

British anthropology and colonialism: what did Max Gluckman add?

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Abstract. British structural-functionalist anthropology was criticized for ignoring colonial relations. What did Max Gluckman do to solve this problem? I quote from the pioneering anthropologist and use a fictional example to make the question more forceful. The fictional example reveals a minimal solution.

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What did Max Gluckman add?

Can you explain or I shall be sad?

Here is a simple portrait of British structural-functionalist anthropology. According to this approach, the different institutions of a society form a structure and each institution functions to maintain that structure. The anthropologist aims to describe this structure and these functions. Now one of the problems that was raised with the fall of the British empire, if not before, was that this approach did not take into account colonial relations. A society studied was represented as a neat whole separated off from everything else. What did Max Gluckman do to solve that problem? “I don’t know.” “Does any twenty-first century student of anthropology know?” Well, this is a quotation from Gluckman, from within Richard Werbner’s quite recent book:

For since Europeans and Africans in Central Africa form a single society, in studying the modern African we also study our fellow citizen, the European. Our studies hope to provide all sections of the community with scientific analyses of

social problems affecting them... (Gluckman, cited in Werbner 2020: 39-40)

I can offer a certain fleshing out of Gluckman's contribution based on this quotation, leaving aside the specific context of Central Africa. By the way, there is a kind of student who may well read my fleshing out and want to ask, "Is this the contribution then?"

Imagine an island on which live a single tribe and one European: a missionary. If a British anthropologist went there before, they would not talk about the missionary. But now what they do is just include the missionary as part of a structure of institutions, each of which functions to maintain that structure. For example, there is the witchdoctor and his apprentices, whom he is training. They do medical work. There are the hunters and their apprentices, whom they are training. They provide meat for the tribe. Occasionally a child is born who seems somehow talented but unsuited to being a witchdoctor or a hunter or any of the other standard roles. Then they send the child to the missionary and the missionary can train them, to become a priest or do other work related to the mission. That is better than their causing a lot of stress for others, with their lack of understanding (and whatever was done to put an end to that). At this stage, I imagine someone asking, "Is that Gluckman's solution for British structural-functionalist anthropology, or one of his solutions? You just include the people who are there because of colonialism as part of the society and describe how they, or associated institutions, contribute to maintaining a total structure, as in the neat example above."

I suppose Gluckman does not seem especially clever now, but perhaps others would just say, "Okay, that is over," once they are presented with the objection of ignoring colonial relations. Faced with such a problem, I am not sure if one can expect much from people one has hired, though they are talented. And perhaps there is a certain cleverness in the minimal solution. "Guys, what we are going to do is this..." Joking aside, I think the contributions of Gluckman

and the Manchester School would have to be translated into a “toy” form or whatever was done will reach hardly any students.

Reference

Werbner, R. 2020. *Anthropology After Gluckman: The Manchester School, colonial and postcolonial transformations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.