New Sources for South African History

A Note on Gluckman's 1930s Fieldwork in Natal

Bruce Kapferer

Abstract: This essay gives an historiographical introduction to the article "On Burning One's Bridge: The Context of Gluckman's Zulu Fieldwork," by Robert Gordon.

Résumé: Cet essai donne une introduction historiographique à l'article "On Burning One's Bridge: The Context of Gluckman's Zulu Fieldwork," par Robert Gordon.

Introduction

Max Gluckman is a major figure in the establishment of British Social Anthropology and more especially the key intellectual inspiration for what became known as his "Manchester School." The Manchester School developed around a research program concentrated in southern Africa mainly centred at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI) in Northern Rhodesia, later Zambia, where Gluckman was the Director before taking the Chair in Social Anthropology at Manchester in 1949. When at the RLI Gluckman conceived of a program of comparative ethnographic research involving

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populations that are now part of the national territories of Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi. The methodological and theoretical inspiration that Gluckman gave to this work had its earliest formulation in Gluckman's own field experience in Zululand, which also involved a particular expansion of some ideas nurtured in a small group of South African intellectuals and scholars, some of whom are referred to in Robert Gordon's engaging account of the circumstances of Gluckman's Zulu research. Isaac Schapera, Meyer Fortes, and Evans-Pritchard (Evans-Pritchard especially from his Oxford days) were close friends and intellectual inspirations. The influence of Evans-Pritchard's studies in the Sudan on Gluckman's thought is evident throughout much of his work and in his efforts to demonstrate the relevance of ethnographic work in small-scale societies to socio-political and philosophical/scientific questions of major concern anywhere. I think he saw his own anthropology and that of Manchester to have taken its direction from Evans-Pritchard's Oxford, although it was more consciously politically radical born, undoubtedly, from Gluckman's birth and background within the context of South Africa, and directed to issues of change and modernization rather than the study of the supposed pre-modern.

Gluckman's Manchester School of Anthropology through the 1950s was to become noted, arguably, as the most politically critical branch of a discipline otherwise not especially noted for its radicalism. Gluckman himself suffered being barred for political reasons from continuing his fieldwork among the Lozi in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) for seventeen years until Zambian Independence. The Australian government was to ban him from entering Papua New Guinea on a brief visit. However, despite widespread rumours to the belief, Gluckman was never a member of the Communist Party. His wife, Mary, however, belonged to the Communist Party and played a strong influence (as Gordon documents in his essay here) for his left-leaning stance. I think that Gluckman saw his own approach and that of the RLI and Manchester as being allied with that of Oxford (where he was to accept a partial appointment at the end of his career), and, to a degree, differing from the approach that had developed at the London School of Economics and Cambridge (here by Leach, Gluckman's life-long intellectual sparring partner) where the tradition established by Malinowski was strong.

Anthropology is often regarded as a subject that not only is the creature of colonialism but embedded, conceptually and ideologically, in colonialist (not to say orientalist) understandings. It is a view that anthropologists still struggle against despite the fact that many have been at the forefront of the critique. One of the distinctions of Gluckman's approach (and that of many of his colleagues at the RLI and at Manchester) was that it addressed the wider colonial and global orders and processes in which the subject populations were conditioned. His perspective was thoroughly against the analysis of societies as if they were discrete, isolated entities. While alive to the distinction of their practices (which he was concerned to explore comparatively) these were to be set within the broader contexts of

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embracing local and global systemic interconnections and their historical formation. Gluckman's objective was thoroughly away from a certain tendency in anthropology to antiquarianism, and was oriented to emphasising the larger forces that were acting upon the societies to be examined.

Gluckman's entire approach which became the central organizing perspective of his Manchester School finds early concrete expression in his essay on Malinowski's functionalism.[1] This is a strong critique of a book written by Malinowski, *The Dynamics of Culture Change*,[2] broadly intended to be of value for the African policies of a white South African government, on the verge of what was to become the Apartheid state. Gluckman's critique was not well-received by many of the followers of Malinowksi, especially at the London School of Economics. In many ways the critique was Gluckman's manifesto as to how anthropology might be pursued in a way which would give it positive modern and pragmatic relevance. He did not advocate an anthropology that retreated into the world of the Other ignoring the fact that such worlds were already affected by and reacting in their own positive way to global social and political forces.

A key motivation behind Gluckman's critical review essay was that he considered Malinowski had betrayed his own great methodological contribution of long-term intensive participant fieldwork. Here is where Gluckman's "Bridge" essay comes in. "Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand"[3] is Gluckman's demonstration of how Malinowski's methodological innovation could be further turned to the purpose of creating a more scientifically valid ethnography as well as being one which could penetrate into the dynamics of modernity and its effects on the small-scale societies that fieldworkers typically studied.

Gordon describes the social and political difficulties that Gluckman encountered during fieldwork, some of which were even more problematic than Gluckman himself realized. He presents a wonderful sense of the colonial world of Zululand in which Gluckman conducted his fieldwork – much of it resonating with the kinds of gossip, snobbery and prejudice that George Orwell describes in *Burmese Days*.[4] As with Orwell's hero, Gluckman's efforts to enter within the life situation of the Zulu (but as an anthropologist) made him the focus of gossip among the white community and complicated his relationships with colonial officials and Zulu chiefs who were

[1] H. Max Gluckman, "Malinowski's 'Functional' Analysis of Social Change," *Africa* 17–4 (1947), 103–121.

[2] Bronislaw Malinowski (Phyllis M. Kaberry [ed.]), *The Dynamics of Culture Change – An Inquiry into Race Relations in Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945).

[3] H. Max Gluckman, "Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand," *Bantu Studies* 14 (1940), 1–39, 147–174.

[4] George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (first published 1934).

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both leaders of their people but also administrators in the interests of White Rule. (The topic of gossip and scandal became a specific sociological concern of Gluckman in later years). Gluckman saw the complexity of his situation and the conflicting processes that it engendered as thoroughly part of the colonial order in which he lived – an order that also created conflicts of interest among the population that he studied. He understood as a function of his own experience that romantic idealized notions of the fieldworker participant observer melding into the worlds of the people being studied – notions that are still not dead among some researchers – is an impossibility. But far more important than this observation was Gluckman's methodological concern to analyze the nature of the complexity of the fieldworker's positioning in the processes being observed.

He asserted – in anticipation of similar admonitions in post-modern analyses much later – that this facilitated assessments relating to the objective value and limitations of anthropological observations. (He was to go further than this, indicating to his colleagues that anthropologists would benefit from psychoanalysis to reveal dimensions of their personal subjective bias, perhaps a reflection of his consciousness of his own biases and emotional involvements during his Zulu fieldwork that influenced him to seek psychoanalytic advice as Gordon notes).

What is most innovative in Gluckman's methodological perspective is his development upon the Malinowskian insistence on the importance of the researcher's field experience. Malinowski saw this, to be facilitated by linguistic competence and participation in everyday life, whereby fieldworkers could gain an inside view. Gluckman underscores Malinowski's point and in dress, in his acquisition of language competence, and other behavior he pursued Malinowski's recommendations. But Gluckman went further. He showed how the systematic analysis of the fieldworker's problematic encounters in the field revealed for him vital conflicts and contradictions in the whole system of relations involving not just Zulu but other Africans and Whites. The fact that he was an outsider, a member of the dominant ethnic group and always in a marginal situation, however much accepted by his Zulu hosts, became a source of critical insight into the structuring of socio-political relations leading to a greater understanding. To put it another way, Gluckman showed how his often anomalous position as a white anthropologist is in itself vital in the production of sociological insight. The examination of the situation (socially and psychologically) of the anthropologist was, and is, not merely important to correct subjectively based knowledge (in an objectivist scientific sense), and to expose biases buried in an individual consciousness, but crucial for the development of understanding into the structural dynamics of social orders and processes as a whole.

In this last regard, Gluckman saw individual consciousness as sociologically constituted – as formed through historically shaped social institutional processes – and not to be necessarily reduced to individual

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psychological dynamics although he by no means wanted to exclude their consideration. In Gluckman's still unpublished work on Shaka Zulu, which he worked on intermittently up to his death, he gave central consideration to psychoanalytic understanding which he conceived as having its effect through the dynamics and potentials of social institutional processes. Gluckman's view – a specific dimension of his Durkheimian and Marxist-tinged conception of things – is that individual action, including the inner conflicts and tensions integral to individual motivations, have their effects and realize their potential in and through the socio-historical contexts, processes, and structures within which they are born. Furthermore, while he stressed the importance of individual factors these could not be seen as the function of culture somehow conceived as a system of value apart from socio-historical dynamics.

A Historian's Eye

Gluckman's social institutional emphasis is one which stressed social institutions as *historical* phenomena – both formed in historical processes and having continuing historical effect especially through the particular temporalities that were part of the logic inherent to certain institutional formations. He was further to develop this idea in relation to state orders and lineage systems of kinship. The idea of equilibrium to which his methodological concept of situational analysis bears some relation, is not ahistorical but in his understanding has historical implications. That is it attends to the way the logic of systemic integration persists through change and defines a particular course of change.

I stress that Gluckman was distinctive for his time in the then fledgling discipline of social anthropology because of his openly declared historical position. Evans-Pritchard had insisted that anthropology was more of a history than a social science (as defined by the positivist Durkheimian positions then in vogue). Even though Gluckman cleaved to the ideas of Durkheim he expanded, more strongly perhaps than Evans-Pritchard, the importance of a historical sensibility. Malinowski and his brand of functionalism was outside a historical consciousness. It encouraged an ethnography that wrote of cultures and societies as if they were pristine isolates in the stream of historical processes rather than enmeshed in them.

Gluckman's "Analysis of a Social Situation" neither approaches the Zulu as a homogenous singular socio-cultural entity nor as separate from the larger socio-political heterogeneous order of South Africa as a whole. The Zulu are in social process within the dynamics of South African society. When seen from this perspective the Zulu are not a coherent socio-cultural order in themselves but differentially aligned and associated among themselves and with non-Zulu through the action of forces variously acting within South Africa as a complex social and political-economic totality. Moreover, the nature of Zulu social life, its cultural

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directions, are situationally relative, continually changing and shifting – in process. In other words, Zulu socio-cultural life cannot be generalized about or characterized and typified or abstractly discussed without examining the situated contexts and logics of their action. Gluckman's "Analysis of a Social Situation" is concerned to address the complexity of social existence on its terms but in a way that can derive general understanding by revealing what he and some of his colleagues later would describe as the logic of situations.

In this approach, Gluckman could be said to operate a historian's eye. He is concerned with the details and particularities of social life and events, and with the individual personalities that are engaged in them. He aims to establish the empirical ground against which his more general sociological assertions can be evaluated and in a way which maintains a sense of the complexity of the living realities that he explores. Gluckman's situational analysis is intended to make full use of Malinowski's methodology of anthropological fieldwork presenting dimensions of what Malinowski called the "imponderabilia" of the everyday life of anthropological observation but, in so doing, showing how such imponderabilia manifested logics in action that could give rise to new understanding. The logic, Gluckman, would maintain, is in the practice – in the various situations of practice – and not merely a product of abstracted theories that ware independent of the actual social actions to be comprehended. What is so important about Gluckman's situational analysis is that he was able to adapt the benefits of Malinowski's fieldwork method, developed in small-scale contexts, to the larger scale contexts and processes of contemporary changing and industrializing contexts.

Here I might comment on the relation of Gluckman's perspective to that of another anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, who stressed anthropological fieldwork-based writing as one involving "thick description." I mention Geertz because his approach and, indeed, his perspective on the analysis of events[5] has been of importance to historians. Geertz's work, highly inspirational as it is, in my view is superseded by the far earlier approach of Gluckman. For Geertz the event becomes illustrative of what he describes as cultural difference and the anthropological orientation of entering within the logic of the Other. Gluckman is concerned, rather, with the logics of events, as in his "Analysis" essay, for example, as moments in processes of differentiation and socio-cultural emergence that do not so much describe cultural difference (in the too often essentializing modality of much anthropology) as much as they reveal the dynamics of historical formation and socio-cultural construction that transcend the particularities upon which the description is founded. In other words, Gluckman's

[5] See, for instance: Clifford J. Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," *Daedulus* 101–1 (1972), 1–37.

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approach is more historical in the sense that it concentrates on the process of changes in which new patterns of social existence are constituted.

Gluckman's "Analysis" is a pioneering effort to develop a methodology that is directed to the study of change and which moved change to being a central anthropological focus, rather than more of an afterthought as in so much anthropology of the time. He, as with many historians, took the event as a critical moment in historical processes of change, a point in the revelation of new possibilities leading to the establishment of novel structures of action. Indeed, "Analysis" looked forward to the study of the "invention of tradition" approach developed in the work of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (with whom Gluckman was in intellectual contact), and in the work of Barney Cohen, to mention a few.

If Gluckman's "Analysis" anticipated more recent developments in historical studies it certainly foreshadowed later developments in anthropology in which a historical perspective was to be emphasised. Noteworthy in this regard is Eric Wolf's study, *Europe and the People without History*,[6] whose Marxist perspective demonstrated the historical integument of peoples, who were supposedly outside history, in historical forces as well as their own historical effect on large-scale historical developments. Gluckman both in the "Analysis" and in "Malinowski's Functionalism" showed how Zulu history was influenced by political and economic events in Europe and whose own historical formation, even before the Zulu came into contact with Europeans, was implicated in European historical processes. His work is an important forerunner to that of Wolf and certainly subverted the kind of ahistorical view that Malinowski propounded in *The Dynamics of Culture Change*.

Moreover, it may be added, that Gluckman in the "Analysis" indicated the ideological, in fact political danger of anthropological positions such as that of Malinowski especially when applied to the African context. As Gluckman implies, Malinowski's perspective on change (along with many other anthropologists then and still) approaches it as pathology, as causing a decline in cultural values and ways of life rather than motivating social and political reconfigurations and effecting novel formations of cultural and social action. Malinowski demonstrates an orientalism in anthropology that was to become thoroughly criticized. Gluckman's approach is, in effect, an anti-orientalism that refuses to see change as necessarily pathological but as the thoroughly normal condition of existence. He was fond of legitimating this assertion – and his conceptual stress on process – by referring to the work of historians who took change as the vital focus of their accounts. Most significantly, Gluckman shows how Malinowski's position not only betrayed his own methodological contribution to anthropological research (the importance of immersion in the life-world of those

[6] Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

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who are the subjects of study) but also, however unintentionally, in the African context supported some of the premises upon which the policy of Apartheid was to be built.

Gluckman's approach was to be thoroughly against approaches to social change of the cultural contact kind egregiously represented by Malinowski's *The Dynamics of Culture Change*. As I have already suggested, Gluckman insisted that "cultures" do not come into contact as independently integrated totalities. They are intermeshed in the diversity of their practices within more embracing systemic arrangements and are continually taking different and varied form in diverse situated practices. The idea that cultures come into contact rather than human beings who furthermore are not to be seen as individual representatives of the totality of their worlds is an argument he pursued that has some resonance with some current views.[7]

I should note that Gluckman was critical of acculturation and adaptationist perspectives in anthropology (especially of American cultural anthropology) and cognate disciplines. He saw Malinowski as a version of these and, moreover, legitimating colonial and imperialist visions of things.

The direction Gluckman was to take at the RLI and at Manchester was diametrically opposed to such orientations, and the "Analysis" is his major demonstration of an alternative approach which his RLI and Manchester colleagues – notable among them being Clyde Mitchell, Bill Epstein, and Victor Turner – were to elaborate.

Gordon's account is a fascinating entry into the fieldwork context which was the ground for one of Gluckman's most seminal essays and perhaps the most critical foundation for the development of Gluckman's Manchester School. Gordon's study excellently reveals the intellectual, political and social world from within which Gluckman's original anthropological direction took form.

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