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# Meyer Fortes: the person, the role, the theory

Adam Kuper

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## ABSTRACT

In the two decades after World War II Meyer Fortes was a central figure in what was then called 'British social anthropology'. Sometimes dismissed as simply a follower of Radcliffe-Brown, Fortes' theoretical influences in fact ranged from Freud to Parsons. He formulated a distinctive theoretical synthesis, and produced the most influential version of 'descent theory'. Fortes is currently out of fashion, but four decades after his retirement from the Cambridge chair a reevaluation is in order.

## Meyer Fortes: the person, the role, the theory

Adam Kuper

I

*In July, 2015, Heonik Kwon convened a small conference to discuss the legacy of Meyer Fortes (William Wyse professor of social anthropology at Cambridge, 1950-1973). A number of the participants had been students in the Cambridge department in the 1960s. This was a small unit in those days, but with two rivalrous leaders: Meyer Fortes himself, and Edmund Leach. They were locked into an absorbing, stimulating debate on questions of theory and ethnography. We followed every twist and turn, argued among ourselves, and our doctoral theses took up the questions they raised. It does all seem a long time ago, and these debates are now seldom cited.*

*My own talk was directed particularly at my fellow students, who are as familiar with Fortes and his work as I am myself. Writing it up for publication I have tried to cater for readers who never had to steep themselves in Tallensi ethnography, or been made to struggle with the minutiae of debates on descent and filiation. I have, however, kept the conversational tone of the introduction because this is at once a personal and an analytical accounting, and I cannot entirely separate my responses to the man I knew, and the ideas he developed. But then nor could he.*

I remember Meyer Fortes, fondly, as do most of his former students, and perhaps here and there I may be indulging in a spot of ancestor worship. Obviously, ancestor worship is particularly appropriate in Meyer's case. That was, after all, a topic on which he wrote some illuminating essays. He often pointed out that a function of ancestor worship is to bolster the authority of the living elders, and that may also help to explain why some former students are inclined to be a little too reverential when discussing his work. But as soon as I say that I am reminded – and precisely because I have been rereading Meyer's later essays –

that there is always an element of ambivalence and resentment in ancestor worship. (See Fortes, 1987.)

Even if ancestor worship is avoided, there may be an impulse to indulge in Confucian filial piety, if only because Meyer Fortes' standing is not what it was. Half a century ago, he was a respected figure in what had come to be called British social anthropology. Probably in large part because that whole project has lost favour, Meyer's own reputation has suffered. In fact he is less well regarded today than are some of his contemporaries who rebelled against functionalism – notably Evans-Pritchard, perhaps Max Gluckman, and, of course, Meyer's maddening confrère, Edmund Leach.

But it is not only that functionalism is now completely out of fashion. Fortes' central contribution was to kinship studies, and that too is now hardly practiced or taught, except in the manner of Schneider and the latter-day Sahlins, as an account of ideological constructions of common substance, or even more loosely, by way of generalised talk of 'relationships'. I recognize that partisans of the new 'kinship' studies will object to this perhaps too blunt, certainly too brief, characterization, but this is not the place to discuss the pros and cons. (My views are set out in Kuper, 1999, chapter 4 and Kuper, 2013.) For present purposes, let us simply agree that the debates about formal kinship structures that so preoccupied anthropologists – and nowhere more than in Cambridge – through the 1970s are currently unfashionable.

It is true, also, that Fortes published less than other leading contemporaries, and it does not help that he wrote in a dry, convoluted style that is anything but reader-friendly. Moreover, his publications had a very limited scope, considering that they spanned forty years. They were concerned mainly with kinship, descent and ancestor worship, largely with reference to the Tallensi. And when it came to theory, Fortes remained faithful throughout to a limited set of authorities, while reading each in a rather idiosyncratic fashion.

The key figures in his personal theoretical pantheon were Malinowski, Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, and Freud. Henry Maine was invoked to endorse a legalistic approach to social structure. Evans-Pritchard was a brotherly associate and occasional critic. Later there was also Talcott Parsons, though he was seldom acknowledged by Fortes. These theoretical influences had been absorbed and

aligned with one another by the time Fortes wrote his Tallensi monographs. Parsons was slipped in as Fortes elaborated his framework in programmatic papers published in the 1950s, at a time when his professorial colleagues – Evans-Pritchard, Firth, Nadel, Gluckman and Leach – issued their manifestos for a post-functionalist anthropology. (This was a time when every professor had to have a theory.)

Like a Fortesian primitive society, Meyer Fortes' theory was stable, bolstered by authority, and resistant to change. His most extensive late statement, *Kinship and the Social Order*, the Lewis Henry Morgan lectures, delivered in 1963 but obsessively reworked before publication in 1969, rehearsed long-held positions.

Latterly he simply passed over theoretical movements in the discipline, or waved them away with a dismissive aphorism. He dealt obliquely with the challenge of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism (e.g., Fortes 1966), and, exceptionally, engaged in a polemical exchange with Leach over alliance theory. This direct challenge from a close colleague really could not be ignored. (See Leach, 1952, 1957, 1960, 1966 and Fortes, 1959 and 1969, pp. 250-75. For a review of the debate see Barnes, 1962.) In general, however, he ignored critics and contemporary theorists.

## II

Fortes made his name with two monographs on the Tallensi of northern Ghana. His account of Tallensi clanship (1945) followed Evans-Pritchard's path-breaking [analysis](#) of the segmentary lineage system among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard, 1940), but his second monograph, on the 'web of kinship' (1949), [appeared](#) before Evans-Pritchard's equivalent account, *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer* (1951). In fact the two sets of monographs formed a coherent package, directly inspired by Radcliffe-Brown. Together they offered [a](#) paradigmatic account of social systems organized into corporate descent groups. But while Evans-Pritchard's [s](#) model of the Nuer system was notably clear and abstract, Fortes on the Tallensi was more concerned with ethnographic detail, his analysis replete with qualifications, much less cut and dried.

In Fortes' account, Tallensi lineages did not present a neat Nuer-like pattern of 'nesting' lineage segments. The clans were also fuzzier constructs than their Nuer counterparts, as described by Evans-Pritchard. Some Tallensi clans were exogamous, others endogamous. They were not mechanically ordered by genealogical connection, however fictitious. Clan ties might be based on spatial proximity. In fact it was often difficult to distinguish clan ties from neighbourhood relationships. Nor was clan membership clearly defined. 'Clanship ties cut across clans', Fortes wrote, and he was forced to define a clan as 'the region where the fields of clanship of two or more lineages have the maximum overlap.' (Fortes, 1945, 63.) Some clans were ordered on principles so uncertain that Fortes was obliged to distinguish a further category of 'extra-clan ties of clanship'. (Fortes, 1949, chapter 11.)

Following Evans-Pritchard's account of the Nuer, Fortes proposed that Tallensi lineages were divided into levels, which he termed minimal, medial and maximal lineage segments. In practice Fortes found that the Tallensi lineage segments were difficult to distinguish. 'As usual in Tali social organization no rigorous criterion can be found.' (Fortes, 1949, 203.) 'These distinctions are not made by the natives,' he admitted. Moreover, 'it should be noted that the Tallensi have no term for the lineage.' (Fortes, 1945, 10.) Later, however, in his programmatic statements of the descent model, these complications and approximations were set aside.

### III

After his appointment to the Cambridge chair Fortes began to make broader theoretical pronouncements, taking a strongly positivist line. 'The new frame of reference for anthropological science will have to be worked out on the model of the experimental natural sciences.' Its method must involve 'testing, amending and adding to the generalisations which make up the body of social anthropological theory by the intensive study of one society at a time.' (Fortes, 1953 (b), 191-2.)

The subject-matter of anthropology was custom and social organization in 'primitive' societies. 'Custom' is 'the behaviour that is standardized, expected and often enforced in a particular situation in a community' (Fortes, 1951, 332). It is rooted in emotions, and gives conventional form and expression to deep feelings.

'Custom is in fact the equivalent of unconscious emotional forces,' and customs 'provide a legitimate – one might also say a conscious – outlet for the contradictory emotions built up' in childhood.' (1956, 794; 1957, 172).

Custom was perhaps Meyer Fortes' preferred synonym for 'culture', a term he avoided using. Addressing a readership of American cultural anthropologists, he tried to bridge what they meant by culture and what he meant by custom. 'We see custom as symbolizing or expressing social relations – that is, the ties and cleavages by which persons are bound to one another in the activities of social life. In this sense social structure is not an aspect of culture but the entire culture of a given people handled in a special frame of theory.' (1953 (a), 21.) The social structure is a different matter, more fundamental than 'culture', shaped by political forces, made manifest in quasi-legal rules.

In the 'tribal' societies with which Fortes was primarily concerned, the politico-jural domain was formed by clan and lineage, the domestic domain by the family. Underlying the whole social system was a biological bedrock of sex, childbirth, maturation and death. These constraints played out in the first place within the nuclear family. And the nuclear family was the foundation of the social order: 'the actor's model for the structure of social groups and relationships at all levels derives from the nuclear field of social reproduction – the constellation of parents and children... it is the experience of the elementary social relations of filiation and siblingship ... that is the basis of a person's conception of his social identity.' (Fortes, 1987, 123.)

But Fortes did not accept a doctrine, shared by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, that primitive social structure was simply an elaboration of the kinship system. The political system, made up of clans and lineages, was represented in a kinship idiom but it constituted an independent source of 'jural' rights and duties. This public 'politico-jural domain' was distinct from and independent of the private, familial 'domestic domain'. The politico-jural domain had to do with rights and duties, the domestic domain with custom, emotion and ~~-ethical~~ ethical imperatives. The values that derived from the experience of growing up in a nuclear family had a moral character. The 'jural' politically sanctioned norms that emanated from the public domain- were of a different order. (For a

statement of the model, see Fortes, 1953 (a). For a critical overview of this 'descent model' of 'tribal societies see Kuper, 1982.)

In every tribal society one principle of descent – matrilineal or patrilineal – is drawn on to establish a system of corporate groups, the clans and lineages. This determines political allegiance and regulates inheritance and succession. But every person relies also on the private moral relationships of 'complementary filiation', traced through the mother in a patrilineal society, through the father in a matrilineal society. The interplay between the politico-jural and domestic domains is made manifest in the contrast between the value and use of descent and filiation, two principles of relationship that are 'always complementary in their action' (Fortes, 1944, 379) and which 'run like a cry and its echo' through the social system of the Tallensi (Fortes, 1949, 30).

Malinowski had represented the Trobriand family man as a divided person, torn between the external demands of his matriclan and his emotional bond with his son. Fortes countered that family emotions were efficiently harnessed to support the clan system. Following Freud, he identified a different source of internal conflict. This pitted a father against his first-born son. (There is surely a biographical element here. Fortes had a difficult relationship with an erratic, sometimes violent father.) What was in essence an Oedipal conflict had somehow to be contained, or managed. Among the Tallensi this work was done by the ancestor cult.

Fortes saw the Tallensi ancestor cult as a projection of the complex of moral impulses that are fostered in the family. 'The binding force of custom among the Tallensi depends, in the final analysis, on their ancestor cult, and ... the key to this lies in their family and kinship system.' (Fortes, 1987, 191-2.) Reciprocally, the moral authority of the father and of the lineage head relies on his relationship with his ancestors. This should not be understood as simply a Durkheimian matter of ritual reinforcement of social norms. In Fortes' view, strains between a father and his first-born son are projected onto the 'ambivalent' relationship that the Tallensi have with their punitive and yet protective ancestors, who are at once feared and loved. 'In short, it seems to me that it is not too farfetched to compare the Tallensi image of their ancestors to



the internalized parent figure of the classical Freudian super-ego.' (Fortes, 1987, 210-11).

The one aspect of the Oedipal relationship that interested Fortes was the tension that it caused between a boy and his father, and more generally it is remarkable how little women figure in Fortes' account of the Tallensi, except as idealized mothers who are above all conduits of ties of complementary filiation for men. 'The *dug* (that is, a woman and her children by one man) constitutes the irreducible unit of Tale social structure, both jurally and morally' (Fortes, 1949, 62). He did, however, indicate that, like *d*-fathers, mothers and maternal kin were viewed ambivalently. Witchcraft and *tyuk*, a form of malign fate, are associated with relatives on the mother's side of the family. In a footnote, Fortes remarked on 'an interesting psychological problem here ... Tyuk and witchcraft might be regarded as the male and female aspects, respectively, of deep-seated vindictive impulses connected with the mother.' (Fortes, 1949, 35-37.)

The most basic assumption is that men – and Fortes was concerned almost exclusively with men – are social actors, that is, in his terms, 'persons', who have specific roles in the two main domains of action, the domestic and the politico-jural. The elements of personhood are gradually accumulated over a lifetime. Taking office, an individual becomes the occupant of a role with established rights and duties. This role obliges him to serve a public purpose. Yet he remains a private person, and it is necessary to develop his moral commitment to this public purpose. Investiture rituals therefore draw on sentiments that derive from the basic moral experience, the experience of family life. Personhood is to be understood in processual terms, as a journey that is completed only by death and incorporation as an ancestor. This is the day of judgement, for 'it is only when the person is dissolved into his or her constituent parts and statuses that his claims to genuine personhood can be evaluated.' (Fortes, 1987, 265.)

'Time and social structure' (1949), perhaps Fortes' most seminal essay, is in some ways an oddity in his oeuvre. His Ashanti data evidently came out of his work on the Ashanti Social Survey, which he directed, rather than from his own ethnographic fieldwork. (He seems to have done little field research in Ashanti.) Also, this is the only study in which he relied on – indeed, had access to – statistical data. And in this essay, unusually, he used the idea of a norm in the

statistical sense. His statistical analysis has been criticized on methodological grounds, but the enduring contribution of the essay was the introduction of the model of 'the developmental cycle of the domestic group'. This ~~model~~ was deployed ~~in order~~ to refute Rattray's proposition that differences in Ashanti household composition were symptoms of an evolutionary change from matriliney to patriliney. Fortes countered that the different forms of household corresponded to stages in a single developmental cycle.

Despite its original features, this essay fits in perfectly well with the Fortesian paradigm. The drivers of the developmental cycle are Fortes' familiar duo, the life cycle and the forces of law and emotion, lineage and family, that produce strains between the obligations of a woman to her husband and to her brother, and between a man's loyalty to his father and his mother's brother. (Fortes, 1971.) For Malinowski, these conflicts were the source of a constant strain in matrilineal societies, which might be finessed by patrilateral cross-cousin marriage. Among the Ashanti, Fortes argued, they were resolved in the course of the developmental cycle, as children grew up and switched their affiliation from father to mother's brother.

#### IV

Broadly speaking, Fortes' understanding of the political structure and its ritual supports derives from Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown. The account of the domestic domain draws on Malinowski and Freud.

For much of his career, probably for reasons of academic politics, Fortes played down the influence of Freudian ideas on his work, although in unguarded conversation he could be clear about his Freudian allegiance. As a young man he was influenced by a leading figure in British psychoanalysis, J. C. Flügel, and perhaps his second marriage, to a psychoanalytically oriented child psychiatrist, revived his interest, but it was only after retirement from his Cambridge chair that he addressed psychoanalytical meetings and published strong endorsements of Freudian theory in psychoanalytical journals. Yet his Freudian interests were nevertheless ~~apparent~~ from the first, even if psychoanalytic

observations appear in the Tallensi monographs mainly in footnotes, which form a sort of Talmudic commentary on the text.

It is perhaps odd to find Freud linked to Durkheim, but Fortes did not see these two ancestral figures as representing conflicting theoretical positions. He told me several times that Jewish thinkers such as Freud and Durkheim – and, he implied, himself – were especially sensitive to the moral power of social institutions, to the ways in which social values were internalized, impressed on the consciousness of each individual. Like Freud, he believed that the fundamental dynamics were universal, because they derived from experiences within the family. With Durkheim, he believed that these moral sentiments are expressed and regenerated in ritual.

Although his debt to Parsons was only occasionally, and obliquely, signaled, it seems obvious enough. Parsons was the most influential theorist of structural-functionalism in the 1950s, and when Fortes came to Cambridge he brought in two visiting professors of social theory: first Radcliffe-Brown and then, in 1953-1954, Talcott Parsons, with whom he had established friendly relations when Parson spent a term as a member of Malinowski's seminar. Parsons argued for the integration of social, psychological and biological perspectives, presenting a sophisticated alternative to Malinowski's functionalist reductionism. He also had a sympathetic interest in Freudian theory. More particularly, and most importantly from Fortes' point of view, Parsons introduced two crucial analytical ideas. First, there are distinct domains of social life, each with its particular system of values. Second, the social actor has a particular role in each domain, and the social 'person' is the sum of a set of roles. Both these ideas, present in embryo in the Trobriand monographs, became central features of Fortes' theory.

Interestingly enough, on one of the few occasions when he directly invoked Parsons, this was to endorse Fortes' own view of the relationship between Durkheim and Freud – and Malinowski. In a passage that provides a good example of how he yoked together his various theoretical influences, Fortes argued:

that there is an overlap between Durkheim's concept of collective representations and Freud's concept of the superego. Durkheim, says Parsons, described collective representations as emanating from the total

society and as characterized by the moral constraints they exert on the members of the society. He suggests that this corresponds, at the social level, to Freud's concept of the superego, the internalized representative of parental authority, as that is in part shaped and moulded by the social structure and the cultural norms and values of the society. Malinowski, hostile as he was to Durkheimian notions of collective consciousness, would nevertheless, I think, have accepted Parsons' model, in principle. I think he would have agreed that it provides a model of the possible processes by which the public and collectively sanctioned norms of custom accessible to anthropological observation are incorporated in a binding form into the attitudes, motives and behavior patterns of the individual. Be this as it may, it can plausibly be claimed that this model corresponds to later developments in anthropological theory and research. (Fortes, 1987, 186.)

This passage illustrates a characteristic rhetorical strategy. Fortes authorized each element of his model by referring it to a master of social theory, although in fact he took only what he thought he needed, and freely edited his sources. The resulting synthesis rested on a set of propositions to which impressive labels were attached. It was then presented as no more than a restatement of orthodox opinion in social anthropology, indeed in social theory: a final act of authorization.

As John Barnes remarked, Fortes' positivist programme did not deliver testable propositions (Barnes, 1971, 213-4). 'The apparent contradictions between one statement and another are due partly to the style in which Fortes writes,' he commented. 'Typically, the main conclusion of any argument is first stated in oversimplified and uncompromising form, and only later does it become clear that this opening statement is to be understood only as a first and inaccurate approximation to a subtle and carefully delimited intellectual position.' (Barnes, 1971, 259.) I would put down some of the ambiguity to conceptual uncertainties, or academic anxieties, which sometimes led to defensively vague formulations. It was for similar reasons, perhaps, that Fortes again and again introduced his largest and most challenging hypotheses indirectly, or attributed them to an unspecified community of experts. 'It would not, I think, be out of step with

modern anthropology theory to say that most, if not all ....' 'Be this as it may, it can plausibly be claimed that this model corresponds to later developments in anthropology and research'. (Fortes, 1987, 7, 18). And so on.

V

Fortes wrote an interesting overview of his career, assessing his own work and identifying the main theoretical influences (Fortes, 1978), but it was John Barnes – a more than sympathetic commentator – who produced the most objective and searching account of Fortes' work, in his *Three Styles in the Study of Kinship* (1971). He identified as the crucial element of Fortes' analytical apparatus the distinction of 'domains', and within the domains of 'roles'. (This, I suggest, comes from Parsons.) The two domains that frame the analysis, the politico-jural and the domestic, are characterized, respectively, by 'principles' (structural or jural) and 'axioms' (kinship-based and moral).

Barnes pointed out that the principles and axioms were not always clearly formulated by Fortes: 'we have to deal with a mixed bag of principles, with some principles more general than others', while the axioms 'are not of equal logical status'. (Barnes, 1971, 220, 224.) Fortes regularly characterized axioms as 'irreducible', but Barnes found that it was 'difficult to give any precise analytical meaning to this use of the adjective "irreducible"'. (Barnes, 1971, 225.) As to the notion of the jural, Barnes simply cited Firth's characterization of it (in a review of *The Web of Kinship*) as obscure, and the distinction between moral and jural obligations as vague. (Firth, 1951.) Following Firth's criticism, Fortes conceded some ground on this matter, so crucial to his approach. 'The basic distinction between the jural aspects and functions of a kinship system and the affective, or it we prefer, psychological meanings of the customs and usages in which the system comes to expression, has been more difficult to establish than might be thought.' (Fortes, 1955.)

Fortes assumed that moral values sustained legal rights and duties, but Barnes remarked that he could be vague as to whether 'norms' were explicit guidelines, even rules of conduct, or rather statistical patterns of choice, that the ethnographer worked out from observations of action. Fortes also had little to

say about economics strategies, and Barnes implicitly endorsed Peter Worsley's demonstration that the Tallensi kinship system was profoundly influenced by economic constraints, factors that Fortes downplayed. (Worsley, 1956.) Nor was Fortes concerned with politicking as opposed to political structures. 'Fortes provides in his books the ethnographic evidence for a study of conflict, inequality, and political process,' Barnes noted, 'but he uses this evidence to build up a picture of Tale culture that is timeless and repetitive.' (Barnes, 1971, 266.)

This presumption of stability, internal consistency and harmony was reinforced by Fortes' refusal to confront history (a point that Worsley also made). Yet the Tallensi population had increased significantly since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. 'These demographically determined phenomena, alas, require a quite a quite different non-cyclical model of Tale society and cannot be accommodated in the internal-cyclical model Fortes provides.' (Barnes, 1971, 208.)

A Tale intellectual, Moses Anafu, pointed out that:

When Meyer Fortes began his research in 1934, Taleland had been under colonial rule for just two decades, and like many other African communities, the coming of the white man had been nothing short of a trauma for Tale society. For over a decade they had put up a heroic resistance to colonial encroachments in the course of which many hundreds had been killed ... When in April 1911, the British finally overcame Tale resistance, it was done with something of a vengeance. The houses of the Hill Talis were razed to the ground and they themselves sent into exile. (Anafu, 1983, 10.)

Barnes added that '[Fortes'] discussion of the pilgrim traffic to the Tong Hills in central Taleland which "has brought violent competition into the sphere of the common ritual interests and values" of the Hill Talis is relegated to a section on "Modern factors of disequilibrium" at the end of the *Dynamics of Clanship* and does not form part of his main analysis.' (Barnes, 1971, 208-9.)

To be sure, Fortes knew all this very well. In his first paper on the Tallensi he remarked that 'the political and legal behavior of the Tallensi ... is as strongly conditioned by the ever-felt presence of the District Commissioner as by their own traditions'. European influences 'are so diffuse and pervasive that one has to

take account of them in every routine observation of social practices, situations and institutions'. Nevertheless, according to Fortes, 'the fundamental institutions, practices and beliefs of the community seem to be sufficiently vigorous to countervail the intrusion of contact influences.' (1936, 23, 46, 47, 49). He put this view forward in his contribution to a joint assault, launched together with his close associates Schapera and Gluckman, on Malinowski's cultural account of change in African societies. He did not, however, return to these observations in his later ethnographic studies. As Barnes noted, Fortes 'proceeds on the assumption that Tale society has in fact been stable for an indefinite period'. (Barnes, 1971, 206.)

This ahistorical approach was bound up with another very basic assumption. Social anthropology, according to Fortes, was 'the analysis of how primitive social systems work'. (Fortes, 1951, 339.) He was convinced that 'primitive' or 'tribal' societies were very different from what he called 'civilised societies'. They were small-scale and not very differentiated internally, and that they sustained themselves in a state of equilibrium. Civilisation was their nemesis (a view shared by Claude Lévi-Strauss). In a paper delivered to a Fabian Society conference on colonialism, on the eve of decolonization, Fortes commented that:

The centre of gravity of the equilibrium characteristic of a stable and homogeneous primitive society lies in its scheme of cultural values; and that a primitive society undergoing rapid social break-down is apt to become a rabble of acquisitive or exploited individuals and the prey of irrational mob impulses if they cease to have common cultural values. (Fortes, 1945(a), 223.)

It is not surprising that he and his second wife, Doris Mayer, published a study of 'migrant madness' among Tallensi, in which they argued that the psychological balance of many Tallensi had been disrupted by modernity. The title of the paper was 'Psychosis and Social Change' (Fortes and Mayer, 1966.)

When Fortes mounted his campaign against sociology, more specifically against the introduction of sociology in Cambridge, his basic argument was that anthropology dealt with primitive society, and so was quite different from sociology. After all, he noted, introducing his Presidential address to the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1966, totem and taboo – the subjects of his talk –

were typical of the sorts of things that preoccupied social anthropologists and did not interest sociologists at all. More pragmatically, Fortes feared that a sociology tripos would draw undergraduates away from anthropology. He fought off calls to establish a chair of sociology at Cambridge, but when the university at last decided to move, Fortes used his political skills to ensure that the first professor of sociology, appointed in 1969, was an anthropologist – none other than his friendly critic John Barnes.

## VI

In his 'Glimpses of the Unmentionable', his essay on social class in British social anthropology, published in 1984, Edmund Leach suggested that:

With varying degrees of enthusiasm and varying degrees of success Malinowski, Firth, Schapera, Fortes, Nadel, and the other foreigners who were mainly responsible for the high prestige that was attributed to 'British' social anthropology in the 1950s and 1960s ... eventually assimilated themselves into the lifestyle and cultural conventions of Oxbridge academics, but they remained 'outsiders' with a highly ambivalent attitude towards the values of their adopted academic milieu. This ambivalence is both reflected in and a reflection of their approach to the study of anthropology.

... Meyer Fortes serves as an example. His basic social identity was that of the son of an impoverished South African Jew of Russian descent. Except for a period during the second World War when he returned to West Africa, Fortes was associated with faculty of either Oxford or Cambridge from late 1939 until his retirement, and for the last thirty-one years of his life he lived in Cambridge as a Professorial Fellow (later Honorary Fellow) of King's College. When he arrived from Oxford in 1951, King's College was still a bastion of British upper-class values of the most archaic kind. (Leach, 1984, 11.)

As an outsider, Fortes was an observer, not a participant, Leach felt: 'he never played an active executive role in College affairs. Indeed to a quite disconcerting extent, he never seemed to understand how the system really worked.' (Leach



1984, 12.) Leach also believed, quite wrongly, that Fortes falsely claimed Sephardi ancestry because he thought it was posh.

In fact, whatever the reasons for his absence from College business, Fortes was rather a shrewd operator in university politics. His final coup was to fix his succession. Following his retirement, the leading candidates to succeed him to the William Wyse chair were Fortes' lieutenant Jack Goody and Leach's close associate Stanley Tambiah. As it happened, two of Fortes' close friends, Max Gluckman and Isaac Schapera, were among the electors. Schapera told me that Fortes asked them to support Goody, who was duly appointed.

Politically, Fortes began on the left. Both his wives had been members of the Communist Party in the 1930s. Jack Goody has documented the troubles Fortes had when the International African Institute was planning to send him to West Africa: he was suspected of leftist allegiances and subjected to antisemitic slurs. (Goody, 1995, 28-9, 48-54.) Fortes nevertheless quickly established good relationships with Gold Coast administrators.

Though never a political conservative, he was a cultural traditionalist, in Taleland as in Cambridge. But he was a colonial and a Jew, and he had grown up in straitened circumstances. The two colleagues with whom he maintained a close life-long relationship, Isaac Schapera and Max Gluckman, were fellow South African Jews. He and Schapera were contemporaries and came from a very similar poor, rural, immigrant background in South Africa. Both he and Fortes had won scholarships to the oldest and most distinguished grammar school in South Africa, the South African College School. (This was quite a typical trajectory for bright young boys from poor families. Schapera once told me that Meyer always came top of his class at SACS. Didn't you? I asked him. No, he said, I came second. The boy who came first was called Solly Zuckerman.) While Fortes was pleased to find himself solidly established in Oxbridge he never fell for the Oxbridge mystique (to which Schapera was wholly immune).

At our first lunch, when I turned up in King's, a raw colonial, Meyer told me, 'Never forget, they don't like Jews here'. Certainly he felt that his background made things a bit harder for him, and he could be thin-skinned. He certainly had to deal with Colonial Office antisemitism in the 1930's. (Goody, 1995, 28-9, 48-54.) But he was secure in his Jewish identity, opposed to intermarriage,

occasionally attending synagogue, though never religious or observant, and he was unsympathetic to Zionism. When the Nazis launched their onslaught on the Jews of Europe, Fortes worked with a secret organization that smuggled Jews into England. (I owe this information to his step-son, Karl Mayer.)

In Leach's view, the theoretical orientation of Schapera, Fortes and Gluckman was explained by their social situation. 'Is it too fanciful to suggest that the prominence that several of these authors were later to give to the notion of homeostatic social equilibrium and to the belief that social structures persist even when there are drastic changes in cultural appearances derived from their personal need for a stable homeland?' (Leach, 1984, 12.) This is stretching things. Schapera and Gluckman were theoretically at odds with one another, and they both differed from Fortes in ways that seemed to them, and I suppose to us, significant. It is more to the point that these men were deeply impressed by the same intellectual orthodoxies that they imbibed as young social scientists. In intellectual matters, if not necessarily in politics, they were conservative men. Although they were rebellious at times, they remained locked in debate with their original mentors throughout their careers.

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