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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

I. THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF SOCIAL SCIENCE: OFFICIAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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The social scientist castigating himself for the unconscionable application of his research has become a frequent spectacle nowadays, and the anthropologist has been perhaps the most enthusiastic self-flagellant (cf. Talal Asad, ed., Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter; Dell Hymes, ed., Reinventing Anthropology; and in general, the columns of the New York Review of Books). My own project is designed to question the received opinions about the relationship of anthropology and British colonialism during the inter-war period. This involves separating two questions which are usually treated as one: the effect of Colonial Office influence on the development of academic anthropology; and the use of anthropological research by colonial governments. This separation is impossible unless one avoids the mistake common to much intellectual history: the tendency to ignore the actual content of ideas under study, and to presume that the proximity of bodies implies intellectual exchange between them.

Many have argued that the coincidence of the dominance of functionalism in anthropology and Indirect Rule in administration is more than accidental. Malinowski indeed endorsed Indirect Rule and undertook an intensive campaign to convince colonial officials of the relevance of his work to theirs. The International African Institute, which embodied Malinowski's position, did in fact assume an important advisory role for the Colonial Office. By no later than 1929, the permanent staff of the Colonial Office consulted Malinowski in outlining a training program for future colonial civil servants which stressed "the value and efficiency of customs and ideas rather than their history." Malinowski in fact made the C. O. an ally in his battle for academic power; it repudiated the sort of work he deplored--historical evolutionary research.

But despite the fact that imperialist spokesmen like Lord Lugard and Lord Hailey identified functionalist anthropology as more useful than any other, it was not necessarily used by administrators. Indeed, the social anthropology written by administrative officers who contributed to Africa and by those who were appointed by colonial governments to do anthropological research (men like Talbot, Meek, Rattray, and Cardinall) was virtually everything but functionalist. It represents rather a condensed history of a century of British anthropology. During the inter-war period colonial anthropologists were still arguing whether the races of the world were in fact separate species or a single one, and evolutionism, which had subsequently supplanted the old debate between monogenists and polygenists, was still a working model. Insofar as colonial anthropologists were affected by contemporary academic anthropology, it was more by diffusionism than by functionalism. Colonial research only appears to be functionalist occasionally because functionalism intersects with evolutionism at several points---such as the notion of growing institutional differentiation. Intellectually, the colonial anthropologists were far from consistent: their analyses mixed polygenist, evolutionist, and diffusionist approaches haphazardly, even though these models conflicted with each other.

My relatively full information about Ghana does not conflict with the hypothesis that Malinowski's alliance with the Colonial Office had no significant consequences for the colonies. Administrators there assumed that the growth of large, centralized tribal states was both the inevitable and desirable result of European culture contact, and Rattray endorsed historically-oriented research to uncover candidates for tribal consolidation. The political service took his practical anthropology seriously, and required all new Assistant District Commissioners to write original anthropological essays. Superior officers periodically assigned their subordinates anthropological research projects. But although the Colonial Office directed the Gold Coast to adopt functionalism in 1929, it did not do so. The restoration of the Ashanti Confederacy in 1935 realized Rattray's hopes, and political officers continued to research and effect tribal mergers, even though they found that the resulting lines of authority were fragile. Not until the end of interwar period did it occur to many administrators that they were dramatically altering traditions.

I propose to develop my research further in two ways. First, using the British archives, I would like to determine the degree to which the Colonial Office was the eminence grise behind British anthropology. I expect to demonstrate that government support was influential in British academia, but that this connection did not lead to the use of academic research in colonial administration. Instead, colonial requirements fostered the creation of an eclectic anthropology. Secondly, I would like to do a detailed archival case-study of the country I know best (Ghana), and by systemically reading District Commissioners' reports, to determine how anthropology actually was applied in the field.