

Why did Frazer not do fieldwork?

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Abstract. Probably the most famous story about the armchair anthropologist Sir James Frazer is about how, when asked by William James about doing fieldwork, he said, “But Heavens forbid!” I propose that it was rational for Frazer to avoid fieldwork given his theory of what is rational for so-called savages: to kill returning tribesmen and visitors, to protect against disease.

Whoever may be this drifting stranger

I hope it's not the park ranger

The abstract basically covers the thinking of this paper and it is just a matter of filling in some details. Here is a quotation from I.C. Jarvie about the armchair anthropologist:

William James tells us that when he asked Sir James Frazer about natives he had known, Frazer exclaimed, “But Heaven forbid!” (1967: 2)

Now in Frazer’s anthropology he tries to rationalize native practices reported by travellers. I don’t think he is often successful in revealing their rationality, assuming they are rational, but here is a possible exception:

The natives of Savage Island (South Pacific) invariably killed, not only all strangers in distress who were drifted to their shores, but also any of their own people who had gone away in a ship and returned home. This was done out of dread of disease. (1894: 158)

What Frazer generally tries to convince us of is that the behaviour of the so-called savage is rational given their overall situation and you would probably do that too, “in their shoes.” But

given this approach to anthropology, Frazer has a good reason not to do fieldwork. If he were a tribe member, he would think that the best thing to do is kill the anthropologist.

Reference

Frazer, J.G. 1894. *The Golden Bough, Volume I*. New York: Macmillan.