logics of local political and ritual institutions in the face of what he perceived as the ignorant and illogical attitudes of Colonial Service functionaries. While such predispositions brought his career to a premature end, Thomas was, to some degree, vindicated in a parliamentary report presented by Lord Passfield, secretary of state for the colonies, in the aftermath of the Aba Riots of 1929, which held the colonial government of Nigeria responsible for precipitating native unrest

through its failure to base administrative policy on sound knowledge of local social organization. The anti-colonial protests and murderous response of military forces might have been avoided, it was suggested, had Lugard entrusted the gathering of such knowledge to trained anthropologists, like Thomas, rather than stubbornly insisting that this work was better undertaken by officers charged with implementing colonial rule.

### **Sources**

A. Afigbo, 'Anthropology and colonial administration in south-eastern Nigeria, 1891–1939', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 8/1 (1975), 19–35

H. Kuklick, *The savage within: the social history of British anthropology, 1885–1945* (1991)

P. Basu, 'N. W. Thomas and colonial anthropology in British West Africa', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 22 (2016), 84–107

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b. cert.

m. cert.

d. cert.

### **Archives**

U. Cam, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, material culture and photographic collections

Royal Anthropological Institute, photographic collections

Special Collections, CUL, Haddon papers

Special Collections, SOAS, linguistic notes

TNA, correspondence

### **Sound**

BL NSA

### **Likenesses**

photographs, Royal Anthropological Institute

### **Wealth at death**

£6401 7s. 3d.: probate, 17 October 1936, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*