

AUDREY ISABEL RICHARDS, 1899–1984

J. S. La Fontaine writes:

Audrey Richards was not only a social anthropologist of distinction but an Africanist in the broadest sense of the term. Her concern was for African *people* as well as for an understanding of their societies and cultures. Her commitment to public service – partly derived no doubt from family background, for her father was a lawyer who served on the Viceroy's Council in India and her mother came from the Cambridge 'intellectual aristocracy' – gave her career a practical bent almost from the beginning.

Much of what she wrote concerned social problems, either in Zambia, where she did her first fieldwork, or later in Uganda. She saw herself as providing the knowledge needed by those in power to enable them to solve more effectively the problems which arose in the course of social change. If she had greater faith than is common nowadays in the will and the power of governments given the right information to solve these problems, she was by no means their unwitting tool. From the first she pointed out, in no uncertain terms, the deleterious effects of, for example, efforts to modernize the Bemba.

Audrey Richards went up to Cambridge to read natural sciences and, one of the few women to do so, took her degree in 1922. This scientific background had a lasting influence on her approach to social anthropology, to which she moved shortly after. She always drew a sharp distinction between theoretical (pure) and what she called practical (applied) anthropology, defining the former as concerned with problems defined in theoretical terms and the latter as the use of knowledge gained in pure research to solve practical problems. These were by no means less important to her: she spent much of her working life contributing to their solution. Nevertheless, in terms of the subject's development she saw theoretical issues as more significant.

As Director of the East African Institute of Social Research at Makerere from 1950 to 1956 she favoured projects which would generate both anthropologically interesting results and useful information. Her view was that the time required to obtain this information represented such a small part of any piece of research that any anthropologist ought to make this small return to the community and others interested in the same area. It was a matter of the scholar's duty to disseminate knowledge.

East African Chiefs (1959), which she edited, is one of several products of the East African Institute that illustrate this approach. It was designed to provide comparative data on the effects of Indirect Rule for as wide a range of peoples as possible. The methods were carefully worked out in advance so that data obtained by a number of different fieldworkers would be strictly comparable. She characterized the project as 'an experiment in comparative research', seeing it as falling between the collection of essays on similar topics and 'the more precise comparisons which might be produced by a team of research workers concentrated for two or three years on the study of a single problem'. She was acutely aware of the importance of methodological rigour, as the many comments in her different publications show very clearly.

Although this project was an Institute one, its conception and the dedicated energy which carried it through to completion were Audrey Richards's. When a number of the contributors, for various reasons, failed to complete the writing-

up of their contributions, she arranged for drafts to be prepared, either by herself or by a younger colleague for whom she obtained financial assistance (a way of helping junior members of the profession she used on more than one occasion). While she was scrupulous in asking the original fieldworkers to approve drafts, she regarded the obligation to publish as so important that she was prepared to bully as well as cajole recalcitrant members of the project, in order to complete the task.

This was only one of a number of collaborative ventures in which Audrey Richards was involved. She edited a book on migrant labour (1954a), carried out a comparative study of fertility (1954b), contributed large parts of a book on the changing political system of the Ganda (1964), edited and contributed to books on councils (1971) and on changing agriculture in Buganda (1973). As the character of many of these projects implies, she strongly believed that many problems, intellectual as well as social, required multi-disciplinary analysis. The East African Institute was multi-disciplinary from the beginning, although social anthropology was the dominant subject while she was there. To her this was inevitable: given anthropology's concern with all social behaviour, disciplines with a narrower focus had much to learn from it. Although, as she put it herself, with characteristic understatement, 'I have dabbled most of my life in inter-disciplinary work,' Audrey Richards believed in the value of different theoretical analyses of the same data. Even when not engaged in multi-disciplinary research she considered that scholars of other disciplines should be able to use ethnographic data that she recorded, so she tried to set them out in the fullest detail.

She also recognised an obligation to make her work available to the people who had given her the information. Her interesting little study of a Ganda village (1966) was written largely for local consumption. Later on, she published at her own expense *Some Elmdon Families* (1974) written for the Essex villagers who had assisted in the training of Cambridge graduate students. But both these books are also of considerable interest to academics. In the first she makes the point that a village in a society as politically complex as that of the Ganda is best understood in terms of principles operating at the centre, combined with its own particular history. In the second she demonstrates the fruitfulness of the genealogical method and the use of oral history in literate cultures.

Audrey Richards has been underestimated as an anthropologist, despite the honours she collected (President of the Royal Anthropological Institute, President of the African Studies Association of the UK, Fellow of the British Academy and giver of many honorary lectures). She once remarked that she had 'never run a "school" or been a professor' although she taught in London for a total of eleven years, was briefly head of the Department of Anthropology in Witwatersrand University and ended her career as Smuts Reader in Cambridge. She suffered from the revolt against Malinowskian functionalism which marked British anthropology from the 1940s onwards. But while she continued to refer to Malinowski's inspiration and teaching even late in her career, she early began to move away from him intellectually. Her first book (1932) was modelled closely on Malinowski's works on reproductive institutions. It sets out to show how the need for food underlies social institutions in a number of southern African societies. Her second, based on fieldwork among the Bemba (1939), is very different. Her account there is informed throughout by an awareness of the structure of social relations that owes much more to Radcliffe-Brown than to

Malinowski. This strand of her work became more pronounced as the years passed. Her article in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (1950), which has been rightly described by Leach as 'a "must" for undergraduates', is an essay in structural comparison, quite unlike any work of Malinowski's.

Yet among the British structuralists of the 1950s Audrey Richards remained somewhat marginal. She doubted the ability of this approach to deal with the details of ritual, with the complexities of actors' motivations and with changes over time. She never accepted the distinction between the domestic and the political which Fortes had so emphasized. In general she resisted all trends in anthropological thinking which seemed to her to oversimplify, over-systematize and, worst of all, to ignore the minutiae of daily life in which individuals express, make sense of, and use their culture. She retained a strongly Malinowskian sense of the interconnectedness of social institutions, treating his approach more as a method of investigation, a research technique, rather than a 'theory of culture'. It was consistent with her view of anthropology as a 'young science' that she insisted that conclusions be soundly based on 'the facts'. The line she drew between 'facts' and 'interpretation' may seem, to a later generation of social scientists, somewhat naive but it gave her ethnography a richness which makes it of lasting value.

In her emphasis on the importance of understanding the effects of colonial rule on African peoples, Audrey Richards was unusual among her contemporaries. In her first publications on the Bemba she was already stressing the consequences of the introduction of a money economy, taxation and labour migration. Her paper *Bemba Marriage and Present Economic Conditions* (1940) was a pioneering demonstration of the unintended results of planned social change. In 1935, soon after she left the field, she published articles on 'Tribal government in transition' and 'Urbanising the native'. She maintained her interest in the human and intellectual problems of social change throughout her career. There is a case for arguing that it was she who stimulated Malinowski's interest in social change, and even a casual glance at her list of publications is enough to explode the myth that functionalism precludes an interest in social change.

Of all her works it is surely her study of the initiation of Bemba girls, *Chisungu* (1956), which is the crown of her achievement. Judith Brown described it in her special study of female initiation rites (*American Anthropologist*, 65, 1963) as 'the most complete and outstanding work' in the field; and it continues as an inspiration for those interested in initiation rites in regions as remote from Africa as New Guinea and South America. Since then there have been a number of excellent monographs on male initiation but nothing remotely comparable on the initiation of girls.

Chisungu also offers an interpretation of symbolism which, at the time when it was published, was completely novel. It sets out in detail a method for analysing the symbolic elements of ritual which the structural interpretations of the day largely ignored. It emphasizes the necessity of a variety of approaches: through the expressed purposes and interpretations of the actors, which will vary according to their specialist knowledge, social position and personal interest; and through meanings deduced by the observer, both from participant observation and comparison with ritual procedures on other occasions. Ritual, she argues, sustains cultural values but it is intentional action rather than merely an expression of sentiment.

In her discussion of interpretations then current Audrey Richards cites Malinowski's *Coral Gardens and their Magic* as an inspiration, but refers more frequently to work in the traditions of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown. Not that she is uncritical of structuralist views:

It is reasonable to assume that any form of social activity makes for closer ties between members of a society who meet face to face; an important ceremony may be the occasion of the largest gathering which a man in a primitive society ever attends. However, anthropologists have shown a tendency to argue that a group experience intensified loyalty because it has attended a ceremony and that the ceremony exists because the group has such strong feelings that it insists on holding one – a circular argument. [1956: 118]

She points to her own observations, published in 1932, that such rites were often occasions of group rivalry and individual dispute. Characteristically she also stresses that ritual behaviour is multivalent, multi-purpose and therefore requires multiple explanation. 'Single explanations of ritual behaviour, however satisfying to the observer, seem to me to deny the nature of symbolism itself.' The book marked a new departure in the anthropological understanding of ritual.

Shortly after the publication of *Chisungu* Victor Turner began to publish a series of articles setting out a method of interpreting symbolism which closely resembled that of Audrey Richards. Turner had worked among the Ndembu, another Zambian people resembling the Bemba and living not far from them. One would expect him to have read *Chisungu*, but he makes no reference to it until an article in 1964, which describes it as a 'superb study'. Turner has been widely accepted as the founder of a new school of interpretation of symbolism but his initial formulation is so close to that in *Chisungu* that it presents the historian of ideas with a considerable puzzle: either Turner had not even read such a directly relevant work dealing with his own area and topic of research, or he had read it and not acknowledged its influences. Personal experience inclines me to the latter view (La Fontaine, 1972: 185, n.11) but this does not explain why the book remained relatively neglected as a theoretical contribution.

Part of the answer undoubtedly lies in the fact that, during the time that *Chisungu* was in preparation, Audrey Richards was in Uganda, fully occupied in directing the East African Institute. She did not attend academic seminars in Britain, where her ideas might have been given currency before the book was published. She engaged in no public controversies and never sought to make disciples. Most of all, she saw herself as an ethnographer, preferring to introduce her ideas as asides, punctuating her careful record of the facts. Even in *Chisungu* she did not present her work as 'theory', and the next generation of anthropologists came to give much more prestige to writing which claimed to offer a new theory, tending to dismiss ethnography as of interest only to regional specialists.

In considering the contribution that Audrey Richards made to the study of African societies and cultures, one must stress the depth of her knowledge of the Bemba and the wealth of data she published. She aimed always at the fullest possible description of the institution she was studying, pursuing the implications of her topic through all its ramifications within the society. In Uganda she demonstrated the next step: regional comparison, which might form the basis of broader comparative generalizations, along the lines of her earlier essay on family structures in Central Africa (1950). However, in Uganda she had far less

opportunity to pursue her own research, and her work of that period lacks the richness of her Bemba corpus. It is interesting for its experiments in methods of comparative research and its combination of the pursuit of theoretical issues with an awareness of their policy implications. Her predictions for the future of Uganda were nevertheless based on a deep understanding of the country and its problems, and time has proved their wisdom.

Meyer Fortes once remarked that in years to come the anthropological works that would continue to be read would be those that were rich with ethnographic detail, rather than those designed to support theories which would be superseded. Certainly Audrey Richards's work on the Bemba has already proved valuable to historians and to social anthropologists seeking to test interpretations, which might differ from hers, but which needed the solid body of data she provided, as a check on their validity. She was most generous to those who embarked on such ventures, as she was to the many people who took up her time because they found her conversation stimulating and her company delightful. As a person she will be much missed; her place in the history of African studies will remain secure.

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