

LAUNCH OF  
**A Touch of Genius: The Life, Work and Influence of Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard**  
Edited by Andre Singer

Friday 21<sup>st</sup> April 2023

LOCATION: Fitzhugh Auditorium, Exeter College Cohen Quad, Walton Street, Oxford OX1 2HG  
at 1.30 for 2.00pm until 6.00pm

Sponsored by: Exeter College; All Souls College, Royal Anthropological Institute

**PROGRAMME**

1.30pm: Tea and Coffee

2.00pm. Welcome.

Professor Sir Rick Trainor, Rector, Exeter College.

Professor David Gellner, All Souls College.

Dr David Shankland, Director, Royal Anthropological Institute

**SESSION ONE. Chair: Professor Malcolm McLeod**

2.15pm. E-P: the person.

Professor Andre Singer. "Evans-Pritchard as I knew him. Recollections as E-P's graduate assistant"

Johnny Evans-Pritchard. "Evans-Pritchard as a Father: what we knew of him at home. "

Bruce Ross-Smith. "My soul there is a country : E-P in the mirror of poetry."

E-P often quoted these sentiments from W.G. Collingwood's 'The Principles of Art' : "For the evils which come from ignorance the poet as prophet suggests no remedy, because he has already given one. The remedy is the poem itself." E-P also followed Ibn Khaldun in believing that poetry provided "the evidence for what the Arabs considered right and wrong." And as he wrote to Meyer Fortes "poetry is my inner life."

Professor Harriet Lyons "E-P, Catholicism and Belief"

For 53 years, Harriet Lyons has pondered the conundrum that the Catholic anthropologists Evans-Pritchard and Mary Douglas approved highly of her B.Litt thesis on Jewish mysticism, and insisted that she, an avowed atheist, must be a believing Jew, while Jews, observant and non-observant, to whom she described the thesis, saw it as threatening to their world view. In exploring this paradox, we touch on Evans-Pritchard's critique of anthropological theories of religion, his own interest in mysticism, the analysis of the Kabbalah contained in the thesis itself, and the roles that Jewish law and sacred texts have played in the self-understanding of Jews across wide spectra of time and religious practice.

Professor Tim Jenkins "The contribution of E-P's religious beliefs to his anthropology"

E-P's Catholicism has always been a topic of interest in local (Oxford) anthropological history.

Timothy Larsen, *The Slain God*; Derrick Lemons, *Theologically Engaged Anthropology* raise the more formal question of whether his Catholic Christian commitment has influenced anthropological theory, which continues to come up in current discussion between anthropologists and theologians

(e.g. Joel Robbins, *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life*). Are there any ground rules which allow us to judge whether personal commitment of this kind makes a specific contribution to anthropological insight?

Professor Juan Ossio “E-P, Humanism and History”

DISCUSSION

3.45pm – Tea and Coffee

**SESSION TWO. Chair: Professor David Gellner**

4.15pm (By zoom): The view from Africa

5.00pm

Professor Malcolm McLeod “E-P and the Azande”

E P gave me an Azande stool - his kindness and interest in collecting helped nudge me towards my own museum career. E-P himself commissioned stools amongst the Azande, and I should like to return to the idea that he himself was an influential element in Zande history. I also touch on how some of the Institute's graduates went on to play important political roles in their own countries.

Dr Douglas Johnson “E-P from the Perspective of an Historian of the Sudans”

E-P observed that social anthropology and history were related branches of social science that had a great deal to learn from each other, going on to declare that just as anthropology must choose between being history and being nothing, so history must choose between being social anthropology and being nothing. Africanist historians generally embraced his challenge, but there has been greater reluctance in Sudan where his legacy among anthropologists is often contested.

Professor Douglas Davies ‘The enigma of genius’. Just how does the pervasive presence of ‘other selves’ help forge our academic selves?

Dr Christopher Morton Visiting E-P in the field: photographs as portals and traces

E-P was a prolific fieldwork photographer, taking more than 2,500 images between 1926 and 1936. He used them liberally in his publications, and refers to them constantly throughout. E-P's writing was also highly visual and evocative, painting many pictures. His rich photographic archive allows historians to revisit his fieldwork encounters and social contexts, albeit in a fragmentary and selective way, acting as portals through which we might recover the many social encounters that led to those famous ethnographies; they also have the potential to subvert received understandings and offer new readings.

Dr David Shankland “Segmentary Lineage Theory and its afterlife”

E-P's model of social organisation in *The Nuer* has been in turn inspirational and dismissed. Yet, I suggest that its impact on the Social Anthropology of Islam through the work of Ernest Gellner, and later on the anthropology of Turkey illustrates that it can be shown to be both theoretically significant and empirically accurate.

DISCUSSION

6.00pm DRINKS: Learning Commons, Ground Floor, Cohen Quad.

### **A note on Edward Evans-Pritchard 1902-1973**

Evans-Pritchard exerted an extraordinary influence on anthropology: through his various ethnographic fieldwork and writings, his lecturing and teaching at the Oxford Institute of Social Anthropology, his founding role in the Association of Social Anthropologists, and his mercurial changes of position throughout his career. He therefore needs to be considered in multiple ways: as a writer, public intellectual, a national and intellectual figure in anthropology as much as a great presence in Oxford after his appointment to the chair in 1946.

Yet, at the same time, he was in many ways a private and complex man. He destroyed many of his notes and other papers before his death. There is no detailed biography. The many myths and stories that are told of his life and peregrinations seem to be contradictory, even to obscure rather than illuminate. It is therefore the aim of the publication *A Touch of Genius* some fifty years after his death, to give a varied account of his life, impact and works, one that will enable us to think of E-P as a person, as well as an anthropologist.

We hope that our event today will also enable us to reflect this aim. It brings together members of E-P's family, former students, those who have studied or used his works and, we hope also, colleagues from Africa who have encountered his writings. It considers E-P's historical impact as well as his contemporary relevance today. The various brief interventions that we have invited are intended to be thought-provoking and stimulating, but also informal, and we welcome discussion throughout.

For those who are not already familiar with E-P's oeuvre, it may be helpful to summarise at least some of the main events and works in his life, as well as offer a brief chronology. E-P attended Winchester College, and then came up to Exeter College as an undergraduate in 1921. He read Modern History, yet influenced by the lively interest in anthropology at Exeter at that time through R R Marett (Moral Tutor and Fellow, Reader in Social Anthropology, later Rector) decided to pursue anthropological fieldwork, going to the LSE to do so. This eventually resulted in his first extraordinary contribution, *Magic, Witchcraft and Oracles among the Azande* (OUP 1932). He continued to conduct fieldwork for much of the following decade, showing himself to be an equally gifted linguist in doing so.

In his search for a permanent position, E-P was hampered by his dislike of Malinowski who had become dominant at the LSE. He therefore turned back to Oxford, and Marett, his old tutor, who supported him in various ways: with the publication of the *Azande* book by OUP, writing a reference for a position in Cairo, and eventually appointing him as a lecturer via his department of social anthropology in Oxford. After the Second World War, in which he served with distinction in Africa, and the publication of *The Nuer*, and *African Political Systems*, E-P became first Reader in Cambridge, then was appointed to the Chair that was created through upgrading the Readership held by Marett, and he duly became professor in 1946.

From the outset E-P was known for his major contribution in two distinct ways: as a pioneer in the study of meaning and causality, and also as an acute analyst of social organisation and kinship. To this, we can add two more: his interest in religion both through the monograph *Nuer Religion*, and his conversion to Catholicism in 1944, and his strong emphasis on anthropology conceived as a humanity, rather than a science, an approach that he explained by emphasising the role of history in anthropological analysis. Increasingly, as he grew older, he explored this interest in the history of anthropology through a series of articles on great social thinkers of the last three centuries.

Clearly, E-P was ambitious in as much as he wanted to forge a path for himself and his conception of anthropology. At the same time, however, he was pragmatic: he remained on good personal terms (whatever he thought privately) with a whole range of anthropologists, even those who might have

been thought to have been old-fashioned. He threw his entire weight behind the Institute of Social Anthropology only after an initial attempt to create a more unified four-field programme was rejected, and he never succeeded in creating a single honours school in anthropology at the university. Nevertheless, whether through design or simply mastering the art of the possible, he became the genial head of a post-graduate research institute that over a period of twenty years changed the face of anthropology both in this country and overseas, bringing together generations of students and colleagues who themselves achieved renown as leading anthropologists. It is fitting that we now, as we look back, should remember this extraordinary contribution, one that we can revisit through reading and rereading his many masterpieces.

### **E-P professional life: Summary Chronology**

1902 Born: 21 September

1921 Matriculates at Exeter College, 18 October

1924 Graduates in modern history. Begins post-graduate studies at the London School of Economics.

1926-1931 four expeditions on behalf of the government of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

1927 PhD 'The Social Organisation of the Azande of the Bahr-el-Ghazel Province of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan'.

1931-1932 Honorary Secretary: Royal Anthropological Institute.

1932-34 Professor of Sociology, University of Cairo.

1934 Lecturer in African Studies, Oxford.

1937 Publication of *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

1940 (edited with Meyer Fortes) *African Political Systems* (London: OUP for the African Institute)

1940 *The Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

1944 Converts to Roman Catholicism.

1945 Reader in Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

1946 Appointed Professor of Anthropology at All Souls, in succession to Radcliffe-Brown.

1946 Founder with Meyer Fortes, and first Chairman, of the Association of Social Anthropology

1949-1951 President; Royal Anthropological Institute.

1950 Marett Lecture: 'Social Anthropology past and present' Published in *Man* L (Sept): 118-24.

1951 *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

1956 *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

1956 Appointed Fellow of the British Academy

1968 Appointed Life President, Association of Social Anthropologists

1971 Knighted Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard

1972 Appointed Chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur

1973 Dies 11 September.

1981 *A History of Anthropological Thought*, edited by Andre Singer (London: Faber and Faber).

A detailed bibliography of Evans-Pritchard's writings may be found in Andre Singer (ed) *A Touch of Genius*, pages 314-322.