

Some Reminiscences and Reflections on Fieldwork

I have often been asked by puzzled students how one goes about fieldwork, and how we fared in what must seem to them those distant days. It had not occurred to me as clearly as it should have done that the information we gathered and published might some time or other be scrutinized and evaluated to some extent by the circumstances of one kind or another in which we conducted our research. So I have jotted down these notes as a fragment of anthropological history. ¹

I

That charming and intelligent Austrian-American anthropologist Paul Radin has said that no one quite knows how one goes about fieldwork. Perhaps we should leave the question with that sort of answer. But when I was a serious young student in London I thought I would try to get a few tips from experienced fieldworkers before setting out for Central Africa. I first sought advice from Westermarck. All I got from him was 'don't converse with an informant for more than twenty minutes because if you aren't bored by that time he will be.' Very good advice, even if somewhat inadequate. I sought instruction from Haddon, a man foremost in field-research. He told me that it was really all quite simple; one should always behave as a gentleman. Also very good advice. My teacher, Seligman told me to take ten grains of quinine every night and to keep off women. The famous Egyptologist, Sir Flinders Petrie just told me not to bother about drinking dirty water as one soon became immune to it. Finally, I asked Malinowski and was told not to be a bloody fool. So there is no clear answer, much will depend on the man, on the society he is to study, and the conditions in which he is to make it.

Sometimes people say that anybody can make observations and write a book about a primitive people. Perhaps anybody can, but it may not be a contribution to anthropology. In science, as in life, one finds only what one seeks. One cannot have the answers without knowing what the questions are. Consequently the first imperative is a rigorous training in general theory before attempting field-research so that one may know how and what to observe, what is significant in the light of theory. It is essential to realize that facts are in themselves meaningless. To be meaningful they must have a degree of generality. It is useless going into the field blind. One must know precisely what one wants to know and that can only be acquired by a systematic training in academic social anthropology.

For instance, I am sure that I could not have written my book on Zande witchcraft in the way I did or even made the observations on which it is based had I not read the books written by that noble man Lévy-Bruhl, and I doubt whether I could ever have convinced myself that I was not deluding myself in my description and interpretation of the lineage system of the Nuer had I not, almost suddenly, realized that Robertson Smith had presented, in almost the same words as I was to use, a similar system among the Ancient Arabians. I do not think I could have made a contribution to an understanding of the political structure of the Shilluk and Anuak if I had not been deep in Mediaeval studies. And I could not have written as I did about the Sanusi had I not had in my mind the model of the history of other religious movements. These last examples illustrate a further point. Strictly speaking, mediaeval

Europe and religious movements might be held to lie outside social anthropological studies, but on reflection it might be accepted that this is not really so, that all knowledge is relevant to our researches and may, though not taught as anthropology, influence the direction of our interests and through them our observations and the manner in which we finally present them. Moreover, one may say that since what we study are human beings the study involves the whole personality, heart as well as mind; and therefore what has shaped that personality, and not just academic background: sex, age, class, nationality, family and home, school, church, companions - one could enumerate any number of such influences. All I want to emphasize is that what one brings out of a field-study largely depends on what one brings to it. That has certainly been my experience, both in my own researches and in what I have concluded from those of my colleagues.

It used to be said, and perhaps still is, that the anthropologist goes into the field with preconceived ideas about the nature of primitive societies and that his observations are directed by theoretical bias, as though this were a vice and not a virtue. Everybody goes to a primitive people with pre-conceived ideas but, as Malinowski used to point out, whereas the layman's are uninformed, usually prejudiced, the anthropologist's are scientific, at any rate in the sense that they are based on a very considerable body of accumulated and sifted knowledge. If he did not go with preconceptions he would not know what and how to observe. And of course the anthropologist's observations are biased by his theoretical dispositions, which merely means that he is aware of various hypotheses derived from existing knowledge and deductions from it and, if his field data permit, he tests these hypotheses. How could it be otherwise? One cannot study anything without a theory about its nature.

On the other hand, the anthropologist must follow what he finds in the society he has selected for study: the social organization of its people, their values and sentiments and so forth. I illustrate this fact from what happened in my own case. I had no interest in witchcraft when I went to Zandeland, but the Azande had; so I had to let myself be guided by them. I had no particular interest in cows when I went to Nuerland, but the Nuer had, so willy-nilly I had to become cattle-minded too, eventually acquiring a herd of my own as the price of my acceptance, or at any rate tolerance.

It will have been evident from what has already been said that it is desirable that a student should make a study of more than one society, though this is not always, for one reason or another, possible. If he makes only a single study it is inevitable that he will view its people's institutions in contrast to his own and their ideas and values in contrast to those of his own culture; and this in spite of the corrective given by his previous reading of anthropological literature. When he makes a study of a second alien society he will approach it and see its people's culture in the light of his experience of the first - as it were through different lenses, in different perspectives - and this is likely to make his study more objective, or at any rate give him fruitful lines of inquiry which might possibly not otherwise have occurred to him. For instance, Azande have kings and princes and a fairly elaborate political organization and bureaucracy. When I went to live among the Nuer after many months among the Azande, I found that although they had quite substantial political groups there appeared to be no political authority of any significance; so naturally I asked myself what gave a sense of unity

within these tribal groups, and in the course of my inquiries I was led to unravel their lineage system. Then, while the Azande were deeply concerned with witchcraft, the Nuer appeared to be almost totally uninterested in the notion or in any similar notion, so I asked myself to what they attributed any misfortune or untoward event. This led to a study of their concept of kwoth, spirit, and eventually to my book on their religion.

The study of a second society has the advantage also that one has learnt by experience what mistakes to avoid and how from the start to go about making observations, how to make short-cuts in the investigation, and how to exercise economy in what one finds it relevant to relate, since one sees the fundamental problems more quickly. It has its disadvantage that the writing-up period is greatly extended - I have still published only a portion of my Zande notes taken down during a study begun in 1927! It is the British intense emphasis of field-research which certainly in part accounts for the demise of the once much extolled comparative method. Everyone is so busy writing up his own field-notes that no one has much time to read books written by others.

The importance of a thorough grounding in general theory begins to reveal itself when the fieldworker returns home to write a book about the people he has studied. I have had much, too much, field-experience, and I have long ago discovered that the decisive battle is not fought in the field but in the study afterwards. Any one who is not a complete idiot can do fieldwork, and if the people he is working among have not been studied before he cannot help making an original contribution to knowledge. But will it be to theoretical, or just to factual, knowledge? Anyone can produce a new fact; the thing is to produce a new idea. It has been my woeful experience that many a student comes home from the field to write just another book about just another people, hardly knowing what to do with the grain he has been at such pains to garner. Can it be too often said that in science empirical observation to be of value must be guided and inspired by some general view of the nature of the phenomena being studied? The theoretical conclusions will then be found to be implicit in an exact and detailed description.

II

This brings me to what anthropologists sometimes speak of as participant-observation. By this they mean that insofar as it is both possible and convenient they live the life of the people among whom they are doing their research. This is a somewhat complicated matter and I shall only touch on the material side of it. I found it useful if I wanted to understand how and why Africans are doing certain things to do them myself: I had a hut and byre like theirs; I went hunting with them with spear and bow and arrow; I learnt to make pots; I consulted oracles; and so forth. But clearly one has to recognize that there is a certain pretence in such attempts at participation, and people do not always appreciate them. One enters into another culture and withdraws from it at the same time. One cannot really become a Zande or a Nuer or a Bedouin Arab, and the best compliment one can pay them is to remain apart from them in essentials. In any case one always remains oneself, inwardly a member of one's own society and a sojourner in a strange land. Perhaps it would be

better to say that one lives in two different worlds of thought at the same time, in categories and concepts and values which often cannot easily be reconciled. One becomes, at least temporarily a sort of double marginal man, alienated from both worlds.

The problem is most obvious and acute when one is confronted with notions not found in our own present-day culture and therefore unfamiliar to us. Such ideas as God and soul are familiar and with some adjustment transference can readily be made, but what about beliefs in witchcraft, magic and oracles? I have often been asked whether, when I was among the Azande, I got to accept their ideas about witchcraft. This is a difficult question to answer. I suppose you can say I accepted them; I had no choice. In my own culture, in the climate of thought I was born into and brought up in and have been conditioned by, I rejected, and reject, Zande notions of witchcraft. In their culture, in the set of ideas I then lived in, I accepted them; in a kind of way I believed them. Azande were talking about witchcraft daily, both among themselves and to me; any communication was well-nigh impossible unless one took witchcraft for granted. You cannot have a remunerative, even intelligent, conversation with people about something they take as self-evident if you give them the impression that you regard their belief as an illusion or a delusion. Mutual understanding, and with it sympathy, would soon be ended, if it ever got started. Anyhow, I had to act as though I trusted the Zande oracles and therefore to give assent to their dogma of witchcraft, whatever reservations I might have. If I wanted to go hunting or on a journey, for instance, no one would willingly accompany me unless I was able to produce a verdict of the poison oracle that all would be well, that witchcraft did not threaten our project; and if one goes on arranging one's affairs, organizing one's life in harmony with the lives of one's hosts, whose companionship one seeks and without which one would sink into disorientated craziness, one must eventually give way, or at any rate partially give way. If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts.

Students have asked me how I was able, if I was, to grasp the Nuer concept or image of a cow, since clearly a cow means something more to them than it does to us. The answer again is that there is no choice. One cannot live in intimate association with a people who live by and for their cattle, spending all day, and sometimes all night, with them and their herds, watching them tend their beasts and singing and dancing to their beloved oxen, and hearing them talk about little else, without getting to know what cattle mean to them. Communication would be impossible and it would be impossible to establish any close bond with them. So among the Nuer I found it absolutely necessary to acquire a small herd of my own. We were then fellow-herdsmen with common interests, common language, common affections, and living the same life in the same conditions; and all this, if it may be so put, imposed on me what 'cow' means to a Nuer.

Here arises a question with regard to which my colleagues have not always seen eye to eye with me. In writing about the beliefs of primitive peoples does it matter one way or the other whether one accords them validity or regards them as fallacious? Take witchcraft again. Does it make any difference whether one believes in it or not, or can one just describe how a people who believe in it, think and act about it, and how the belief affects relations between persons? I think it does make a difference, for if one does not think that the psychic assumptions on which witchcraft-beliefs are based are

tenable, one has to account for what is commonsense to others is incomprehensible to oneself. One is in a different position with regard to belief in God, or at any rate I was. We do not think that witchcraft exists, but we have been taught that God does, so we do not here feel that we have to account for an illusion. We have only to describe how a people think of what we both regard as a reality and how in various ways the belief influences their lives. The atheist however, is faced with the same problem as with witchcraft and feels the need to account for an illusion by various psychological or sociological hypotheses. I admit that this is a very difficult philosophical question, for it might reasonably be asked why, other than in faith, should one accept God and not witchcraft, since it could be held, as many anthropologists do, that the evidence for the one is no greater than for the other. The point is, I suppose, that in our culture (leaving out past history and modern scepticism) the one makes sense and the other not. I raise the question even if I cannot give a very satisfactory answer to it. After all, it does make a difference whether one thinks that a cow exists or is an illusion!

Since this question of entering into the thought of another people has been raised, I might touch on a further implication. I wonder whether anthropologists always realize that in the course of their field-work they can be, and sometimes are, transformed by the people they are making a study of, that in a subtle kind of way and possibly unknown to themselves they have what used to be called 'gone native'. If an anthropologist is a sensitive person it could hardly be otherwise. This is a highly personal matter and I will only say that I learnt from African 'primitives' much more than they learnt from me, much that I was never taught at school, something more of courage, endurance, patience, resignation and forbearance that I had no great understanding of before. Just to give one example: I would say that I learnt more about the nature of God and our human predicament from the Nuer than I ever learnt at home.

III

It is an academic issue of some importance and one which is often confused and sometimes leads to rancour: what is the difference between sociology and social anthropology? I have discussed this question elsewhere and will not go into it again here, especially as it is only peripheral to my topic. But I would like to touch on a query put to me from time to time by sociology students: why do anthropologists in their fieldwork not employ some of the techniques used by sociologists in their's, such as questionnaires, sampling, interviews, statistics and so forth. The answer is that, though I suppose the situation is now somewhat different, in my day the use of such techniques among a primitive people would not have been to any extent worthwhile, or even possible at all. The peoples I worked among were totally illiterate, so the distribution of questionnaires would have been a waste of time. With a homogeneous rural or semi-nomadic people sampling, such as is required in a socially heterogeneous urban community in our own country, is not only unnecessary but more or less meaningless. Set interviews in the anthropologist's hut or tent, as distinct from informal conversations are generally impossible because natives would not co-operate; and in any case they are undesirable because they are held outside of the context of a people's activities. I made it a rule never to take a note-book with me in public, not that people would have had any idea of what I was doing, but because I felt that somehow a notebook came in between them and me and broke our contact.

I memorized what I saw and heard and wrote it down when I got back to the privacy of my abode. Statistics have a very limited value even when the required numerical data can be obtained - had I asked a Nuer woman how many children she had borne she simply would not have told me, and had I asked a Nuer man how many cattle he possessed he would have, unless he knew me very well indeed, all too likely have withdrawn into an unbroken taciturnity, or perhaps have been violent.

When I say that in my time set interviews were out of the question, private conversations with a few individuals, those whom anthropologists call informants (an unfortunate word) must be excluded. There are certain matters which cannot be discussed in public; there are explanations which cannot be asked for on the spot (as for instance during a funeral or a religious ceremony) without intruding and causing embarrassment; and there are texts to be taken down, which can only be done in seclusion. It is necessary therefore to have confidential informants who are prepared to attend regular sessions, maybe daily; and it is evident that they must be men of integrity, truthful, intelligent, knowledgeable, and genuinely interested in your endeavours to understand the way of life of their people. They will become your friends. Among the Azande I relied mostly on my two personal servants and on two paid informants, but as usual in Africa, there were always people connected with them coming in and out of my home. The one young man whom I came across who was capable of writing Zande was for a time my clerk, having been sacked from the C.M.S. Mission for having married a divorced woman. Among the Nuer and Anuak and Bedouin I never found anyone who could, or would, become an informant in the sense I have set forth above, and so I had to do the best I could, gathering information from all and sundry. One has to be very careful in one's selection of informants, if one has the opportunity to be selective, for it may be found that it is only a particular sort of person who is prepared to act in this capacity, possibly a person who is ready to serve a European as the best way of escaping from family and other social obligations. Such a man may give a slant to one's way of looking at things, a perspective one might not get from others.

Sometimes it is said that the anthropologist is often hoodwinked and lied to. Not if he is a good anthropologist and a good judge of character. Why should anyone lie to you if there is trust between you? And if there is not, you might as well go home. If you are in the hands of an interpreter it is true that it can be a hazard, but if you speak the native language you can check and re-check. It would be improbable in these circumstances, unless everybody is telling the same story, for a man to get away with an untruth. There may be, and very often is, a difference, sometimes a considerable difference of opinion between one informant and another about a fact, or its interpretation, but this does not mean that either is telling a lie. Natives are not all of the same opinion any more than we are; and some are better formed than others. There may, of course, be secret matters about which an informant does not wish to speak and he may then prevaricate and put you off from pursuing a line of inquiry for one reason or another. Till towards the end of my stay among the Azande my inquiries, even among those I knew and trusted most, about their secret societies met with lack of response. Informants, who were members of these societies, pretended to know nothing about them. As they were sworn to secrecy they could scarcely have done otherwise.

However, to an observant anthropologist a lie may be more revealing than a truth, for if he suspects, or knows, that he is not being told the truth he asks himself what is the motive of concealment and this may lead him into hidden depths.

Perhaps here is the place to discuss another question which has frequently been put to me. Does one get the native view about life (and about women) from men only or can one get to know the women as well and see things from their viewpoint? Much depends on the people one is studying and the status of women among them. During an abortive (war broke out) field-study in an Upper Egyptian (Quft) village I never spoke to a woman or even had more than a flitting sight of one at night. Bedouin women in Cyrenaica did not veil and could be conversed with if not with intimacy, at least without embarrassment. The Zande were almost an inferior caste, and unless elderly matrons, shy and tongue-tied. In Nuerland, where women have high status and assert their independence, they would come and talk to me whenever they chose, often at times most inconvenient to me. It seemed to be an endless flirtation. Certainly it was they and not I, who made the going. On the whole I would say that the male anthropologist, not fitting into native categories of male and female and not therefore being likely to behave as a male in certain circumstances might be expected to behave, does not come within their range of suspicions, judgements and codes. In a sense he is, since he lies outside their social life, however much he may try to identify himself with it, sexless. For example, nobody in Zandeland objected to my chatting to their womenfolk, but had an unrelated Zande done so there would have been serious trouble; in pre-European days indemnity would have been demanded or emasculation would have ensued.

It is asking a rather different question, whether a woman anthropologist can obtain more, or better, information about women's habits and ideas than a man can. Here again much depends on the kind of society. Obviously in an urban Moslem society, where women are secluded in hareems only a woman has access to them. But I would say that elsewhere I have seen little evidence that female anthropologists have done more research into woman's position in society and in general their way of life than have male anthropologists. I would add that I doubt whether it is even an advantage for an anthropologist to be accompanied by his wife in the field. They then form a little closed community of their own, making it difficult for both to learn the native language quickly and correctly and to make the required transference which only the feeling of need for close company and friendship can force a man to make. However, I would imagine that the man with a wife in the field gets at least better fed; but since I was not married when I did my research this hardly comes within my reminiscences. But I cannot resist the observation that, as I see it, what eventually ruined our relations with the peoples of the Southern Sudan were motor-cars and British wives.

Another matter which has some bearing on the subject of informants is the anthropologist's relations with other Europeans in the areas in which he is working. In the Southern Sudan in my day this presented no great problem. There were only a handful of administrative officials, a few missionaries and an occasional doctor. With one or two exceptions, I found them kindly, hospitable, and willing to be helpful. Sometimes they were able to give me information which, though it was not always accurate or from an anthropological point of view adequate,

saved me time and enabled me at least to make a start. This was particularly the case with the American Presbyterian missionaries in Nuerland, with Mr. Elliot Smith among the Anuak, and Archdeacon Owen among the Luo of Kenya. In this matter the anthropologist has to be wise. After all he is, so to speak, an intruder into their territory, a territory about which they have often and for a long time been considered, and considered themselves to be, the main or even sole authority. There is no need or purpose in his being condescending, and if he has got the sense not to be, they will not in my experience hold back a willing hand. Let him therefore always remember that, at any rate at the beginning of his research, though he may know more general anthropology than they, they possibly know more about the local ethnographical facts than he. Also let him remind himself that if he cannot get on with his own people he is unlikely to get on with anyone. And, furthermore, they are part of what he is supposed to be studying.

But I must caution students not to accept, above all in religious matters, what they may find in mission literature. The missionary generally only knows a language outside of the context of native life and therefore may well miss the full meaning of words which only that context can give him. The fact that he has been among a people for a long time proves nothing: what counts is the manner and mode of his residence among them and whether God has given him, among other blessings, the gift of intelligence. I have advised caution above all in religious matters. It is, or should be, obvious that since the natives do not understand English the missionary in his propaganda has no option but to look in the native language for words which might serve for such concepts as 'God', 'soul', 'sin' and so forth. He is not translating native words into his own tongue but trying to translate European words, which he possibly does not understand, into words in a native tongue, which he may understand even less. The result of this exercise can be confusing, even chaotic. I have published a note on the near idiocy of English hymns into Zande. Missionaries for instance, have used the word mbori in Zande for 'God', without any clear understanding of what the word means to the Azande themselves. I have been attacked, with a good deal of malice, by Fr. Giorgetti for pointing this out. Even worse things have happened in the Nilotic languages, or some of them. I am not going to pursue this matter further now beyond saying that in the end we are involved in total entanglement, for having chosen in a native language a word to stand for 'God' in their own, the missionaries endow the native word with the sense and qualities the word 'God' has for them. I suppose they could hardly have done otherwise. I have not in the past made this criticism of missionaries because I did not wish to give offence and because I thought any intelligent person could make it for himself.

Here might be a suitable place to discuss a related topic. I do so very briefly because Dr. Beattie in Other Cultures has said a good deal about it, and very well. How much help can the anthropologist get from technical experts who have worked in his area of research—agronomists, hydrologists, botanists, doctors, vets and others? The answer is that he can gain information he cannot himself obtain and that some of it may be relevant to his own problems and lines of inquiry. Only he can judge what has relevance and what has not. Succinctly stated, a physical fact becomes a social one when it becomes important for a community and therefore for the student of it. That the Nile and its tributaries rise in their beds at a certain season of the year is a fact that it is essential for the Nuer, and me, to know,

but exactly why they rise hardly concerns either of us. That the Azande are unable, whether they would wish to or not, to keep domesticated animals, other than dog and fowl, on account of tsetse morsitans is obviously a fact important to know, but knowledge of the pathology of the trypanosomes is not going to shed much light on the social effects of what they do. But one must beware of accepting what anyone tells you about native life, whatever his special qualifications may be. An awful example would be de Schlippe's book on Zande agriculture, for what he describes in it are less Zande modes of cultivation than those imposed on the Azande by the Government of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Had de Schlippe been able to speak and understand the Zande language he might have realised this. Also beware of a joint team of research. It can only lead to waste of time and irritation. Meyer Fortes told me that when he was in such a team in Ghana he spent much of his time and energy in trying to explain to other members of the team the significance of their observations, and when I became a member of a team for study in Kenya I was the only member of it who turned up and did anything. When I did my research in the Sudan there were no agronomists, entomologists, and so on, so I had to do the best I could to be my own expert. Perhaps it was just as well.

All that was required in one's dealings with Europeans in a country ruled by the British were tact and humility. Things have changed. In the first place, it has become increasingly difficult, often impossible, to conduct anthropological research in many parts of the world. Clearly, at present, one would be unlikely to be encouraged to do so in soviet Russia, and at any rate some of its satellites, or in China. In present circumstances I would not, though I speak Arabic, care to try to do research in most of the Arab lands. Even were I given permission to do so, there would be constant supervision and interference. In such countries the anthropologist is regarded as a spy, his knowledge likely to be used in certain circumstances by the Intelligence of his country; and he is also resented as a busybody prying into other people's affairs.

Even when this is not the case and in countries where no acute political issues are involved, there may be, and I think generally is, a hostile attitude to anthropological inquiries. There is the feeling that they suggest that the people of the country where they are made are uncivilized, savages. Anthropology smells to them as cultural colonialism, an arrogant assertion of European superiority - the white man studying the inferior black man; and they have some justification for their suspicions and resentment, for anthropologists have in the past only too readily lent and sold themselves in the service of colonial interests. The late Dr. Nkrumah once complained to me that anthropologists tried to make the African look as primitive as possible: photographing people in the nude and writing about witchcraft and fetishes and other superstitions and ignoring roads, harbours, schools, factories, etc. Indeed, anthropology has, I think rather unfairly, and without its intentions and achievements being really understood, become a bad word for the peoples of new and independent states, perhaps especially in Africa. So I have for many years advised students about to embark on fieldwork to claim that they are historians or linguists, subjects which no one can take offence at; or they can talk vaguely about sociology.

On the question of the length of fieldwork, I would say that a first study of a people takes, if it is to be thorough, up to two years. (My stay among the Azande was twenty months). I do not think it can be much less (in spite of the American way of doing research). Ideally, the programme would be something like a year in the field and then a break of some months to chew the cud on what one has gathered, discussing with friends problems that have arisen in the course of one's work, and sorting out what has been omitted and overlooked during it. Then back to the field for another year. This has not always, or even often, proved to be possible. Furthermore a student must, if anything is to become of his research, have at least another year for writing-up. This, again, is not always, or even often, possible, and the fieldworker may be compelled to accept a post in which he is plunged into teaching, and the results of his research become stale. How often has this not happened?

IV

Obviously the most essential of all things the anthropologist must have in the conduct of his inquiries is a thorough knowledge of the language of the people about whom he is going to tell us. By no other path can their thought (which is what I have myself chiefly been interested in and why I have spent a lifetime in anthropology) be understood and presented. So in the researches I have made, other than the ethnographical surveys (through the medium of Arabic) to oblige Prof. Seligman, I have struggled with and mastered the native language - Zande, Nuer, Anuak, Bedouin, Arabic, and even Luo and Galla to some extent. All English anthropologists today, unlike their predecessors, Rivers, Haddon, Seligman and others, would pay at any rate lip-service to this requirement and would claim that they have spoken native tongue well. They may have done so, but they seldom display evidence of their ability. Even when I have little doubt that they understood languages, a critic may, and probably will, at sometime in the future ask what their credentials are. In the past these could be presented in the form of texts (with translations), but today this cannot be accepted as certain evidence, for as most 'primitive' societies become literate it is possible for the anthropologist, as it was seldom, often never, possible in my day, to find people to write his texts for him and to translate them. I met only one Zande who could write at all coherently, while among the Nuer, Anuak, Bedouin Arabs and other peoples there was no one; so I had to take down texts myself, and in the hard way, there being at that time no tape-recorders, an instrument not always an advantage. Being brought up on Greek and Latin, texts were for me a necessary accomplishment and my passion for them was inflamed by Malinowski who in his turn had been inspired in this matter by the Egyptologist Sir Alan Gardiner. The trouble, however, is to get vernacular texts published - who can or wants to read them? I have done my best for Zande. It has cost me much time and money; and I have given up all hope of publishing others in that language or in other languages.

One of the things I have often been asked is how does an anthropologist make even a start in his study of a primitive society. I must answer the question in the light of my own experience, which may not be quite the same as that of others working in different conditions.² It helped of course that most of my research was carried out in a country, the Sudan, at that time ruled by the British

and with a government and its officers friendly disposed to anthropological research. What helped also, I think, and even more, was that the British were few and far between, that in other words one could be liked or disliked, accepted or rejected, as a person and not as a member of a class of persons (which was very unlike Kenya, where it was hard to decide who were the more unpleasant, the officials or the settlers, both of whom were so loathed by the Africans that it was difficult for a white anthropologist to gain their confidence). But given favourable conditions, such as generally obtained in the Sudan, it has always seemed to me to be perfectly simple to walk into a so-called primitive society and sojourn there. Why should anybody object since one does no harm and is a guest? Would not I feel the same if one of them came to live near me? I did not expect, as some American anthropologists appear to, to be loved. I wanted to give and not to be given to; but I was always received with a kindly welcome, - except among the Nuer, but they were bitterly hostile to the Government at the time. I suppose that if one knows one is going to be so received one just turns up and hopes to get to know people, and in my experience they are happy to be known. It may happen that an anthropologist who has encountered difficulties among one people might not have done so among another. To this extent it could be said that there is an element of chance.

There are really no directions that can be imparted about how one gets to know people. Somehow or another one finds a couple of servants, or more likely they find you, and one or two men who are prepared for a reward to teach you the language; and these people tend to identify themselves with you so that nothing you possess is 'yours' any more, it is 'ours'. Then they get some kudos for having - I was going to say owning - their white man, and are happy to introduce him to their families and friends, and so it goes on. There is an initial period of bewilderment, one can even say of despair, but if one perseveres one eventually breaks through. I have always found that the best way, largely unintentional on my part, of overcoming my shyness and sometimes my hosts' suspicion has been through the children, who do not have the same reserve towards a stranger, nor if it comes to that, did I on my side towards them. So I started among the Azande by getting the boys to teach me games and among the Nuer by going fishing every morning with the boys. I found that when their children accepted me their elders accepted me too. Another tip I venture to give is not to start trying to make inquiries into social matters - family, kin, chieftainship, religion or whatever it may be before the language has to some extent been mastered and personal relationships have been established, otherwise misunderstandings and confusions may result which it may be difficult to overcome. Anyhow if you do what I did, refuse, or was unable, to make use of an interpreter you cannot in the early stages of research inquire into such matters. The way to begin is to work steadily for twelve hours a day at learning the language, making use of everybody you meet for the purpose. That means that you are their pupil, an infant to be taught and guided. Also people easily understand that you want to speak their language, and in my experience in your initial gropings they are sympathetic and try to help you. The strictest teachers were the Nuer, who would correct me, politely but firmly, if I pronounced a word wrongly or was mistaken in its meaning. They were quite proud of their pupil when he began to talk more or less intelligibly. Then, being mute to begin with, one learns each day through the eye as well as by the ear. Here again it seems to people both innocent and reasonable, if sometimes a bit amusing, that you should, since you have sprung up from nowhere, to

join them, take an interest in what is going on around you and learn to do what they do: cultivating, pot-making, herding, saddling camels, dancing, or whatever it may be.

I will only add to these random remarks that I have always advised students going into the field to begin by learning a few new words each day, and by noting materials things. Every social process, every relationship, every idea has its representation in words and objects, and if one can master words and things, nothing can eventually escape one. A final hint: get away from servants and regular informants from time to time, and meet people who do not know you; then you will know how badly you are speaking their tongue!

V

It may well be asked, and it sooner or later has to be, what should one record about a people one makes a study of and how much of the record should one publish. I have always held, and still hold, that one should record in one's notebooks as much as possible, everything one observes. I know that this is an impossible task, but long after, maybe many years after one has left the field and one's memory has faded, one will be glad that one has recorded the most familiar and everyday things - what, how and when people cook, for example. I have now lived to regret that I did not always do so. And how much that goes into the notebooks should go into print? Ideally, I suppose, everything, because what is not published may be, and generally is, forever lost - the picture of a people's way of life at a point of time goes down into the dark unfathomed caves. And one cannot know how valuable what may appear to one at the time to be a trifle may be to a student in the future who may be asking questions which one did not ask oneself. I feel it therefore to be a duty to publish all one knows, though this is a burden hard to be borne - and publishers think so too. One is burdened for the rest of one's life with what one has recorded, imprisoned in the prison one has built for oneself, but one owes a debt to posterity.

It may be here that I should make a protest about anthropologists' books about peoples. A certain degree of abstraction is of course required, otherwise we would get nowhere, but is it really necessary to just make a book out of human beings? I find the usual account of field-research so boring as often to be unreadable - kinship systems, political systems, ritual systems, every sort of system, structure and function, but little flesh and blood. One seldom gets the impression that the anthropologist felt at one with the people about whom he writes. If this is romanticism and sentimentality I accept those terms.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard.

Notes

1. This paper is based on talks given in the Universities of Cambridge and Cardiff.
2. Notes and Queries was certainly of little help to me. I carried my books in my head, but for the record I will say this: before I went to Nuerland I talked over with Max Gluckman the problem of books and we decided that if I could take only one to guide me it should be Lowie's Primitive Society. It was a very good choice.