

The Master Ethnographer: Life and Work of Arthur Maurice 'A. M.' Hocart

Charles D. Laughlin

Carlton University

2018

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Laughlin, Charles D., 2018. "The Master Ethnographer: Life and Work of Arthur Maurice 'A. M.' Hocart", in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris.

URL Bérose : article1262.html

BEROSE Publisher: ISSN 2648-2770

© UMR9022 Héritages (CY Cergy Paris Université, CNRS, Ministère de la culture)/DIRI, Direction générale des patrimoines et de l'architecture du Ministère de la culture. (All rights reserved).

Your use of this article indicates your acceptance of the Bérose site (www.berose.fr) terms and conditions of use, available [here](#).

Visited on 23 April 2024 at 19:25

Arthur Maurice Hocart (1883-1939) was a British sociocultural anthropologist living and working in the same era as A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942). He was one of the most experienced and painstaking ethnographers in the history of anthropology, having spent six years studying various island communities in the South Pacific and having spent most of his life living outside the United Kingdom, including in Sri Lanka and Egypt. Yet despite his extensive ethnographic fieldwork, scientific sophistication, and insightful writings, his work is far less well known than that of his more famous contemporaries. Thomas O. Beidelman (1972) referred to Hocart as a "neglected master," while Meyer Fortes (1967) spoke of him as a "neglected pioneer." Indeed, were it not for the efforts of Lord Raglan (1885-1964: Raglan was Fitzroy Somerset, the 4th Baron Raglan and was a notable anthropologist in his own right) and Rodney Needham (1923-2006), many of his writings would still be gathering dust in obscure journals and unpublished manuscripts (Needham 1970:xxi).

The works of A.M. Hocart should be better known by anthropologists for many reasons, not the least being that he contributed in an insightful way to understanding of the interplay between individual and social psychology on the one hand and culture and social organization on the other. The purpose of this essay is to bring the relevance of Hocart's research and provocative thought to a modern audience of psychological anthropologists where it should have been considered with more attention all along (Evans-Pritchard 1981).

Hocart's Background and Influence

Hocart was born on April 26, 1883 in Etterbeck, Belgium. He attended school in Brussels and at Elizabeth College for boys on Guernsey in the Channel Islands (Needham 1967a, 1970:xvii; Gaillard 2004:47-48). He was educated in the classical fashion and spoke several European languages, including French and German. He attended Exeter College, Oxford, during 1902-1906 where he studied history, Greek and Latin. While in the South Pacific he learned a variety of languages, including Fijian and some languages of the Solomon Islands. Later he learned Sanskrit, Pali, Tamil, and Sinhalese. When he carried out ethnographic research, he did so in the vernacular.

It is difficult to retrace the influences upon Hocart's ethnology with any certainty; he never really addresses this issue in any of his writings. Indeed, he left no autobiographical material at all before leaving for the South Pacific, so far as I can tell. To make matters worse, he was erratic in referencing sources that he must have read and that may have influenced him to some extent. For some peculiar reason, perhaps xenophobia (see Needham 1970: lxxxviii-lxxxix), Hocart gave short shrift to his French contemporaries, especially anthropologists like Emile Durkheim and his nephew Marcel Mauss who had authored important contributions to the study of the evolution of social organization (see especially Mauss' *Essai sur le Don*, or *The Gift*). However, considering his educational background, he was interacting with scholars who considered that anthropology and psychology have much in common (e.g., physician and ethnologist W. H. R. Rivers, physician and ethnographer C. G. Seligman, physician and psychologist William McDougall, and psychologist F. C. Bartlett; see Kuklick 1991: 138). Certain influences are apparent from historical documents, while others must remain circumstantial and inferential (see Charles D. Laughlin, « The Influences Upon Hocart's Thinking and His Influences on Others » in Bérose, Dossier documentaire A. M. Hocart, « Notes et instruments de recherche »). What is clear is that Hocart's ethnology was grounded in his understanding of the human mind, a subject he studied in addition to philosophy at Berlin University (approximately 1906-1908; see Evans-Pritchard 1939, 1970; Needham 1970) where he carried out research on auditory perception with the great British experimental and social psychologist, William McDougall (1871-1938; see Hocart and McDougall 1908).

McDougall was a medical graduate student under and close friend of the famous British ethnologist, neurologist, and psychiatrist, W.H.R. Rivers (1864-1922). Both Rivers and McDougall accompanied Alfred Cort Haddon on the Second Torres Straits Expedition in 1898. Hocart, also a friend of Rivers, along with fellow student Gerald C. Wheeler (1872-1943), accompanied Rivers on the Percy Sladen Trust Expedition to the Solomon Islands in 1908 (Hocart 1922; Stocking 1983: 83, 1992: 29-30, 1995: 118; Hviding and Berg 2014: 10-12). It is not known whether Rivers introduced Hocart to McDougall during Hocart's Berlin days, although Rivers did supervise the latter's research on perception. In fact, it is not clear why McDougall went to Berlin. In any event, McDougall was the first psychologist to formulate a theory of human instinctual behavior. He reasoned that human beings are driven by a finite set of instincts, a view that is clearly reflected both in Rivers' psychology and in Hocart's pivotal notion of "the quest for life."

During Hocart's time at Berlin University, psychology was an off-shoot of philosophy, and was under the heavy influence and supervision of Carl Stumpf (1848-1936) who all but single-handedly founded German psychology (Ash 1998: Chap. 2). Stumpf was a follower of Franz Brentano's (1838-1917) philosophy of consciousness, and in his turn, he had a direct impact upon the phenomenologies of both Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), as well as upon the founders of gestalt psychology, Kurt Koffka (1886-1941), Wolfgang Köhler (1887-1967), and Max Wertheimer (1880-1943). Koffka and Köhler were at Berlin University at the same time as Hocart and doing work with Stumpf. Köhler, like Hocart, was studying the physics of the perception of sound. It was also in Berlin that Hocart undoubtedly encountered both Adolf Bastian's (1826-1905) and Friedrich Ratzel's (1844-1904) brands of German ethnology, as too did Franz Boas (1858-1942), the latter studying for a time with Bastian (Throop and Laughlin 2007). It is not surprising then that, because of these influences, Hocart ended up having more in common with American cultural anthropology than with his British functionalist contemporaries (Stocking 1995: 228; Laughlin 2014a, 2014b).

After leaving Berlin in 1908, Hocart traveled extensively and carried out ethnographic fieldwork in the Pacific under River's initial guidance (the Solomon Islands, Fiji, and other societies of the western South Pacific; see Stocking 1995: 220-228). Hocart was a remarkable linguist, and usually carried out interviews in the vernacular after a very short time among a group. Professor Alan Howard, who carried out ethnographic work among the Polynesian peoples on the island of Rotuma in the Republic of Fiji, mentioned to me: "As an aside, Hocart spent three months on Rotuma, where I have done research since 1959. During that time, he took some 800 pages of notes on a huge range of topics. He began taking notes in English with Rotuman words introduced as he learned them, but after only a few weeks his notes are almost entirely in Rotuman, which is not an easy language phonetically. Unfortunately, he published very little about Rotuma, but his field notes have been immensely helpful to my own research. I am in total awe of him as an ethnographer" (personal communication, September 2012).

Hocart returned to England in 1914 and served with army intelligence in France (1915-1919) during World War I, ending his career as a captain. After the Great War, he took a variety of positions in the colonies, including becoming the Archaeological Commissioner of Ceylon (1920-1925) where he supervised numerous archaeological surveys and excavations. He returned to England to recuperate from a serious illness, and, repeatedly failing to obtain a faculty position at Cambridge, returned to Ceylon where he again suffered ill health. He retired in 1929 and in 1934 moved to Cairo to become a Professor of Sociology at the Egyptian University (the only faculty position he ever held). He remained in ill health and died in Cairo in March 1939 (see obituaries by Evans-Pritchard 1939; Parnavitana 1939; Marett 1939).

During the last decade of his life, Hocart penned some of the most interesting and evocative studies in the history of ethnology and social anthropology, including *Kingship* (1927), *The Progress of Man* (1933), *Kings and Councillors* (1970[1936]), *Caste* (1950) and *Social Origins* (1954),

some of which were published posthumously (see Needham 1967b for a complete bibliography). His essays have been published in several volumes including *The Life-Giving Myth and Other Essays* (1952) and *Imagination and Proof: Selected Essays of A.M. Hocart* (1987). Despite the fact that he gained little headway in British academia (Stocking 1992: 31), he had a significant influence upon both French and British ethnology, including the works of Louis Dumont (1911-1998; see Dumont 1968, 1981), Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009; see Levi-Strauss 1967), Lord Raglan (1885-1964; see Raglan 1936: 171-174 *passim*), Meyer Fortes (1906-1983; see Fortes 1967), Edmund Leach (1910-1989, see Leach 1971), and of course, Rodney Needham (1923-2006; see Needham 1962, 1974).

References Cited

Ash, Mitchell G. 1998 *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture 1890-1967: Holism and the Quest for Objectivity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

Beidelman, Thomas O.. 1972 Neglected Master: A. M. Hocart. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2(3): 311-316.

Dumont, Louis. 1968 A.M. Hocart on Caste – Religion and Power. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 2(1): 45-62.

– 1981 *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E.. 1939 Arthur Maurice Hocart: 1884-March 1939. *Man* 39(August):131.

– 1970 Foreword. *In Kings and Councillors: An Essay in the Comparative Anatomy of Human Society*. A.M. Hocart, ed. (with an Introduction by Rodney Needham). Pp. ix-xi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

– 1981 *A History of Anthropological Thought*. New York: Basic Books.

Fortes, Meyer. 1967 Of Installation Ceremonies. *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 1967(1):5-20.

Gaillard, Gérald. 2004 *The Routledge Dictionary of Anthropologists*. London: Routledge.

Hocart, A.M.. 1922 The Cult of the Dead in Eddystone of the Solomons. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 52(2): 71-112, 259-305.

– 1927 *Kingship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

– 1933 *The Progress of Man: A Short Survey of His Evolution, His Customs and His Works*. London: Methuen.

– 1950 *Caste: A Comparative Study*. New York: Russell and Russell.

– 1952 *The Life-Giving Myth and Other Essays*. Rodney Needham, ed. London: Methuen.

– 1954 *Social Origins* (completed posthumously by Lord Raglan). London: Watts & Co.

– 1970[1936] *Kings and Councillors: An Essay in the Comparative Anatomy of Human Society* (Rodney Needham, ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

– 1987 *Imagination and Proof: Selected Essays of A.M. Hocart* (Rodney Needham, ed.).

Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.

Hocart, A.M., and William McDougall. 1908 Some Data for a Theory of the Auditory Perception of Direction. *British Journal of Psychology* 2(4): 386-405.

Hviding, Edvard, and Cato Berg, eds. 2014 *The Ethnographic Experiment: A. M. Hocart and W. H. R. Rivers in Island Melanesia, 1908*. Vol. 1. New York: Berghahn Books.

Kuklick, Henrika. 1991 *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Laughlin, Charles D.. 2014a A. M. Hocart: Reflections on a Master Ethnologist and His Work. *In Anthropologists and Their Traditions across National Borders: Histories of Anthropology Annual*. Regna Darnell and Frederic W. Gleach, eds. Pp. 41-68. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

– 2014b A. M. Hocart on Ritual: On the Quest for Life, Ceremony, Governance and the Bureaucratic State.' *Journal of Ritual Studies* 28(1): 31-43.

Leach, Edmund R.. 1971 *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1967 *Structural Anthropology*. Garden City: Doubleday.

Marett, R.R.. 1939 A.M. Hocart. *The Stapleton Magazine* 9:289.

Needham, Rodney. 1962 *Structure and Sentiment*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

– 1967a Preface and Biographical Introduction. *In A Bibliography of A.M. Hocart (1883-1939)*. Rodney Needham, ed. Pp. 13-16. Oxford: Blackwell.

– 1967b *A Bibliography of A.M. Hocart (1883-1939)*. Oxford: Blackwell.

– 1970 Editor's Introduction. *In Kings and Councillors: An Essay in the Comparative Anatomy of Human Society*. A.M. Hocart. Pp. xiii-xcix. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

– 1974 *Remarks and Inventions: Skeptical Essays about Kinship*. London: Tavistock.

Paranavitana, S. 1939 A.M. Hocart. *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 34(3):264-268.

Raglan, Lord. 1936 *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*. London: Methuen.

Stocking, George W., Jr.. 1983 *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

– 1992 *The Ethnographer's Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

– 1995 *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology 1888-1951*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Throop, C. Jason, and Charles D. Laughlin. 2007 *Anthropology of Consciousness*. *In Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness*. P. D. Zelazo, M. Moscovitch, and E. Thompson, eds.



Pp. 631-669. New York: Cambridge University Press.