



History of Anthropology Newsletter

Volume 34
Issue 2 December 2007

Article 4

January 2007

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Recommended Citation

Morton, Christopher; Malinoswki, Branislaw; and Evans-Pritchard, Edward Evan (2007) "Evans-Pritchard and Malinowski: The Roots of a Complex Relationship," *History of Anthropology Newsletter*. Vol. 34 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

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EVANS-PRITCHARD AND MALINOWSKI: THE ROOTS OF A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

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Students of the history of British social anthropology will no doubt be wholly familiar with Helena Wayne's two fascinating volumes of letters between Bronislaw Malinowski and Elsie Masson (Wayne 1995).¹ Although barely mentioned in the correspondence, the few references to Edward Evans-Pritchard, probably the most brilliant anthropologist to emerge from those important early years at the London School of Economics (LSE) in the 1920s, offers us a tantalizing glimpse of a complex relationship that was personally strained from the very beginning.

On 2 February 1928, soon after writing up a PhD thesis based on only six months' fieldwork among the Azande during 1927, Evans-Pritchard presented a paper on "The Morphology and Function of Magic"² at Malinowski's Thursday seminar at the LSE. A year later, in a letter to Masson, Malinowski remembers the event distinctly:

LSE. Saturday, 19 January, 1929

My own darling,

... I went to the School this morning and joined Yates who had to scrutinize Evans-Pritchard's article on Magic. You remember the paper he read to us last winter – you were present and then we all went to the flat and Evans-Pritchard got offended with me. Or was it in the autumn term? Somehow I think you were there. Anyhow, he gave me the paper, I commented on it, he has now just sent it back to me and asked me to pass it finally for press... we 'passed' it this morning, Cicely [Bevan, Bronio's Sec.] has taken it with her home to type it. I shall send it to Lowie to print in the *American Anthropologist*.³

To which Elsie Masson replied three days later from their home in Gries, Italy:

Gries

22 January, 1929

... I was of course there when Evans-Pritchard was so beleidigt [offended]. That was a year ago exactly. That

1. Helena Wayne, 1995, *The story of a marriage: the letters of Bronislaw Malinowski and Elsie Masson*, vol. 2: 1920–1935 (London: Routledge).

2. See E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 1929, "The morphology and function of magic: a comparative study of Trobriand and Zande ritual and spells", *American Anthropologist* (n.s.) 31: 619–641.

3. Wayne 1995: 132

term was made rather ugly by Pritchard and Driberg quarrels ...⁴

It is clear from this correspondence that for it to be so bitterly remembered a year later, the 'offence' taken by Evans-Pritchard at Malinowski's basement flat in Doughty Street after the seminar must have been severe, and seems to be the first documented falling-out between the two, leading to an enduringly strained personal relationship. But until recently it had been entirely unclear just what happened at Malinowski's flat that Thursday afternoon in February 1928. Researching correspondence in the Malinowski Papers at the LSE, I came across two letters from Evans-Pritchard to Bronislaw Malinowski, in a folder marked "Battles", the first written the day after the Doughty Street incident, the second presumably a day or so after that. The first letter is typed, brief and certainly offended, but not hastily written since it was composed the next day:

3 February, 1928

42 Guilford Street, W.C.1

Dear Prof. Malinowski

With reference to your statement last night that you believed that I had "cooked" and "faked" field-work material, I think that you owe me some kind of explanation.

I have never been more deeply wounded in my life and you should have been the first to realize what bitterness such an insinuation must cause in a person engaged in & with a strong sentiment towards scientific work.

Yours, E. E. Evans-Pritchard⁵

The second letter, hand-written and undated, shows signs of being much more hastily composed, and is contrite in the extreme:

42 Guilford Street, W.C.1

Dear Dr Malinowski,

I unreservedly apologise for my letter. I was certainly under the impression you had made the statement I referred to & Schapera also was under this impression too.

However, I am very sorry indeed. I was angry not because it is by any means inconceivable that I should

4. Wayne 1995: 133

5. London School of Economics Archives, Malinowski Papers, 37/21. Letter dated 3 February, 1928.

cook my facts but just because there is an incessant desire to do so which has to be rigorously [sic] repressed. I have to ask myself again & again everyday "are you certain this is really so or are you simply selecting part of the facts to fit them in with your theory?" We are always angry when we think that we are accused of a line of conduct which we would like to take but have to repress – so please regard my letter in the light of Freud's teaching! I did not send you my M.S. to Italy partly because I did not think you would read it and partly because I did not think it was much good. I fully appreciate the compliment you paid me in coming to my lectures & was grateful for your praise. Your teaching was my great source of inspiration in the 'field'. I consider my work to be deplorable, my material being inadequate, fragmentary, insufficiently checked – & I had hoped, & still keep on hoping, that you will help me reformulate the problems, gather up the uneven strands & make clear the objectives. Far from wishing to quarrel with you my desire is & has always been to learn from you & to be as friendly as possible. What infuriates me is that when I am anxious for your help about some problem you are completely inaccessible. However in future I shall take you at your word a bombard you with M.S. and hope for the best.

Yours, E. E. E-P.⁶

So the Doughty Street incident becomes clearer. Even if Evans-Pritchard and Isaac Schapera did misconstrue a characteristically forthright remark by Malinowski as a personal attack on E-P's academic methods, it is evident that the criticism of 'cooking' data struck at the heart of the younger anthropologist's insecurity. The contrition of the second letter seems to address a number of rebuttals made by Malinowski, presumably in a reply letter soon after. There are at least two other important contextual points to make about this incident. The first is a highly personal one for Malinowski. By the end of January 1928 Elsie Masson, whose health had deteriorated over recent years, had eventually received the diagnosis that they must have been dreading – multiple sclerosis (Wayne 1995: 110). This recent hard news provides a highly emotional context to the meeting at their Doughty Street flat only a few days later. In addition, and perhaps in combination, Evans-Pritchard's paper was a direct critique of Malinowski's work. 'I shall attempt to demonstrate in this paper', he wrote, 'that the principles of magic deduced from Melanesian data and formulated as general laws for all societies have, in view of a study of African peoples, to be reformulated and

6. Malinowski Papers. Handwritten letter, no date.

possibly modified. I shall show how this is so by a comparison between the magic of a Melanesian society described by Professor Malinowski and the magic of an African society investigated by myself' (Evans-Pritchard 1929: 619-620). In other words, Evans-Pritchard's paper would expound a scientific 'comparative method', whereas Malinowski's theoretical generalizations would be seen to have been drawn from only one example. No doubt Malinowski did feel, when listening to E-P's counter-examples of magical practice from Zandeland, that this student's six months' as opposed to his two years' worth of fieldwork did not entitle him to 'reformulate' his own functional analysis of magic. There seems little doubt on the face of it that it was Evans-Pritchard's critique of the 'scientific' basis (the comparative method) of Malinowski's theory of magic presented in the seminar paper that prompted the Doughty Street incident. It appears that one of Malinowski's complaints to E-P was that he hadn't passed him a copy of his paper before his presentation, to which E-P responds that he didn't think Malinowski would read it, or that it was good enough.

Evans-Pritchard's second, apologetic, letter was possibly advised by his supervisor Charles Seligman, who understood how important a professional relationship with Malinowski would be to E-P's future career. Indeed this sort of ongoing mediation by Seligman between the two anthropologists was crucial in gaining E-P his first teaching position in Cairo in 1931. Although Seligman was against E-P applying for the post at King Fuad I University, he knew full well that his student would need a reference from Malinowski to gain a position, and that the absence of one would look bad. In a letter to Malinowski in Sept 1931, Seligman writes that E-P "feels you have so strong a feeling against him that it would not be fair" to ask Malinowski for a reference. Despite the bad blood between them, Seligman's insistence on a professional relationship based on academic ability rather than personality, meant that Malinowski provided the crucial reference. In response to Seligman's request, Malinowski reiterated his own position:

4/10/1931

Soprabolzano

"I perfectly well remember the gist of our conversation at the school and my promise to you to assist E-P in his career, and you will see from the enclosed testimonial that I am redeeming my promise. You will remember also the two caveats I made: first that I could not very well co-operate with E-P in the same place, considering the bitter hostility which he has shown to me and is showing me, openly and above all underground...I naturally do not like motives of dishonesty being imputed to me and that is what he has been doing constantly."

Although the strained relations between the two did not end with Evans-Pritchard's departure for his new position in Cairo in 1932, their relationship did enter a new phase, partly characterized by an enduring mutual intellectual respect. This new understanding of the Doughty Street incident shows it to be more than a clash of personalities, since it illuminates something essential about the combative intellectual atmosphere at the LSE. This atmosphere was to produce some of the formative figures in the British tradition, not just Evans-Pritchard, but Isaac Schapera, Raymond Firth, Audrey Richards and Jack Driberg among others. The atmosphere was a critical one in the positive sense, and drove the discipline on to new standards of theory and methodology. But it was also a charged atmosphere, in which rivalry and competition over the 'scientific' status of anthropological fieldwork and subsequent theoretical argument was on the increase.