

JACK HERBERT DRIBERG (1888-1946)

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In the course of writing an obituary of Aidan Southall, my attention was recently drawn back to Jack Driberg, his first teacher in social anthropology and an important source of inspiration and encouragement for him to take the subject up professionally.¹ Many anthropologists, especially younger ones, have scarcely heard of him. Information about him is widely scattered, and he is not an easy man to write about with confidence. He was clearly a remarkable character, who never fitted easily into the moulds that others tried to cast him in, and he was also the kind of person around whom anecdotes and myths, including some of his own production, readily accumulated.

As Evans-Pritchard, Southall and John Barnes have all testified, Driberg was almost single-handedly responsible for keeping academic social anthropology, and one might add the place of African research within it, alive in the small Archaeology and Anthropology Department in Cambridge in those otherwise rather barren days of the 1930s. After gaining a little teaching experience in London, the main intellectual centre of the subject in Britain at the time, he was first invited to lecture in Cambridge by Professor Hodson in 1931. He then became a University Lecturer from 1934 to 1942, when he left academic anthropology. He went on to work on Middle Eastern affairs, including war-time military operations, until his death in his late fifties in 1946. He first came to my notice in the 1960s when I began research among the Luo-speaking Labwor people of northern Uganda.

By 1934 he was already 46 years old and had enjoyed a colourfully eccentric life as a colonial administrator in Uganda and neighbouring areas of the Sudan until 1926, when he retired partly 'on medical grounds'. A 1949 history of the Acholi people written in the vernacular by V. Pellegrini, a Verona Father, notes how he was much respected by the local people and was given the nickname Bwana Tong (Sir Spear) because he always carried a spear with him on his walkabouts. I myself encountered older men who claimed to remember him. One told me that he spoke Luo fluently and was 'a real man'. If there was a killing on his beat,

¹ I would like to acknowledge the help I have received from many conversations with John Barnes, who also has much of interest to say in his autobiographical memoir, *Humping my drum* (2007); he also discusses Driberg with Jack Goody in a 1983 interview (www.alanmacfarlane.com/DO/filmshow/barnes). I also wish to acknowledge the help of Jane Hogan and her colleagues at the Durham University Sudan Archive in facilitating my access to

he didn't bother with the courts but simply dispatched the killer with his own spear. Such at least was his reputation, though I cannot vouch for the accuracy of the latter part of the account.²

It may be helpful to note that colonial 'administration' in these regions at the time in question varied typically along a scale from light to almost non-existent, and that the social and political organization of peoples of the area differed greatly from those of groups like the Baganda further south. There were no well-developed forms of authoritative chiefship, and especially in the north-eastern Karamoja area and adjoining parts of the Sudan, there were long-standing patterns of large-scale and violent cattle raiding between neighbouring peoples. Age-organization and a system of clans and lineages, plus varying forms of informal leadership, formed the main bases of order in the region.³ Moreover, firearms had begun to penetrate the area with the arrival of ivory hunters from Ethiopia and farther afield.

Notwithstanding the question of his health, Driberg is said to have left East Africa under a cloud. Characteristically, there is a wealth of oral tradition, as well as some detailed literature about this. I have variously heard that he neglected to send in regular reports to administrative headquarters in Khartoum under the pretext that his time was taken up with dealing with a tribal war. According to one story, a member of his staff went to Khartoum on leave and, when asked, professed total ignorance of the war in question. Another version describes how his claims about a war led to reinforcements being sent down to him which he led fruitlessly around the countryside till the truth came out. Yet another version, quoted by Glyn Daniel (1986) as current in the 1930s and mentioned in a short biography of his brother Tom, is that he disobeyed an order to burn a local village as an official punishment.⁴ He is then said to have concocted a report that he had carried out the order, but his deception was unmasked. Something close to this is also mentioned in the short obituary of him in *Nature* for April 1946.

Quite the most detailed published account is given by Robert Collins in his book *Shadows in the grass* (1983). Based largely on official papers, this reveals the anecdotes as not completely false and allows us to place them in the complexities of southern Sudanese

contemporary archival material, and of Douglas Johnson on a point of detail. There is a valuable account of Southall's links to Driberg in John Burton's interview with him (1992).

² Driberg was in fact quite interested in the development of 'Native Courts', and it is possible that this comment is ultimately connected to his own claims (see below) to have participated in inter-community fighting (rather than the handling of intra-community violence).

³ Cf. Gulliver (1955), Dyson-Hudson (1966), Thomas (1965) and Abrahams (1978) for further ethnographic information on this area.

⁴ In Watkins, *Brief lives* (1982, 20). Tom Driberg, later Baron Bradwell, was a well-known Labour politician.

‘administration’ of the time.⁵ After a successful period of several years among the Lango of northern Uganda, Driberg was moved in 1922 to the newly ‘pacified’ Didinga mountains on the Sudan border. When the area was formally taken back under the Sudan administration, he remained in charge there and transferred to the Sudan Political Service. As earlier among the Lango, he seems to have become strongly attached to the people – and also to their highland country – and he was especially keen to defend them against their enemies, the as yet unadministered Toposa pastoralists, who were apparently taking advantage of their weakened state and that of their closely related Longarim neighbours.⁶ Contrary to orders from above he led some forays against the Toposa, and he was keen to be sent some military reinforcements, which he hoped would persuade them to pay compensation for their raids and make peace through the threat of force. In pursuit of this he got caught up in a mire of deception, claiming falsely that the Toposa had carried out a particularly serious raid which he had repelled with local police support. It appears that at the time he was overworking and genuinely unwell, with symptoms of jaundice. In the end, faced with an imminent government strike force to punish the Toposa for this fictive raid, he confessed his fabrications and was allowed to resign, albeit it seems with a pension.

Collins presents a generally convincing picture of the very complex mixture of local and international considerations in this exceptionally remote area, the so-called Ilemi Triangle, situated near the Sudanese borders with Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia, and he also makes plain the tensions between the attitudes and concerns of officials in Khartoum and London on the one hand, and the locally situated, independent-minded ‘Bog (sc. South Sudan swamp area) Barons’, as they were known. These were largely ex-military men who tended to despise the distant, typically Oxbridge-educated bureaucrats who were nominally in charge of them but were usually quite ignorant of the local conditions in which they had to work. Despite his own Oxford education, Driberg clearly had much in common with these locally based colleagues. They too were keen on learning and working through the local languages in relative isolation from central government, though none of them could match Driberg’s own linguistic skills

⁵ I have recently been able to see some of these papers with the help of the Sudan Archive staff at Durham University.

⁶ Before Driberg was transferred to the Didinga, they had engaged in troublesome cross-border cattle raiding with the help of Swahili and Ethiopian ivory poachers, including a supply of firearms, against several groups in northern Uganda. Repeated requests for the Sudanese authorities to put an end to this were unsuccessful – they appear simply not to have had the resources to do so – and eventually, in 1921, the Ugandan Government sent a military expedition, lightly supported on the Sudan side, against them. This then tempted the Toposa, whom the Sudan government were equally unable to control, to engage further in their raiding against the Didinga and other groups, including the Turkana in Kenya.

and deep ethnographic knowledge, nor his quite remarkable degree of attachment to the people in his charge.

It is interesting in this regard that the Governor of Mongalla Province in which Driberg served criticised his actions but made several mitigating comments at the time. He noted that Driberg had always ‘taken the keenest interest in the welfare of the natives of his District and...spent a considerable part of his salary on the District.... While this does not place the Government under any pecuniary obligation, I hope that the Council dealing with the case will consider it as a reason for generous treatment of Mr Driberg in a pecuniary way’. He went on to say that he would feel justified in recommending him for ‘non-administrative work’ in anthropological research and linguistic studies if the Council felt disposed to offer him such employment, and that he considered that allowance should be made for his actions in view of the ‘peculiar type of life he has led’ in close intimacy with local people in the course of his researches.⁷

By this time, he was already interested in academic as well as ‘practical’ anthropology and had had some contact with the Seligmans in London. Before his retirement from Sudan, he published a large and impressively scholarly monograph on the Lango of Northern Uganda (1923).⁸ This was ethnographically of great help to me in my own research in the neighbouring Labwor area, and it demonstrates extraordinary linguistic skills and a very sharp observational eye, along with a generally warm appreciation of the people and their culture. He also shows a strong knowledge of the available ethnographic literature on neighbouring and related peoples and considerable reading beyond this, including Junod’s work on the Thonga and Rivers’ kinship theories, which he was probably introduced to by Brenda Seligman. In later works he reveals comparable familiarity with Didinga language and culture, and his book on the people, *The people of the small arrow*, takes a remarkable experimental novel-like form.⁹ In an article about anthropology and the colonial system (1927), he stresses

⁷ I understand that the ‘Council’ in question was the Council of Secretaries, the executive council in Khartoum presided over by the Governor-General of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium.

⁸ I write Lango following his orthography in the book. As he points out, however, the ‘ng’ sound in the area is almost always a ‘velar nasal’ often transcribed elsewhere as ŋ or ng’ and pronounced as in ‘sing’ in standard English as opposed to its counterpart in ‘finger’.

⁹ This book was beautifully illustrated by his then wife, Pearl Binder, later Lady Elwyn Jones. In a little known paper on Driberg’s approach to anthropology, Nancy Schmidt (1989) explores the ‘humanistic’ qualities of this book and much of his other work, along with his interests in poetry and song. She also pays strong tribute to his closeness to the peoples he writes about. Overall, she sees him as a little recognised precursor of later practitioners of ethnography as a creative enterprise. Despite diligent searches for relevant published material at the time of writing, I unfortunately only came across Schmidt’s article after the present paper had been ‘put to bed’. I have been relieved to find that it mainly complements my own, although I would take issue with its

the need for anthropologists to be separate actors, free from the restrictions necessarily imposed upon administrators. This no doubt reflects his then recent experiences. It is clear, however, that his rather special personality enabled him, both in Lango and Didinga country, to enjoy the deep intimacy of intensive participant observation for several years while at least to some degree continuing to administer, at any rate until the final crisis.

Upon leaving Africa Driberg decided to embark more formally on an anthropological career, and he studied for a time at the LSE with Seligman and Malinowski, as well as with Morris Ginsberg, Graham Wallas and Gordon Childe. Evans-Pritchard, Audrey Richards, Raymond Firth and Isaac Schapera were among his fellow students.¹⁰ In addition to the publications already noted, he went on to produce a wide range of writings on various aspects of African life and custom, including a general introduction to social anthropology and some translations of African poetry and song. In another book, dedicated to a twelve-year-old girl called Janet, he tells the story of Engato, a lion cub he reared and kept as a pet for several years. The book provides an interesting picture of his generally happy life of close contact with the Lango, and tells *inter alia* how he – and indeed later the lion – were ‘initiated’ at the instigation of the people into the local age-group system.¹¹ As with so much else in his life, it is once again not wholly clear where the border between fact and fiction lies in this charming work.

Evans-Pritchard was apparently his closest friend within anthropology and dedicated his 1940 LSE monograph on the Anuak to him, ‘with great affection’. Driberg is said to have given him support in his clashes with Malinowski.¹² Apparently through Evans-Pritchard, Gluckman also developed an attachment to him as a young blood in Oxford not long out of South Africa. Evans-Pritchard wrote a warm obituary of him (*Man*, January 1947) which evokes a sympathetic picture of a complex, Renaissance-type figure. He recalls his wide ranging interests as an Oxford student – music, poetry, the classics, heavyweight boxing – and

attempt to distance Driberg from the interests of the small community of his contemporaries in British anthropology. The article deserves to be better known.

¹⁰ It is extremely likely that he also came across the ideas of Radcliffe-Brown during this period, partly at least through Schapera and Evans-Pritchard, to whom the former showed his notes on Radcliffe-Brown’s Cape Town lectures (see Stocking, 1995: 337).

¹¹ There is a useful bibliography of Driberg’s numerous writings in Evans-Pritchard’s obituary of him. The list includes a co-authored book on poker (written under the pseudonym of Herbert Johnson). Barnes mentions his prowess in this game in *Humping my drum*. In addition to most of the works cited by Evans-Pritchard, Schmidt (1989) also lists several reviews both by Driberg and about his work, plus some other minor publications.

¹² Among other things, Driberg is said to have corresponded, with Evans-Pritchard’s knowledge and behind Malinowski’s back, with Alex Rentoul, a colonial magistrate in the Pacific who had disputed Malinowski’s

his affection among those he went on to administer. He also notes his great success as an exciting and inspiring teacher. This is clearly acknowledged by former students, including Aidan Southall, John Barnes and Glyn Daniel. Though not taken by him personally to the same degree, Monica Wilson (then Hunter) was another major figure in the discipline who acknowledged his undergraduate lecturing and his later help with her research.¹³ Barnes, in *Humping my drum* (2007), remarks that he learned more from Driberg than from any other Cambridge teacher. He also tells a remarkable story of one of Driberg's classes. Describing how local warriors would form opposing lines and throw spears at each other, he told how Driberg claimed that the ideal was to catch an enemy spear in the air and hurl it back before the thrower could throw another one. When Barnes expressed scepticism about this, Driberg commented that the man next to him in the line had done exactly that. Evans-Pritchard describes him as a man of *baraka*, and Barnes has talked to me of his 'charisma', and mused that, when together, he and Evans-Pritchard must have been a pretty formidable pair. Evans-Pritchard described his friend as a 'brilliant talker, at his best *splendide mendax*' ('untruthful in a noble cause'), which was presumably a veiled reference to the end of his administrative career.

Evans-Pritchard points out that Driberg made little individual contribution to theory, though he rightly asserts his important role as a powerful if lonely voice for academic social anthropology in Cambridge. He describes his teaching legacy as mainly important for subsequent colonial administrators who passed through his hands. Happily this underestimates the influence he had on Wilson, and later on men like Barnes and Southall who went on, albeit after his death, to become leading Africanist figures in the discipline. Here one should also mention Thomas Hayley, who worked under his supervision among the Lango and later became a well-known psychoanalyst.¹⁴

There is an interesting and paradoxical combination here: the long-serving ex-colonial official and first-class ethnographer, versed in standard theory but not developing it, who, through his flare and charm, keeps a flame burning which is only really brought to life in Cambridge in the vital decade of the 1950s, with Fortes' arrival as professor and his recruitment of Leach and Goody.¹⁵ It is possible that a little of this can be seen in the history

statements about Trobriand ideas of paternity. Cf. Goody (1995: 23) and Rentoul (1932) for further information on this and relevant sources.

¹³ See Bank (2009), and also Hunter's acknowledgment in *Reaction to conquest* (1936).

¹⁴ See Hayley's book *The anatomy of Lango religion and groups* (1947).

¹⁵ Fortes succeeded Hutton in 1950. Leach was appointed a Lecturer in 1953 and then as Reader in 1957. Goody was initially appointed an Assistant Lecturer in 1954 and then Lecturer in 1959. All three remained in Cambridge

of the succession to the William Wyse chair in Cambridge in 1937, though once again by no means everything is clear here. The episode has been briefly discussed by Stocking in his book *After Tylor* (1995: 430), and also, following him, by Tambiah (2002: 406) in his biography of Edmund Leach. When Hodson, the first William Wyse professor, was coming up to retirement, Gregory Bateson wrote to his former teacher Haddon, who still wielded some influence, to express his interest in the post. He acknowledged a debt to Ruth Benedict's work on culture and personality but, 'in the language of Radcliffe-Brown', he mainly professed an interest in the idea of social anthropology as a 'technical science' in which the academic study of disappearing cultures was of greater concern than the needs of a colonial administration. Haddon replied firmly that the needs of 'colonial cadets' and others who would not be taking up the subject professionally should be the prime concern of the holder of the chair. The eventual impressive list of candidates included Firth, Richards, Forde, Fortune and Hocart, as well as Driberg and Hutton, a recently appointed lecturer not long retired from the Indian civil service. It fits well with Haddon's comment that as a former colonial officer Driberg was the initial favourite, according to Stocking, and that Hutton was in the end appointed. This outcome is rather shocking to modern eyes, given the stellar intellectual quality of some of the other candidates, and it suggests that both men were seen as relatively safe bets to steer the desired course. It is hard to know what lay behind the final shift of preference to Hutton, who was reputedly a poor teacher with little interest in academic anthropology. It would not surprise me, however, if the local core of the electors – the external member was Seligman – were ultimately worried that Driberg was a less safe bet, given his flawed colonial service history and his undoubted ability to communicate his deeply engrained respect and romantic enthusiasm for the subject as an exciting discipline.¹⁶ Certainly Hutton appears to have posed no such threat.

It may be added that, even in death, Driberg's story has a 'larger than life' twist. He became a Muslim in his later years, and his body was sent for burial in the Muslim cemetery near Woking. Unfortunately, this is said to have nearly come to nothing when someone

as key figures until their retirement. Audrey Richards also returned to Cambridge during this period, being based in Newnham College and the new African Studies Centre. Before them, Evans-Pritchard came in 1944, but only for a couple of years, first as Lecturer and then as Reader.

¹⁶ There is yet another apocryphal story in this context. It has been said that the electors intended to elect Driberg but at the last declined because it emerged in their final discussions that he owed money to a number of them. They are said then to have elected Hutton, presumably because they worried that they might be seen to be appointing Driberg for their own financial benefit! This, if true, does not directly support my speculations, but it does not automatically negate them since I can well imagine a sigh of relief from some members of the

noticed that a brass cross had been thoughtlessly tacked on to the coffin by the undertakers. Like so much in his life, the details are unclear exactly where and when the offending symbol was removed – apparently with some violence – but once this had been done the funeral was allowed to proceed without further problems.

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committee. It appears that Evans-Pritchard had supported Driberg's application (see Goody, footnote 4, p.215, 1995) and had later commented that the electors had wanted 'an older man'.

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