

canon. In both cases the investigator starts with apparently impenetrable phenomena; and in both he needs a fundamental delicacy of perception . . . if he is to detail and assess the complexities of the situation. And yet there is nothing contingent, nothing arbitrary, in the order which he introduces into the incoherent-seeming collection of facts.

- Claude Lévi-Strauss (1961) *A World on the Wane*, London: Hutchinson. (First published in French, 1955) p.60.
- 2 Sigmund Freud (1958) *Dreams in Folklore*, New York: International Universities Press. This essay was written in collaboration with D. E. Oppenheim, a classicist who was briefly associated with the Vienna Psychoanalytical Society. It disappeared from view for a generation before turning up in the possession of Oppenheim's daughter. The work was published in German with a simultaneous English translation.
  - 3 Freud, *Dreams in Folklore*. Citations pp. 63 and 26-7.
  - 4 Loc. cit., pp. 37 and 38.
  - 5 Claude Lévi-Strauss (1988) *The Jealous Potter*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (First published in French, 1985) pp. 188-9.
  - 6 Freud (1953) *The Interpretation of Dreams*, London, Hogarth, pp. 388 and 289. For the list of symbols see section E of chapter six.
  - 7 Freud, *Dreams in Folklore*, citations pp. 45 and 50.
  - 8 See Lévi-Strauss, *The Jealous Potter*, pp. 93-6.
  - 9 See the discussion in Jarich Oosten (1985) *The War of the Gods: The Social Code in Indo-European Mythology*, London: Routledge, p. 4.
  - 10 Freud, *Dreams in Folklore*, p. 38.
  - 11 These stories can be found in chapter three of Lévi-Strauss *The Jealous Potter*.
  - 12 Lévi-Strauss, *The Jealous Potter*, pp. 186-7.
  - 13 See the essay 'Cannibals, Beasts and Twins' in my book (1987) *South Africa and the Anthropologist*, London: Routledge.
  - 14 Adam Kuper and Alan A. Stone (1982) 'The Dream of Irma's Injection: A Structural Analysis', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 139(10): 1225-34.
  - 15 Lévi-Strauss, *The Jealous Potter*, pp. 185-6.
  - 16 Oosten, *The War of the Gods*, p. 8.
  - 17 Loc.cit.
  - 18 Dan Sperber (1975) *Rethinking Symbolism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 84.

## 7

## Audrey Richards: A Career in Anthropology<sup>1</sup>

## I

Unprejudiced, unshockable, in many ways unconventional, Audrey Richards nevertheless operated unselfconsciously by the standards of her parents and their class. Her family belonged to the strikingly endogamous and coherent community Noel Annan called the intellectual aristocracy, a very English intelligentsia, 'wedded to gradual reform of accepted institutions and able to move between the worlds of speculation and government'. Its charter was the reform of the Indian and English civil services on meritocratic principles in the mid nineteenth century. 'No formal obstacle then remained to prevent the man of brains from becoming a gentleman'. Influenced by the Utilitarians, fascinated by the new social sciences, these public-spirited intellectuals 'were agreed on one characteristic doctrine; that the world could be improved by analysing the needs of society and calculating the possible course of its development.'<sup>2</sup> Their theoretical work addressed practical concerns, and their official reports – perhaps their most characteristic genre – sometimes made pioneering intellectual contributions.

Born in London on 8th July, 1899, Audrey was the second of four daughters of Henry Erle (later Sir Erle) Richards and Isabel, the daughter of Spencer Perceval Butler. The Butler side of the family was prototypical of the intellectual aristocracy – Annan took them for one of his case-studies.<sup>3</sup> Spencer Perceval Butler, a double first in classics and mathematics, was a barrister and public servant. Two brothers were headmasters, respectively of Haileybury and Harrow. Among his children were Sir Spencer Harcourt

Butler, a Governor of Burma, and Sir Montagu Butler, Governor of Central Provinces, India, and later Master of Pembroke College, Cambridge, and the father of R.A. Butler, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Master of Trinity College, Cambridge.

H.E. Richards, younger son of a Welsh lawyer who married a local heiress and became Lord Chief Baron, was educated at Eton and qualified as a barrister. He served as legal member of the Indian vice-regal council from 1904 to 1909, and returned to England in 1911 as Chichele Professor of International Law at Oxford University and fellow of All Souls. Audrey once told me that this had been a difficult choice – her father could have expected a glittering career in India – and that it was her mother who insisted that the girls should not be sent alone to England, to boarding school, while the parents remained in India, as was customary. (She also said her father regretted that his four children were all daughters.)

Audrey later recalled that in her younger days her mother 'did much entertaining for the clever, popular, amusing husband. There were large, formal parties at Simla and Calcutta. . . . Those were the days when the children were pulled up and down on rugs by Indian servants to polish the floors; when the father became more and more exuberant; and the mother, the last flower placed, stood at the top of the stairs to receive her guests with that very charming, almost regal, carriage of the head and opened the ball with the Viceroy to the strains of the "Blue Danube".' Her mother she recalled as not only a solicitous and kindly hostess but as a selfless woman and 'one of the sincerest characters I ever met'. And, like Audrey herself, she was very amusing: 'she had all the family's quick sense of the ridiculous, a dry humour and that piercing judgment of character on which so much English fun depends. Her comments on people were a delight.' Her father 'was brilliant, witty, and a born raconteur . . . In his intimate circle he bubbled over with an irresistible flow of pure nonsense and fantasy.'<sup>4</sup>

Audrey attended Downe House School near Newbury, and developed intellectual interests that her parents did

not encourage (rebelliously, she read books during meals, holding them below the table). Her parents were against her going up to university, and they insisted that if she did so, she should study science. She attended Newnham College, Cambridge from 1918 to 1921, and read for the Natural Sciences tripos.

Coming down from Cambridge she taught for a year at her old school, then worked as assistant to Gilbert Murray, the classicist, who remained a friend and who was to read and criticise her doctoral thesis. (In a spoof reference in 1924 he wrote, 'As for papers, she will hide them so as no inspector could find them . . .')<sup>5</sup> For eighteen months she did relief work in Frankfurt, at a Friends' Ambulance Unit Family Welfare Settlement, and began to take a practical interest in problems of nutrition. Between 1924 and 1928 she was secretary to the labour department of the the League of Nations Union in London. ('I was one of the idealists who thought war could be prevented by the League of Nations. We used to speak in its favour on Hampstead Heath, in Methodist chapels, and in schools etc.')

Her two younger sisters married, both to fellows of All Souls, but her elder sister Gwynedd, who also remained unmarried, embarked on a career as a social worker. Audrey was always close to Gwynedd (who spent some months with her in the field among the Bemba), and it must have seemed that she was drifting into a similar career; yet given her background she could hardly have doubted that academic research might contribute to welfare. Certainly neither she nor her relatives had any doubt that she would have to earn a living.

Influenced by the socialist political scientist Graham Wallas, father of a Newnham friend, she decided to begin postgraduate study at the London School of Economics. According to a letter from Wallas to the anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski, asking Malinowski to supervise her work, she intended to treat the history of European ideas about 'nature' and 'freedom' 'in relation to the permanent facts of human biology'.<sup>7</sup> Malinowski took her on but persuaded her to change her topic, and between 1928 and 1930

she worked under his supervision on a doctorate, based on published sources, teaching anthropology at the same time at Bedford College.

## II

Bronislaw Malinowski, himself a transplanted member of the Polish intelligentsia, dominated social anthropology at the London School of Economics from 1924 (when he took up a position as Reader at the School, shortly after completing his first great Trobriand monograph) to 1939. The LSE was associated with new ideas of social improvement, and was committed to the application of the social sciences. Still somewhat marginal, not yet entirely respectable, it offered an ideal environment for an ambitious and creative outsider, and was more hospitable than the ancient universities to the aspirations of women. Malinowski had developed new methods of intensive ethnographic fieldwork, and was propagating a theory he called 'functionalism'. He 'had no doubt about his greatness', according to Edmund Leach, also one of his students, and saw himself as 'a missionary, a revolutionary innovator in the field of anthropological method and ideas'.<sup>8</sup> Volatile and charismatic, 'a man whose expressions became more extreme with opposition,' as Audrey Richards noted, he gathered around him a brilliant group of mature students, often graduates in other fields, and always including a large proportion of women.

Malinowski demanded what he called loyalty, but he engaged his students in debate and challenged them to apply his theory of culture to ethnographic materials, in particular his own Trobriand data. 'The idea,' as Audrey Richards has explained, was 'that rites, beliefs, and customs, however extraordinary they appear to an observer, actually fill "needs", biological, psychological, and social.' Seminar discussions had 'the fascination of a game for which the *chose donnée* was the necessity of the custom or institution under discussion to the individual, the group or the society. If the Trobriand islanders did it, or had it, it must be assumed to

be a necessary thing for them to do or have.' In consequence, 'discussions of the function of aspects or institutions of tribal life led directly into field-work material . . . and we began actually to visualise ourselves "in the field"'.<sup>9</sup>

But before going into the field students were required to write library theses, based on the ethnographic literature. Audrey's background in biology was broadly relevant to the Malinowskian project, which insisted that culture was rooted in biological needs, and she chose a topic in which both biology and culture were implicated: nutrition. Malinowski had dealt with the domestication of sex in his *Sexual Life of Savages*, which appeared in 1929, but in the very first sentence of her book Audrey Richards pronounced: 'Nutrition as a biological process is more fundamental than sex'.<sup>10</sup> Nutrition was also one of the classic subjects of the social surveys favoured by reformers in Britain, and in the 1920s it had become a subject of rapidly growing interest in academic and government circles. Institutes of Nutrition were set up in Aberdeen and Cambridge, and in 1927 with the assistance of the Dietetics Committee of the Economic Advisory Council the Aberdeen Institute collaborated with the Kenya Medical Service on studies of Kikuyu and Masai nutrition.

However, the functionalist approach promised a fresh perspective. First, Audrey Richards insisted, 'nutrition in human society cannot be considered as a biological instinct alone.'<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the study of nutrition could not be restricted to a review of agricultural techniques or an analysis of diets. Drawing on the ethnographic literature on the Southern Bantu peoples, she argued that social institutions are organised essentially to meet this fundamental physiological need, and that a 'whole series of institutions and relationships' constitute 'the *nutritional system*'.<sup>12</sup>

This was an orthodox Malinowskian formula, and Audrey Richards was to remain an orthodox Malinowskian, always passionately loyal to him. It is true that she was sensitive to one of the fundamental difficulties of the approach: that it made comparison very difficult. (Later she experimented with structural methods that facilitated comparison.) However, she never accepted the other conventional criticism of

functionalism, 'the charge often made by administrators,' she noted, 'that functional anthropologists were not prepared to allow for any changes in the tribes they were studying.'<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, she was convinced that the type of information and analysis that functionalist ethnography provided would be of great value to policy-makers in the colonies, and that it could indeed illuminate the problems of social change.

### III

Audrey Richards and Lucy Mair (step-daughter of Sir William Beveridge, the director of the LSE), another of Malinowski's most loyal students, were among the first anthropologists to carry out applied research in Africa. With Malinowski's blessing, they hoped to bring the insights of functionalist anthropology to bear on the problems of colonial administration.

Audrey's fieldwork proposal, dated July, 1929, begins with a conventional enough Malinowskian statement of intent: 'To make an intensive study of the social institutions, customs and beliefs of the Awemba tribe . . . of N.E. Rhodesia, with special reference to the part played by women in tribal and economic life, the nature and importance of the family system and the marriage contract, and problems connected with the rearing and education of children.' This should not be read as a precociously feminist proposal. Rather, Malinowski was inclined to think that women ethnographers would find it easier to study women. ('As long ago as 1930,' she recalled in a lecture on feminist anthropology in 1974, 'I was sent to study a matrilineal society because it was thought particularly appropriate for a woman anthropologist to study women. When I got there you will not be surprised to hear I found as many men as women!')<sup>14</sup>

In any case, she immediately turned to the potential application of the study. 'I believe such work to be of immediate importance in view of the proposed extensions of the railway system to the Plateau area, and the further development of the copper resources of the district. Both these factors are

likely to raise important administrative problems in native government, and to lead almost inevitably to new sources of conflict between the white and black races.'<sup>15</sup>

From May 1930 to July 1931, and again from January 1933 to July 1934, Audrey did fieldwork in what was then Northern Rhodesia, among the Bemba, who occupy the north-eastern plateau of modern Zambia. In the 1930s the Bemba numbered between 115,000 and 140,000, but lived in small villages dispersed over a very large territory. Their kinship system was indeed matrilineal, they practised shifting cultivation, and they were organised into numerous chiefdoms under a highly ritualised but not very powerful paramount chief. Pacified without much resistance in the last years of the nineteenth century, they had accepted the imposition of British colonial government. In return, they had been allowed to retain their system of chieftainship. Nevertheless, taxation in cash became general from 1905, and from 1914 large numbers of men were engaged in migrant labour in the mines of Katanga and Southern Rhodesia, and from 1920 in the Copperbelt. By 1914 between twenty and thirty per cent of the men were away from their villages as labour migrants, and food production at home began to suffer in consequence. In 1929 the Native Authority and Native Courts Ordinance introduced Indirect Rule.<sup>16</sup> Audrey was intrigued by the rapid social changes, even if she was perhaps unaware that they had been in train for a generation before her arrival. 'I really think they are an interesting people,' she wrote to Malinowski from Chilonga in September, 1930, in another letter preserved in the Malinowski archive at the LSE, 'the queer mix up of a conquering people who had only been installed for 50 years in this country when the first white people came, and are now being transformed by the mining industry 500 miles off.'

Malinowski's students were expected to learn the vernacular and to live in close association with the people they were studying. Audrey made long forays into the villages, but she used the estate of the colonial grandee, Stewart Gore-Browne, as her base, and never pretended that she had 'gone native': 'in an area where the only white people consist

of three main classes – Government officials, missionaries, and traders – and where the tribe itself is organized on an autocratic basis . . . the anthropologist will find it impossible to be treated as an equal by the natives.' She was accorded the status of Chieftainess, and learnt to use the appropriate Bemba royal speech conventions. 'This position of prestige prevented my attaining any real position of equality with the people but was an advantage in carrying out village censuses when it was helpful to be able to exert a certain amount of authority.'<sup>17</sup>

She lived in a tent, spending between three and six weeks in each village. On the move, she must have made a striking impression:

Off the main road you must travel from village to village by footpaths, the white man or woman ahead on a bicycle or on foot, and the most motley procession of carriers behind. A native can carry a 60 or 70lb load on his head, and seems to have an infinite capacity for hanging incongruous objects together with strands of bark. . . . Behind this will follow your tent, and a clatter of cooking equipment, while the kitchen boy brings up the rear with a live chicken strung by its feet round the barrel of your rifle, and a couple of flat-irons in a basin on their heads.<sup>18</sup>

Lorna Gore-Browne, who accompanied her on some expeditions, reported in a letter in 1933, 'Audrey never fusses . . . and is able to laugh and laugh when things go just a little wrong.'<sup>19</sup> She was one of the outstanding ethnographers of her generation, her gregariousness, her stamina, her acuteness of social observation and above all her ability to laugh and make people laugh with her carrying her triumphantly through the inevitable crises and periods of fatigue and discouragement. The difficulties were always reported as farce:

There is the difficulty of taking photographs and simultaneously writing notes during rites that take place in bush and village and on the road between the two. There is

also the factor of exhaustion. Songs and dances often went on until two and three in the morning. On such occasions the company is usually elated by beer and accustomed to the heat of a small hut about eight feet in diameter filled with twenty or thirty people and an enormous fire. The observer is dead sober, nearly stifled, with eyes running from the smoke, and straining all the time to catch the words from the songs screeched around her, and to transcribe them by the firelight that penetrates occasionally through the mass of human limbs.<sup>20</sup>

A sober Bemba testimonial is available from an occasional field assistant, the evangelist Paul Bwembya Mushindo. 'I was very much impressed by the character of Dr A.I. Richards who was a European and purely English lady, who treated me, who was a pure African and her servant, very kindly. She had very good will to all African people. She was like a sister to me . . . Dr Richards thought I was helping her in her duties . . . I felt I was in a university for study. In this way Dr Richards learned less, but I felt I had learned much more without my teacher, Dr Richards, realising it.'<sup>21</sup>

The first generation of Malinowski's students were encouraged to make a rounded study of a culture, rather than to concentrate on a particular facet of social life. It was only on her return to London that Audrey Richards decided that the focus of her first Bemba monograph should be, once again, nutrition. This had not been her original plan, and she had not organised her fieldwork systematically to collect material on the production and use of foods. Rather, very characteristically, the topic emerged as part of an interdisciplinary project with a strong 'applied' cast to which Audrey decided to subordinate her choice of subject-matter.

In 1935 she had taken the chair of the Diet Committee of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures, a 'small group of anthropologists, medical and nutritional experts', and she persuaded them that social and cultural information should be included in the nutritional surveys being planned. 'It was therefore suggested that it would be instructive if I wrote a short book describing, in

the case of one particular tribe . . . the variety of different factors, whether economic, political, legal, or religious which actually affected the people's diet. The result is in effect a description of the whole economic life of the tribe.'<sup>22</sup> It is more, being virtually a complete ethnography of the Bemba with an emphasis on the economy. In her first book she had 'tried to prove that hunger was the chief determinant of human relationships'. Her aim in the second was rather 'to show how the biological facts of appetite and diet are themselves shaped by the . . . cultural mechanisms for producing, preparing and dividing food.'<sup>23</sup> This is an intriguing shift of emphasis, but the book was still a characteristic Malinowskian ethnography. Its specific model was the first volume of Malinowski's masterpiece, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, his account of Trobriand husbandry that had appeared in 1935. There was, however, one major difference: unlike Malinowski, she situated her ethnography firmly in the current, colonial context.

In 1940 Audrey Richards published another monograph that was aimed primarily at a readership of colonial administrators: *Bemba Marriage and Present Economic Conditions*, which was published by the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Northern Rhodesia. Because of the time and place of the publication it never became widely known, yet it is one of the most sociologically sophisticated accounts of the effects of migrant labour on African family life, illustrating and probing the thesis that while industrial change created similar problems in many parts of the continent, 'the reactions of the different Native tribes . . . are not identical.'<sup>24</sup>

Her first major theoretical article dates from the same period, appearing in 1940 in a famous collection, *African Political Systems*, edited by Meyer Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard. She tried to place the Bemba political system in a more general framework of African government, drawing out the universal features and indicating what was particular about the Bemba; but what is perhaps most remarkable about this essay, in contrast to her contemporary 'applied' publications, is that the influence of British colonial government, and economic and religious change, are noted only in a

concluding section, while the Bemba are presented for the most part in a timeless, 'traditional' mode. It is as if she felt that academic anthropology need not address the impact of colonial overrule, while 'applied' anthropology dealt with the realities of social and cultural change. Similarly, her contribution to *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, in 1950, ignored the urgent problems of family change with which she had been concerned in her essay on Bemba marriage. This essay is, however, of far greater intrinsic interest than her earlier paper on political systems, presenting as it does a comparative (and notably structural) account of the problems common to matrilineal systems in Central Africa. It greatly influenced thinking about matrilineal kinship.

While she was writing up, Audrey Richards taught at the LSE: and now her personal relationship with Malinowski came to a crisis. She had become an intimate friend both of Malinowski himself and of his chronically ill wife, Elsie. After Elsie's death, in 1935, 'Audrey and Bronio came very close to marrying', according to Malinowski's daughter, Helena. However:

their temperaments were perhaps too much alike; Audrey could not, as my mother had been able to, stand back as it were from his volcanic nature. Audrey tried to intervene for us three children, to see that Bronio fulfilled his fatherly duties, but what he demanded from his friends, especially in the unhappy times right after Elsie's death, was total, uncritical support of all his actions. . . . So their marriage plans came – alas – to nothing. His daughters have always wished that they had married.<sup>25</sup>

It is possible that Audrey would have undertaken the marriage only in the interests of the Malinowski daughters, but Raymond Firth attests (personal communication) that both Audrey and Malinowski had other serious attachments at the time. In the event, Malinowski moved to Yale in 1939 and remarried. He died suddenly in the United States in 1942.

Audrey moved to South Africa, teaching from 1937 to 1940 at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

Characteristically she both began new fieldwork and forged friendships with interesting and powerful people, among them the Prime Minister Jan Smuts, at whose farm, Irene, near Pretoria, she was a regular guest. Intermittent fieldwork among a Tswana group in the Northern Transvaal yielded only one paper, but it is a brilliant piece, analysing the revival of 'tribalism' in an area in which traditional cultures had been destroyed a generation earlier. She argued that the movement had nothing to do with nostalgia for a golden age, or with traditionalism, but was rather to be explained as a manoeuvre in the competition for land rights.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in a better-known essay on the spread of anti-witchcraft movements in Central Africa, she had argued that they were a response to cultural dislocation and, above all, the social conflicts and uncertainties generated by industrialisation.<sup>27</sup>

## IV

'I mean to come back next Xmas,' she wrote from Johannesburg to Raymond Firth in December, 1938, 'and then if nothing else turns up go back for another two years at least. I don't want to stay here all my life and miss much as you may imagine, but it was good to get away and I want to do one bit of fieldwork and get something done at the university here.' However, the war intervened and she returned to London as a temporary principal at the Colonial Office. Working with Lord Hailey, she participated in the reorientation of research policy in the colonies.

She became special lecturer in Colonial Studies at the LSE from 1944-5, and continued as a Reader from 1946 to 1950, but she also served as a member of the Colonial Social Science Research Council. (The appointment of Raymond Firth as Secretary was largely her initiative.) Various career paths were now open to her, but Audrey felt that at long last British African policy-makers had come to appreciate that they could benefit from expert social science advice, and this presented a great opportunity. 'It is said that youth is the time of enthusiasm,' she wrote later, reflecting on this time, 'but I

believe there is no sense of commitment so great as that of middle-aged men and women who suddenly find themselves in a position to do the good they have been trying to do for many years.'<sup>28</sup>

One of the most important initiatives of the CSSRC was the establishment of research institutes in the African colonies. In 1950 she went out to Makerere University in Uganda, as director of the newly-established East African Institute of Social Research. The model for the new institute was the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Northern Rhodesia under the direction of Max Gluckman. She later wrote that 'both Gluckman's Institute and mine were really experiments in organising field research'.<sup>29</sup> Both also promoted interdisciplinary research, and both were committed to applied studies of interest to colonial governments. Audrey's gregarious, hospitable style nevertheless gave the Makerere Institute a distinctive tone. 'Talented cuisine, great entertainer on a shoe string, informally without fuss,' notes one of her colleagues, Aidan Southall. 'Shrewd vagueness covering sharp precision . . . Catholic in friendship with Ganda princes, chiefs, clerks, as well as the humble . . . Her close friendship with Sir Andrew Cohen [Governor of Uganda] spilled over on to EAISR and made for a unique period of discourse between high government and intellectuals black and white.'<sup>30</sup>

Audrey divided up the work between anthropologists already in the field (coopting some who were only notionally, if at all, answerable to her) and members of the institute staff, almost regardless of their formal specialisms, and drawing in, as equals, her secretary Jean Robin and locally recruited interpreters and field assistants. She would chivvy her collaborators to write up, in the last resort commandeering their notes and writing them up herself. It was in this way that the major studies of her Uganda period were produced, most notably *Economic Development and Tribal Change: A Study of Immigrant Labour in Buganda* (1954) and *East African Chiefs* (1960). Many years after she had left East Africa she organised a comparable study that resulted in the book, *Subsistence to Commercial Farming in Present Day*

*Buganda* (1973). These studies mobilised all her talents for administration, teaching, fieldwork and synthesis, however much she complained that they took her away from the 'theoretical' work she hoped to complete, especially when she found herself filling in for colleagues who had not delivered their promised chapters.

While at Makerere she did, nevertheless, find the time to complete her most extensive 'theoretical' study, *Chisungu* (1956). This is an account of female initiation among the Bemba, based largely on observations of a single ceremony through which two girls passed. The account is painstaking and detailed, and the analysis has often been praised, but the 'functionalist' analytic framework already seemed dated. The ritual is very largely presented as it appears to the outside observer, the actors' experience and native exegesis being subordinated to the sociological and psychological interpretations of the anthropologist. Just as the book appeared, Victor Turner was beginning his study of initiation ceremonies and other rituals in another Zambian tribe, the Ndembu. In the early sixties he began to publish richly documented, phenomenological analyses, which were to transform the study of African ritual behaviour, making Audrey Richards's study – which had, after all, been conceived thirty years earlier – seem old-fashioned and inadequate. A telling instance is the contrast between Richards's straightforward and one-dimensional account of the symbolism of the *musuku* tree and Turner's famous exegesis of the symbolism of the same tree.<sup>31</sup> Audrey was uneasily aware of these problems, but she explained that her ethnography was necessarily less specialised than Turner's, since she was working in the Malinowskian tradition of 'multi-purpose' ethnography, in which the fieldworker was expected to cover all the important social institutions.

I once tried to list the symbolic meanings of the immense variety of trees, bushes and plants used in Bemba magic. I got surface meanings for some thirty-four of these and was beginning to get some of the deeper associations, but I had to give up the attempt since I found it impossible

to combine this with the study of the main outline of the social structure, institutions and beliefs of the people in which I was engaged.<sup>32</sup>

## V

In 1956 she returned to a fellowship at Newnham College, Cambridge, where she later served as Vice-Principal. She held the Smuts Readership in Commonwealth Studies in the University from 1961-6, and built up the University's African Studies Centre, lobbying for its formal recognition and becoming its first director. She also supervised ethnographic research, carried out largely by Cambridge students, on the small Essex village, Elmdon, in which she lived for most of this period, introducing aspirant anthropologists to the realities of fieldwork and finally facing up to the fact that if she did not herself arrange for the collation of the material it would never be written up. She also produced a pamphlet for the villagers on the genealogical studies that had been made.

She was, however, a marginal figure in the social anthropology department at the University, perhaps largely because she and the Professor, Meyer Fortes, did not get on. She was, of course, a greatly respected figure, and much loved by most of those who worked with her. Her career had been a distinguished one. Her honours included a CBE for her work in Uganda, election to the British Academy, and the Presidency of the Royal Anthropological Institute. Nevertheless, in these Cambridge years she was not a major intellectual influence in the discipline.

It has been suggested that she was undervalued, even discriminated against, because she was a woman.<sup>33</sup> She herself resisted this suggestion, and any handicap she laboured under as a woman was at least counter-balanced by the advantages of her background and connections. 'Her upper-class background no doubt added to her self-confidence,' wrote her friend Edmund Leach, 'her reputation for modesty was perhaps deceptive. She was quick to make the

most of unexpected opportunities but sometimes authoritarian in her treatment of collaborators.<sup>34</sup> This is broadly accurate, although according to her nephew Dr T. Faber her background was rather 'upper-middle class'. He added that she was 'certainly privileged in being born into a secure, intelligent and comfortably-off clan. . . . But all the Butlers were made to feel that they had to work, and my grandmother and my mother were both, by training and inclination, economical women in a typically bourgeois way.' In a later letter to me he emphasised, however, that 'a lifetime spent in universities' was more important to Audrey than the particular circumstances of her childhood.

Audrey was also a critic of the feminist movement that developed within anthropology in the seventies. She argued against the ethnocentrism and special pleading that she discerned in the feminist critique, and insisted on 'the duty of the field-anthropologist to distinguish very clearly when she considers the position of women between what shocks her and what shocks "them".' Are women generally discriminated against? Societies like the Bemba clearly distinguish between 'the reproductive period of a woman's life and the rest. In a sense it would be true to say that Bemba regarded the individual who was producing and rearing children as a woman and the female persons who were not doing so as men.' A similar distinction might come to be accepted in the West. 'We may see a clearer division between women who want children and those who are willing to give them up for professional or other reasons.'<sup>35</sup> This was the sacrifice she had made herself, but it had freed her to enjoy a rewarding career.

Yet within her chosen career she had made a further choice, which she did believe had a deleterious effect on her reputation. This was her primary commitment to 'applied' as against 'theoretical' research. She was prepared to argue that applied research could yield theoretical dividends. 'I personally learnt more about the political organisation of the Ganda while conducting an immigrant labour survey which could be described as "applied anthropology", than I might have done by a "theoretical" study of the political

system because I attended local council meetings at all levels to discuss the project.'<sup>36</sup> However, she felt that her applied work was not properly appreciated by her colleagues, and that it had robbed her of the time she wanted to devote to her pure research. *Chisungu* was finally completed, but not the promised study of Bemba royal ritual, on which she published only a few papers rather than the major monograph she had in mind.

Her theoretical essays were sometimes influential, most notably the classic paper, 'Some Types of Family Structure among the Central Bantu' (1950). Nevertheless, the theoretical framework which she generally retained, rooted in Malinowski's functionalism, was not favoured by the next generation of anthropologists, and she did not sympathise with the very general shift from the study of 'function' to the explication of 'meaning'. As Edmund Leach has remarked, 'She showed little sympathy for post-functionalist developments in social anthropology.'<sup>37</sup> This was perhaps surprising, since she increasingly came to concern herself with the study of ritual; but if Victor Turner neglected her work so did she his, and that of other younger theorists in the field, like Lévi-Strauss and Geertz (although in general she followed closely debates within British social anthropology).

Moreover, while her 'applied' studies were distinguished by their ethnographic realism, and their acute attention to processes of social change, the theoretical papers seemed to shut out the colonial realities. Perhaps it was the legacy of functionalism, or the example of the Trobriand monographs, but when she wrote what she called 'theoretical' studies Audrey Richards adopted the pastoral idiom of the 'ethnographic present'. The richly nuanced accounts of social change in her 'applied' studies were informed by shrewd, pragmatic, if often *ad hoc* sociological analysis, yet they too lacked a crucial dimension, for criticism of the colonial governments could not be risked, at least in print.

Audrey Richards was nothing if not a realist, and she had an intuitive understanding of the official mind. She was well aware that African colonial administrators might accept expert advice on matters of practical policy, but that they

were not open to criticisms on fundamentals. She thought it obvious that the anthropologist was not in the business of criticising colonial governments. 'I tried very hard to follow the precepts then taught by Malinowski as to the complete neutrality that was desirable for a fieldworker. I made it my business not to criticize European or African officials or to express strong views on policy.'<sup>38</sup> In any case, however successful in their own terms, the interest of the applied studies was ultimately both short-term and local. They were addressed to 'social problems' defined by the preoccupations of government officials, and they were largely forgotten with the end of the British Empire in Central and Eastern Africa in the early sixties. The new universities and research institutions, and the international aid agencies, put their faith, for a while, in five-year plans, built around large-scale capital projects: exercises in 'planification' that had little room for anthropologists.

Moreover, in the new African states, anthropologists were discredited precisely on account of their association with the colonial regimes. This disconcerted Audrey, and she defended the record of applied anthropology and of the colonial welfare programmes more generally. 'We were all "do gooders"', she wrote, 'trying to organize research which we felt to be helpful for "welfare and development", the term used in the Colonial Development and Welfare Act. Many would deny the validity of our belief . . . especially those who feel that cultural and structural differences between the peoples inhabiting the ex-colonies should be obliterated as soon as possible.'<sup>39</sup>

This suggests that she had limited sympathy with African nationalism and with the African intellectuals' critique of 'tribalism' and of colonial motives. There is little in her writings, or even her correspondence, to suggest that she appreciated the significance of the post-war nationalist movement. Her main political study of this period, *East African Chiefs* (1960), was formulated in classic colonial terms.

Why is the selection of these chiefs described as a problem?  
Because British administrators have considered themselves

to be committed to a policy of raising the standards of living of the people under their rule and of introducing something like Western types of social service.<sup>40</sup>

There is little in the book about the colonial administration as a whole, which her American colleague and friend Tom Fallers had described so acutely in one Uganda region, Busoga.<sup>41</sup> Two years after *East African Chiefs* appeared, Uganda was independent. I taught anthropology at Makerere in the late sixties, and this study longer seemed to be relevant to the political problems of the country.

\* \* \*

Ironic, self-mocking, a hilarious companion, famous in Uganda for her party trick of lighting matches with her toes, Audrey was nevertheless a most serious and moral person. 'I have spent most of my life sucked into "do-good" things,' she once wrote to a friend.<sup>42</sup> In her last years, her health fragile, Audrey willingly accepted responsibility for an old friend who was suffering from alcoholism. One evening she tried to carry her upstairs, fell and cracked a bone in her leg. But when I visited her she was buoyant. She knew she was needed, she said. If she thought she could no longer be of use to others, then she would rather die. Only a few days before her death, she told a close friend that she was ready to die because 'there is no one any longer for whom I can do anything'. She lived until 1984.

# Notes

- 1 I am very grateful to Professor Sir Raymond Firth and to Dr T.E. Faber, for allowing me to consult and cite Audrey Richards's letters in the collection of the London School of Economics, and to Dr Angela Raspin, the Keeper of Manuscripts, for her kind help. Unless otherwise indicated the letters cited are to be found in this collection. Professor Firth and Dr Faber also wrote very helpful comments on an earlier draft, as did Professors Jean La Fontaine and Andrew

Roberts. Professor Roberts also directed me to valuable historical sources on the Bemba and corrected some key passages in the original draft. Walter Elkan and Aidan Southall, former colleagues of Audrey Richards in East Africa, answered a number of my questions.

- A full bibliography of Audrey Richards's publications by T. M. Luhrmann appears in Shirley Ardener (ed.) (1992) *Persons and Powers of Women in Diverse Cultures*, New York and Oxford: Berg, pp. 51-7. This bibliography is also published in a special commemoration number of *Cambridge Anthropology* (10:1 1985) which includes memoirs of Audrey Richards by Helena Wayne, Raymond and Rosemary Firth, Sir Richard Faber, and several of her former students and associates. Marilyn Strathern wrote a substantial obituary, 'Audrey I. Richards, 1899-1984', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 82 (1993): 439-53.
- 2 N.G. Annan (1955) 'The Intellectual Aristocracy' in J.H. Plumb (ed.) *Studies in Social History*, London: Longmans.
  - 3 Loc. cit., pp. 269-73.
  - 4 The citations are from a memoir of her mother written by Audrey Richards and kindly put at my disposal by Dr T. Faber.
  - 5 Duncan Wilson (1987) *Gilbert Murray OM. 1866-1957*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 350.
  - 6 Letter to Adam Kuper, 13th June, 1978.
  - 7 Letter (in the LSE collection) from Graham Wallas to Malinowski, dated 13.11.1926.
  - 8 E.R. Leach (1957) 'The Epistemological Background to Malinowski's Empiricism' in Raymond Firth (ed.) *Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 124.
  - 9 Audrey Richards (1957) 'The Concept of Culture in Malinowski's Work,' in R. Firth (ed.), *Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 18-19.
  - 10 Audrey I. Richards (1932) *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe: A Functional Study of Nutrition among the Southern Bantu*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 1.
  - 11 Loc. cit. p. 211.
  - 12 Loc. cit. p. 213.
  - 13 Richards, 'The Concept of Culture in Malinowski's Work', p. 19.

- 14 Audrey Richards (1974) 'The 'Position' of Women - an Anthropological View', *Cambridge Anthropology*, Vol 1, No. 3: 7.
  - 15 The fieldwork proposal is in Audrey Richards's student file in the LSE archive.
  - 16 On the history of the Bemba, see Andrew Roberts (1973) *A History of the Bemba*, London: Longmans. Professor Roberts comments: 'Audrey, of course, may have been unaware of this background when she arrived in 1930. I don't think, indeed, she acknowledges it anywhere; and she doesn't seem to refer at all to the extended study of the N. Rhodesian economy (including labour migration) made in 1932 by Austin Robinson, who was already a Cambridge lecturer in economics (and a member of the Intellectual Aristocracy - his father was Dean of Winchester . . . ) I do wonder whether Audrey - at least in the 1930's - regarded even contemporary scholarship of this sort as 'knowledge' - let alone the testimony of 19th century travellers!'
  - 17 Audrey Richards (1939) *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia: An Economic Study of the Bemba Tribe*, London: Oxford University Press for International Institute of African Languages and Cultures, pp. 12-13.
  - 18 Audrey Richards (1949) 'Colonial Future: the Need for Facts,' *Spectator*, 4 February 1949).
  - 19 Cited in Robert I. Rotberg (1977) *Black Heart: Gore-Browne and the Politics of Multiracial Zambia*, Berkeley: California University Press. This book gives a good account of the expeditions the two women made together.
  - 20 Audrey Richards (1939) *Land Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia*, pp. 12-13.
  - 21 Paul Bwembya Mushindo (1973) *The Life of a Zambian Evangelist*, Lusaka: University of Zambia Institute of African Studies, Communication no.9., p. 28.
  - 22 Audrey Richards, *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia*, Preface.
- For appreciations of Audrey Richards's contributions in the field of nutrition see Jo Gladstone (1986) 'Significant Sister: Autonomy and Obligation in Audrey Richards' Early Fieldwork', *American Ethnologist*, 13: 338-62; Jo Gladstone (1987) 'Venturing on the Borderline: Audrey Richards' Contribution to the Hungry Thirties Debate in Africa', *Bulletin of the Society for the Social History of Medicine*, no.40; and Jo Gladstone (1992) 'Audrey I. Richards: Africanist and Humanist' in

- Shirley Ardener (ed.) *Persons and Powers of Women in Diverse Cultures*, New York and Oxford: Berg.
- 23 Audrey Richards, loc.cit.
- 24 Audrey Richards (1940) *Bemba Marriage and Present Economic Conditions*, Livingstone: Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (Rhodes-Livingstone Papers, no.4, p. 7.
- 25 Helena Wayne (1985) 'Bronislaw Malinowski: the Influence of Various Women on His Life and Works', *American Ethnologist*, 13 (3).
- 26 Audrey Richards (1942) 'Some Causes of a Revival of Tribalism in South African Native Reserves', *Man*, no.41: 89-90.
- 27 Audrey Richards (1935) 'A Modern Movement of Witchfinders', *Africa*, 8: 448-61.
- 28 Audrey Richards (1937) 'The Colonial Office and the Organisation of Social Research', *Anthropological Forum*, 4 (2): 168-89 (p. 173).
- 29 Letter to Firth, 27th May, 1984, in Firth papers, LSE collection.
- 30 Letter to Adam Kuper, 12th April, 1994.
- 31 For an early statement see V.W. Turner (1961) *Ndembu Divination: its Symbolism and Techniques*, Manchester: Manchester University Press for the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute.
- 32 Audrey Richards (1967) 'African Systems of Thought: An Anglo-French Dialogue', *Man*, 2 (2): 286-98 (p. 292). She is making a distinction between what she terms 'British' and 'French' approaches to fieldwork, but is in fact describing the Malinowskian tradition. At a later point in the same paper (p.296) she specifically distances herself from Turner's approach.
- 33 See, e.g., Jo Gladstone (1992) 'Audrey I. Richards: Africanist and Humanist', in Shirley Ardener (ed.) *Persons and Powers of Women in Diverse Cultures*, New York and Oxford: Berg.
- 34 E.R. Leach (1990) 'Richards, Audrey Isabel (1899-1984)', in *Dictionary of National Biography, 1981-5*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 338.
- 35 Audrey Richards (1974) 'The "Position" of Women - an Anthropological View', *Cambridge Anthropology*, 1 (3): 3-10. Citations from pp. 4 and 9.
- 36 Richards (1977) 'The Colonial Office and the Organisation of Social Research', *Anthropological Forum*, p. 183.
- 37 Leach, 'Richards, Audrey Isabel (1899-1984)'.
- 38 Richards, 'The Colonial Office', p. 169.

- 39 Loc. cit. p. 174.
- 40 Audrey Richards (ed.) (1960) *East African Chiefs: A Study of Political Development in Some Uganda and Tanganyika Tribes*, London: Faber & Faber, pp. 13-14.
- 41 Lloyd A. Fallers (1965) *Bantu Bureaucracy: A Study of Integration and Conflict in the Political Institutions of an East African People*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 42 Letter to Jean La Fontaine, quoted in Jean La Fontaine (1985) 'Audrey I. Richards, obituary', *Africa*, 55: 64.