PROFESSOR MAURICE FREEDMAN: IN MEMORIAM

Memorial Address by Sir Raymond Firth, M.A., Ph.D., F.B.A., Kt.
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WHEN the Warden and Fellows paid me the compliment of inviting me to give this Memorial Address they laid upon me a heavy burden. To talk informally about the academic dead is easy and comforting; we feel ourselves still in a community of ideas with them. But to talk formally about the academic dead, in Oxford and in this College, is to call to mind the innumerable tributes paid over more than five hundred years to a host of illustrious names.

Maurice Freedman's name can be worthily added to that roll. He was a distinguished scholar in social anthropology, with a great power of perceiving and clarifying general relations of critical significance in his field. He was especially creative in the area of Chinese studies, linking anthropology and sinology to a degree never known before in this country, and admired internationally. With both energy and detachment he promoted and contributed outstandingly to studies in Jewish sociology. He was also a cultivated man of wide-ranging interests in literature and the history of thought. And in the more intimate sphere, he linked his scholarly standards of rectitude with his personal standards of conduct to an unusual degree.

My burden in this address then is not one of substance but sentiment. Maurice was my student, my colleague and my friend. Twenty years

younger than I am, he has gone from us at a time when he was displaying his powers of scholarly grasp and integration of complex subjects to the full. This address is then a reversal of generations. In the Chinese way of expressing age relations in symbolic form it is 'white mourning black'—a reference to hair colour which also indicates something contrary to nature, an untimely passing. This is the kind of ironic paradox that Maurice himself delighted to explore, and there is an added poignancy in thinking how he might have commented upon it with his well-known sparkle and wit.

As a scholar Maurice Freedman cleared for himself a unique path. From an undergraduate career in English and French, and three years in the Army in India during the war he came, still in uniform, to the London School of Economics. He wished to see what anthropology had to offer him in trying to understand the character of peoples and their relations with one another. He was searching and precise in his enquiries, and it was clear that here was an intellect of unusual calibre. When he left the Army, he began to work on problems of the cultural aspects of race relations, a subject in which he continued to take a deep interest throughout his life. This led him to a preoccupation with social anthropology. In anthropological theory he found scope for his intellectual curiosity and analytical powers. Even in his first student essays these qualities were demonstrated in acute but judicious criticisms of what are now regarded as anthropological classics—though with weaknesses which Freedman had already begun to perceive.

Regionally, his interest focused early on Southeast Asia, and especially on the position of the 'Overseas Chinese' there. He saw them as communities whose relations with the mother country and variant institutions in the countries of their settlement posed fascinating problems for study and interpretation. But he thought of them in terms of more general social categories. His first period of field research, in Singapore in 1949 and 1950, was concentrated largely on what he called 'the part played by kinship in the ordering of social life in a colonial offshoot of the society of China'. Working in the Hokkien dialect, he produced the penetrating and pioneering study of *Chinese Family and Marriage in Singapore*, which not only illuminated its immediate subject but also gave perspective to the character of Chinese society as a whole. This work alone, in the authoritative opinion of an American colleague, would have entitled Freedman to an honourable position in Chinese studies.

His reputation so gained was speedily secured by a striking analysis of lineage organization in south-east China itself. With a companion volume some years later, this has provided the standard blueprint for anthropologists working on these problems ever since. In 1958, in the first book, Freedman suggested modestly that historical research and anthropological fieldwork in the New Territories of Hong Kong could test some of his

speculations about south-east China. I have just come from Hong Kong where this testing is still going on, and where I could see how important indeed has been his inspiration to all subsequent workers in that field. His own brief period of fieldwork in the New Territories in 1963, cut short by illness, did allow him to produce a report on village leadership, land tenure, geomancy and allied themes, which was not only of considerable practical value to government but also set out with great clarity a series of basic theoretical problems for the consideration of social scientists. In Hong Kong Freedman is one of the greatest figures in anthropological and allied studies. Memory of his enthusiasm, concern for people and sense of significant problem is still vivid there. In recent years not only had he turned his attention more directly to China proper—as it used to be called—but he was focusing more intently upon a reinterpretation of the older standard works on Chinese society. These included notably studies of Chinese religion by de Groot and Granet in the light of their intellectual background.

In all his anthropological work, but particularly in his Chinese studies, Maurice Freedman was distinguished by the breadth of his approach. He liked to think of problems in terms of whole units, broad social aggregates, integrative ties. In his Malinowski Memorial Lecture of 1962, entitled 'A Chinese Phase in Social Anthropology', he gently rebuked those who had stressed the primary importance of village studies in the Chinese field. Such 'miniaturizing methods', as he called them, would fail to grasp the nature of Chinese society. He argued cogently that whatever the limitations of a field situation the frame of reference should be the whole society. He has illustrated this view in a very recent essay on the sociological study of Chinese religion. A commonly accepted idea has been that a gulf has separated the rationally agnostic rites of the elite from the polytheistic 'superstitious' practices of the masses. Freedman's argument was that the 'metaphysical' gulf between them was no gulf at all but a neat transformation. The beliefs and behaviour of the intelligentsia were oriented towards the political requirements of the hierarchically organised society, and so given a more abstract, less personalized form. Freedman's integrative approach was also apparent at the methodological level. He showed a willingness unusual among anthropologists to co-operate with historians, linguists, demographers and other experts in the Chinese field, and he did much in this country to dispel any constraint that may have existed between sinologists and anthropologists.

He himself had not received any formal training in classical Chinese language and literature, and he could read very little Chinese. His work with literary materials was done primarily in European languages. His strength as an interpreter of Chinese society lay in his fusion of the insights he derived from these literary sources with the meticulous observations of his field research, and the help of his powerful theoretical

imagination. He was not just that traditional figure for whom a new reverence has recently arisen, an armchair anthropologist—though he did describe his work on lineages as an exercise in armchair anthropology. He did look upon himself as essentially an urban man—he once wrote to me from the United States that after a few weeks of looking at the open air 'I pine for concrete and crowds'. He appreciated the comforts of urban living. Yet in Singapore, Indonesia and Hong Kong he carried out field research—much of it in co-operation with Judith Djamour, his wife and fellow anthropologist—in conditions which were often urban but not at all urbane. He was outspoken in his enjoyment of the field experience. From the moment he first set foot in Penang in 1949—'my first view of China Improper', he called it—to the end of his period in Hong Kong in 1963, despite illness and other difficulties he seemed indefatigable in his keen pursuit of data to test his hypotheses. Unlike Arthur Waley, who refused to visit the Far East lest his vision of the traditional Orient be dissipated or disturbed, Maurice revelled in the bizarre conjunctions which met him on every side. In one letter he reported, 'a Chinese girl sings "I love Papa" in jazz and Mandarin'—adding, 'filial piety with a twist'. Yet he was not dazzled by the mystique of fieldwork. 'There are excellent grounds for saying that the tradition of fieldwork is the core of the profession, but it does not follow that absolutely everyone must be given a ticket to far places' is one of his characteristic utterances on this theme. He regarded fieldwork as important not for its own sake but as a means to an end—the provision of material for formulation and verification of hypotheses about social relations. And he was never averse to combining data from literary sources with those from field research in his formulations.

He was robust in his intellectual interests. He delighted in paradoxes of reconciling apparently discrepant institutionalized behaviour. In his inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics, in January 1967, on Chinese marriage, he took pains to contrast the role and status of the Chinese woman as property-owner with the conventional view of her jural inferiority to men. Yet again he contrasted the honour accorded to Chinese women as mothers with the abuse to which they were subjected as wives, in which capacity, he said, they attract some of the most defamatory descriptions of which Chinese society is capable. All this he drew into his analysis of the marriage relation, linking the roles of wife and mother with the marriage rites. For the more successful a wife is in producing children for the family of her husband the more she is strengthening the forces of her husband and his offspring which will ultimately split his own original family. The marriage rites, according to Freedman, reflect the pleasures and fears of this old family at receiving the disturbing woman stranger into their midst. But he added with his usual frankness: 'Of course the rites do not speak as clearly as that. If the rules of marriage are prose, the

rites are poetry. They are a structure of resonant ambiguity.' He clearly relished tracing out such involuted relationships. His studies of family and marriage often faced him with intricate legal arrangements in which Chinese and Western norms came into contact and often conflict. So far from being daunted by this he was attracted. He confessed to enjoyment in paying attention to questions of law, on which he published several penetrating studies, and in his inaugural lecture he held that he was bringing together two important strands in modern social anthropology: the study of things jural and the study of rites and symbols.

I have dwelt on Maurice Freedman's contributions to sinological anthropology because they represent his most substantial theoretical achievement. It was these especially that brought him his international reputation. But other interests, above all Jewish studies, claimed his deep attention. One might say that both Chinese and Jews, in very different ways, believe themselves to operate under the Mandate of Heaven. Maurice Freedman wrote of both with imagination and precision, and apparent equal detachment. But if his intellectual investment in each was great, his emotional investment in Jewish studies was greater. After his first visit to Israel in 1956 he wrote: 'with my nose grazed by the grindstone of the sociology of Chinese religion I am only dimly aware that I am recently back from the disturbingly interesting land of my forefathers. But it comes back to me as I write: sunshine, Jews, the stone-faced houses of Jerusalem, cubic Tel Aviv, whitewashed Arab houses, hills, vineyards, fig trees, orange groves, Safed...' (one of the traditional seats of learning). His many contributions, from a consideration of Jews in Britain and his fascinating Noah Barou Memorial Lecture on the structure of Jewish minorities to his long guidance of the *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, indicate both his profound commitment to this aspect of his cultural heritage and his equally strong conviction that studies in this field should be of a scientific character. His penetrating essay on the structure of Jewish communities in the Diaspora, to which I have just referred, emphasises that he was trying to trace connections between general changes in institutions and modes of behaviour. He said he was speaking as a sociologist looking for some regularities in history rather than as a historian aware of special circumstances and peculiarities of time and place. He spoke then not only to Jews but to all students of society. This breadth of vision he carried through into all his work.

Of his general career I need speak only briefly since it is known to so many of us: Lecturer in Anthropology at the London School of Economics in 1950, Reader in 1957, Professor in 1965 (a personal chair, with special reference to Asian anthropology); fieldwork in Indonesia on nutritional problems as World Health Organization consultant, in collaboration with Judith Djamour; visiting appointments at Yale, Cornell and the University of Malaya; chairman of the London Committee of the London–Cornell

Project for Research in South and Southeast Asia—a unique experiment in transatlantic academic co-operation of which he was one of the founders; chairman of the Anthropological Committee and member of the Social Science Research Council. Most notable, in the present context, was his election in 1970 to the Professorship of Social Anthropology in this University, and to a Fellowship here at All Souls, a college which he loved, at which he taught and in which he found an intellectual home.

In this distinguished career there was little of personal ambition, but much of a thirst for knowledge. His inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics revealed something of his personal approach to this search. He acknowledged the significance of applied anthropology—to which he had already made substantial contributions. But he went on to make a plea for a disinterested anthropology which would be well enough endowed to follow where its curiosity leads. Whatever else the universities may do, he said, they must produce intellectual pleasure—though with his pragmatic foresight he immediately added that the support of pleasure, even intellectual, on a large scale from the public purse would not appeal to our policy-makers! But one of the keenest pleasures in anthropology is (I quote) 'the contemplation of another society, the experience of analysing ideas and institutions in another tradition, the leap of imagination across the gulf between us and different symbols and customs'.

Maurice Freedman's search for knowledge was neither random nor trivial; it was governed by a strong sense for intellectual discipline, which ran through all his conduct. In the mythology of anthropology there is a half-formulated notion that anthropologists in fieldwork not only get the people they deserve but also may have some affinity with them. So it seemed with Maurice and the Chinese. His writing was elegant and informed, his conversation seasoned with wit. In him one could see, I think, a modern image of what Confucius re-defined as his concept of the *junzi*, the scholar-gentleman. This man was a product of learning, not heredity, who sought neither wealth nor power from his command of literacy, but virtue. He did not need the law, because his own perception of where harmony lay provided him with an inner moral force which guided his conduct. But he kept the rites, as a convenient framework for moral action.

I hope the sinologists will forgive me for this crude incursion into their field. But I think the analogy not inapt. Maurice fused the scholar and the man. He had his defects. He could be uncompromising. In what he considered to be matters of principle, once his mind was made up he could be very difficult to move. He seemed on occasion to over-simplify his judgement of issues, and be unduly censorious of people. In criticism he sometimes used a cutlass instead of a rapier. But much of this came out of concern for scholarly standards. In characteristic mood he wrote in a

report on anthropology prepared for UNESCO: 'there is a pleasure to be got from a reading of the polemical literature that has grown up in economic anthropology'. But his pleasure was professional, impersonal, without malice. In his own encounters he was courteous and dignified, and he never engaged much in public controversy. If he could be rigid, this was largely from principle; if he could sometimes be tactless, this could well be from honesty. For Maurice was an intensely moral man. Not moral from religious precept, but moral from what seemed almost aesthetic standards of rectitude, his duty to himself. It is no accident, I think, that the main title to his inaugural lecture on Chinese marriage involved a pun on the notion of *rights*, 'Rites and Duties'. Well do I remember a time long past, when he was first invited to a conference in the United States, in Honolulu, on race relations. It was that regrettable period in the United States when visas were being refused on trivial grounds of suspected political involvement. At the age of seventeen Maurice had attended a camp of the Young Communist League during a summer vacation, though he had continued to be a firm non-Communist. He could have had a convenient amnesia when, twenty years later, he went to make his declaration at the Consulate-General in London. But he felt that as a man of integrity he had to answer honourably all the questions asked of him about his previous contacts, though he guessed the outcome, as his friends had warned him. Being human, he was outraged by the humiliating terms in which his visa was refused, but he had not thought of modifying his stance. (A few years later this episode was officially wiped out, and he made the first of his many fruitful scholarly visits to America.)

A prime virtue of the Chinese scholar-gentleman was loyalty, and this Maurice had in full measure. His friends, his colleagues, his students and the institutions to which he was attached all were treated with great consideration. He was a generous man and a kindly man. He was also a good companion, and a lively conversationalist, reacting gaily to the world about him but sympathetic to the interests of others. In his later years he was troubled by professional burdens, but his thoughtfulness and scrupulousness were undiminished, as his scholarly zeal was not abated. At times his students and colleagues found in him a stern critic. But they have stood in his debt for the creative stimulus he consistently gave them in their work. We sadly miss that acute intelligence, that pungent wit, that honourable and kindly man.

I cannot do better than conclude with the words from Ecclesiastes (7: 25) which have been carved upon the stone at his grave: 'I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of things.'

PART ONE

Family, Lineage and Village