



## History of Anthropology Newsletter

---

Volume 10  
Issue 2 *December 1983*

Article 6

---

1-1-1983

# Hocart and Cambridge: Complaints of a Colonial Commissioner in Ceylon

Charles Morrison

corresponded with the crown-prince of Denmark, Frederik Christian, especially concerning the mineralogy of Denmark and its dominions, but also regarding the crown prince's gift of the skull of the "bosen Dirne von Umanak" ('naughty lass from Umanak'), which clearly showed the transition from the Mongolian to the American race (Christian VIII, Kongehusarkivet, Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen, 126, Nr. 8, f. 1 r<sup>o</sup>). Nationalism had no place in matters of science; the Republique de lettres crossed all borders, even amidst political upheavals, in particular during the period of the French revolution. While on a diplomatic mission to Paris to rescue the University of Göttingen from being closed under the Napoleonic government of Westphalia, Blumenbach had met Georges Cuvier; their correspondence is preserved in the Bibliotheque Mazarin de l'Institut de France, Paris. This type of science was carried out on a much more personal level, and this of course implied exchange. Blumenbach repaid the kindness of his collaborators with the latest German scientific literature as well as with specimens of natural history from the surrounding provinces (especially minerals and petrifacts). This "reflex" system of scientific communication, by means of the letter, is perhaps the most interesting general characteristic of the Briefwechsel.

#### CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

##### Hocart and Cambridge: Complaints of a Colonial Commissioner in Ceylon

Charles Morrison  
Michigan State University

Among those who apparently expressed interest in competing for the first appointment to the William Wyse Chair in social anthropology at the University of Cambridge in 1932 were two ex-colonial civil servants. Beyond sharing this modicum of professional identity, however, the careers and scholarly inclinations of these two candidates were about as different as can be imagined. The successful candidate, Thomas Callan Hodson (1871-1953), had already been appointed Reader in succession to Alfred Cort Haddon (1855-1940) in 1926--against Haddon's wishes. The other "ex-colonial" was Arthur Maurice Hocart (1883-1939) who had, three years earlier in 1929, been pensioned off as medically unfit for further service in the colonial government of Ceylon, where he had been serving since 1921 as Commissioner of Archaeology. In his recent book on Cambridge anthropology between 1898 and 1931, Ian Langham quotes one of Hocart's letters to Haddon, written from Oxford sometime in the 1920s, about squabbles over Rockefeller money for British anthropology.<sup>1</sup> Several other Hocart letters, sent to Haddon from Ceylon during that decade, provide an interesting footnote on Hocart as an administrator caught up in nationalist unrest and the inter-

departmental tensions of colonial government. The letters (now in the Manuscript Room at Cambridge University Library and reproduced here with their permission) suggest that in Anuradhapura, as in Oxford, Hocart resented the way the machinations of his colleagues robbed him of the peace he needed for his real work; that Cambridge (and Haddon, for whom he seems to have a great personal affection despite some intellectual differences) represented an area of calm to which Hocart was always an outsider.

Ceylon, 20 November, 1926

Dear Haddon,

This will be your first Christmas in retirement. I hope you will enjoy a well deserved otium cum dignitate surrounded by grateful pupils. It is nearly a year if I remember well since I enjoyed Mrs. Haddon's kind hospitality, and I still remember the fine crisp weather I had in Cambridge. Our scheme of a Government Ethnologist is beginning to take shape. I have been authorised to include it in next year's estimates. I shall propose one year at home on languages, one year in Germany, etc., and possibly a look at India. He should be able to take over the Archaeological Department when I retire or go on leave. What sort of salary do you think could attract good men?

There is something to be got out of Ceylon for a man who does not imagine people with a literature to be outside the pale. I think my Kingship, of which I am just now correcting the last proofs, will show there is very important evidence to be got out of Ceylon. . . .Who has succeeded you? . . . [It was, of course, Hodson.]

Ceylon in the 1920s had begun to move towards independence. Unaware of the eventual outcome of local agitation, colonial civil servants in the island blamed the tension and turmoil of their circumstances on interdepartmental squabbling, misguided interference by the Colonial Office in London, and the personalities of the Governor and Colonial Secretary. Opposition between "official" and "unofficial" members of the legislature was so bitter that the Donoughmore Commission (1928-1929) recommended the upper echelon of administrators be given the chance to retire early with compensation for loss of career. Hocart already had in mind settling in Cambridge after Ceylon, and in 1927, after the death of Sir William Ridgeway (1853-1926), Haddon seems to have encouraged Hocart to seek the Disney Professorship in Archaeology:

Ceylon, 21 June 1927

. . .I am trying hard to get out of this, and I am not the only one. Personally, I do not mind the reforms [constitutional reforms and administrative rearrangements being introduced under pressure from the local population]; I think one can deal with the Sinhalese,

but I and many others, do mind the new Colonial Secretary who has constituted himself a leader of the opposition and thinks he knows by intuition more about physics than the [government] meteorologist, about education than the principal of [the] college, or archaeology than myself. Four months after landing in the island, without having seen me or a single ruin, he made a minute to the effect that I had no programme. I am waiting for the new governor [Sir Herbert Stanley] to put in a long review of this department and all the obstacles put in the way by Government. I shall send you a draft copy, as the work here can only be judged in the light of the difficulties we have had to contend with, and I think it might be submitted along with other papers to the electors to the Chair if you think wise. . . . I would be most grateful if you will forward my name. Even if the new Governor does put his Colonial Secretary in his place, I am tired of the Government, and the future here is too uncertain. Clifford [Sir Hugh Clifford, 1866-1941, Governor of Ceylon, 1925-1927] was disappointing. The general feeling was that he was going a bit queer. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Ceylon, 27 June 1927

Dear Haddon,

Your cable was forwarded to me in the wilds and by sending a special messenger I was just able to catch the mail. It should get there in time, but to make things surer, I cabled as well. . . . Personally I am not a bit hopeful, and I am rather doubtful about my ability tackle the job. But the future here is too uncertain. I used to complain of government apathy and red tape obstructions, but there is one thing worse and that is Government trying to be efficient. I don't think there would be a man left here, except old stagers on the verge of a pension, if they were given a chance as good as you have so kindly put me in the way of. I am just now engaged in excavations, but one can put little heart into it when it may all come to nothing. . . .

Hocart's nomination however, was unsuccessful--as the next letter indicates. By this time Sir Hugh Clifford had been replaced by Sir Herbert James Stanley, who governed the island from 1927 to 1931, and with whom Hocart appears to have had good relations:

Ceylon, 9 September 1927

Dear Haddon,

. . . . I am sorry it did not come off but I was not disappointed as I could not expect anything.

The situation is more hopeful. All the reports about the new Governor is that he is very accessible and wants people to talk to him as man to man. In fact it is thought that he has been warned by the Colonial Office that the Colonial Secretary had got things too much in his own hands. There is no doubt Clifford was

on the verge of a breakdown. He spoke for 2 hrs 50 mins at the Police Mess and sacked his private secretary for nodding! That is only a mild case. I gauged the situation aright when I staved off a crisis until the new man came. At all events he listens to you.

However, I shall never recover any enthusiasm or loyalty, and my one idea is to get out. We are living in hopes of retirement on proportionate pensions. If that comes it should not be later than 1930.

The Colonial Secretary has succeeded in sidetracking the Ethnologist. He will have to be financed from home. Do you realize this is one of the most archaic countries in the world, not from love of old things but from inertia. But since 1922 buses are scouring the country and will upset everything. . . . Just one thing about your review. I did not like the title. The Sun God is a mere accident. It is the method I am keen on; but the sun god at the top is apt to prejudice people with the idea that it is another of the sun cranks. The king appears to be the universe, and chiefly sun king, because the sun is the Lord of the Universe, but the pre-eminence of the sun is probably later, or at least he only became so supreme later. I should have made this clearer. I hinted at it in the preface.

The final letter in the series, dated a year later from Anuradhapura, was written not long before Hocart himself was sent home permanently, medically unfit:

Ceylon, 5 August 1928

Dear Haddon,

Your enquiry reached me just when things are beginning to look easier. First, the [Donoughmore] Commission has caused jubilation by condemning the local Colonial Secretary, and by commenting on the "grave discourtesy" to which officials were subjected [by unofficial members of the legislature]. On top of that, I have just had a most satisfactory interview with His Excellency [Stanley] who said that the things had got in a tangle (no allusion to who made the tangle) and asked if I had any objection to getting Marshall [Sir John Marshall, 1876-1958, Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India] over to report on reorganization. I said I was going to suggest such an expedient myself. It is Government's usual way out of the difficulty: an expert for the university (tangle caused by the same intrigue as in my case); an expert for the residency, then as his findings are not acceptable, two more experts from England; then the Museum; then self.

There still remains the committee on the budget on Tuesday. What is going to happen, I don't know, but I have maneuvered Government into cutting out items which both I and the [legislative] council want, and Govern-

ment has to face their indignation. There is some fun in it, but all the same I don't think I shall outstay proportionate pensions with compensation for loss of career. I prefer the peaceful pursuit of solutions to problems of political intrigue in which all the odds are in favor of the enemy.

I hope to come on leave September next year, and settle down in Cambridge to see if the atmosphere is more congenial than Oxford, and also get an idea how much I can live on. What can a bachelor live on quietly? It is a question that has to be studied now, so I shall be glad of your opinion. I am glad to hear Cambridge is doing well anthropologically. . . . I am afraid I am reading less and less about men, and more and more reading them. The one thing I look forward to is browsing Homer, Hesiod, Livy, Plutarch, the Rig Veda, etc., etc., and consigning their modern commentaries and paraphrases to limbo. What people say about other races is so different to what they say themselves (e.g., mana) that you must choose between them. I prefer Livy's world to Momsen's.

Yours sincerely,  
A. C. Hocart

For a few years after his return Hocart held an unofficial position at University College, London, and served as secretary to the Royal Anthropological Institute. Needham reports that doubts about Hocart's health were a factor in the decision not to offer him the Cambridge chair in 1932. It also seems possible that Hocart's association with the hyperdiffusionists Elliot Smith and Perry at London counted against him in the Cambridge network. In any case, Hodson was by then Reader and in a strong position to compete for the chair. In 1934, Hocart was elected to succeed Evans-Pritchard to the chair of sociology at the University of Cairo. He died in Egypt five years later, age 56.

#### Footnotes

(1) The Building of British Social Anthropology, (Boston:1981). The best account of Needham's life, work, and character is still Rodney Needham's introduction to the second edition of Kings and Councillors (Chicago, 1970).

(2) Historians of modern Ceylon seem agreed that Sir Hugh Clifford was mentally unstable at the time of his governorship of the island; he went to Ceylon career as a colonial governor in Africa and the Far East. See Sir Charles Jeffries, Ceylon: The Path to Independence (New York, 1963); E. F. C. Ludowyk, The Modern History of Ceylon (New York, 1966).