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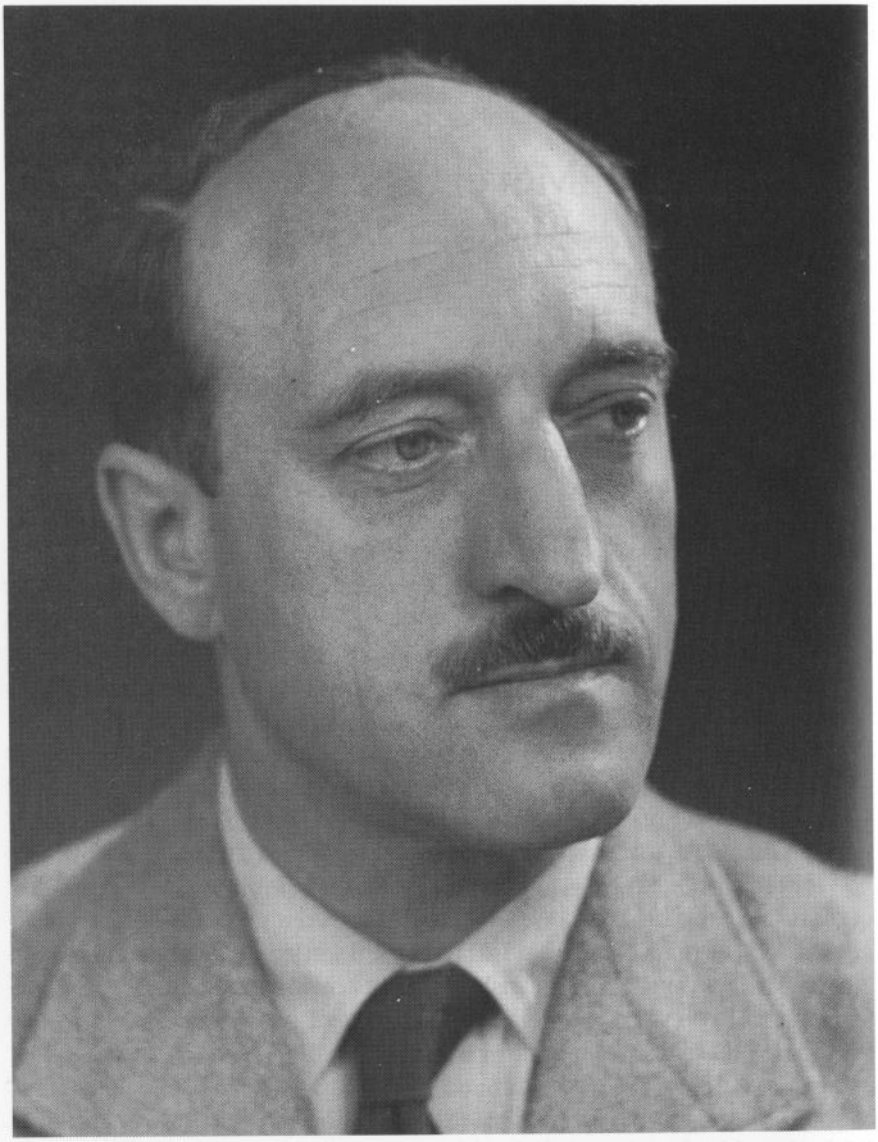
Meyer Fortes
1906–1983

MEYER FORTES was in the first rank of that distinguished group of scholars who virtually created the subject of social anthropology in Britain between the two wars. Created, that is, the subject as a form of comparative sociology based upon field observations, bringing their intensive research to bear upon problems, mainly of non-European societies, that related to cultural, psychological, historical, demographic, political and administrative matters, in all of which, with the exception of the historical, Fortes took part.

His father, Nathan, was born in Melitopol, Crimea, which he left at the age of 16 to escape being drafted into the army. He walked to Hamburg and took the boat to England where he stayed for a year to earn enough to pay for a passage to America. There he worked as a peddler before settling down in Memphis and marrying a young Jewish widow who owned a bar. A daughter was born, he prospered and was joined by two brothers. But his wife died and, after some trouble in the bar, he left for England where he worked in the clothing industry in Leeds. There he was joined by his parents and their other children. Nathan emigrated to South Africa where he married Bertha Kerbel from Lithuania and settled down as an innkeeper in the Afrikaans-speaking township of Britstown, some 500 miles inland from Cape Town. The couple had four sons and two daughters, of whom Meyer was the eldest, being born on April 25, 1906.

From 1918 to 1922 he attended the South African Collegiate High School, dominated by Scottish teachers to whom he was always grateful. With the aid of various scholarships he studied for a B.A. in English and Psychology at the University of Capetown and received the Noble scholarship as the best graduating student of the year 1925. He then took an M.A. with distinction in 1926 and received the highest postgraduate



M. FORTES *Ramsey & Muspratt*

award which he used to go to London to register for a Ph.D. degree in Psychology. There, with the South African situation in mind (he had become interested in the education of Cape coloured adolescents), he worked first with the sociologist Morris Ginsberg but then decided to carry out research on non-verbal intelligence tests for inter-racial use under G.E. Spearman under whom he took his Ph.D in 1930 at University College.[1] At the same time he started working voluntarily under the psychiatrist Emmanuel Miller at the first child guidance clinic in the East End of London, funded by the Jewish Health Organisation, on the effects of sibling order on adolescent behaviour, research that led him increasingly to concentrate on the social dimensions of psychology.[2] His association with the clinic and his meeting with J.C. Flügel resulted in a permanent interest in psychiatric and psychoanalytic theory, especially as it affected interpersonal behaviour within the family.

It was through Flügel that Fortes met the man who was to have the greatest influence on his life, the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. He describes his encounter as a chance meeting but chance had a directional quality about it.[3] In the first place he had a number of introductions from Cape Town, which he assiduously cultivated. Secondly, he lived in Bloomsbury at a time when even research students could afford rooms in Central London and when, in Raymond Firth's words, that area had some of the characteristics of the Quartier Latin, or anyhow the Left Bank, in Paris. As a bright young man with the right contacts he met many of the leading intellectuals of the day as well as the major figures in the social sciences. In Cape Town he had been given the names of Ginsberg and Miller. Miller, who founded the *British Journal of Delinquency*, had been taught at Cambridge by W.H.R. Rivers, a man who combined an interest in psychology, psychoanalysis and anthropology, as Fortes was later to do in a different way, and who trained the Cambridge psychologist Sir Frederic Bartlett, author of *Remembering*. It was Bartlett who acted, a little reluctantly, as a referee when Fortes later applied for a Rockefeller Fellowship in 1932.[4] Fortes also speaks of a chance meeting with C.K. Ogden which gave him the opportunity to translate a ponderous but authoritative work on the *Gestalt Theory* by B. Petermann for that remarkable series, *The International Library of Psychology, Philosophy*

[1] The tests Fortes devised at this time contributed to the Raven IQ tests.

[2] The work Fortes did at the Clinic was published in *Economica* (1933).

[3] He had in fact met Malinowski on a previous occasion but this is when he was invited to join his seminar. See the accounts given to John Barnes in S. Drucker-Brown, Notes towards a biography of Meyer Fortes, *American Ethnologist* 16 (1989): 375–85.

[4] Bartlett had been an examiner of Evans-Pritchard's doctoral thesis on Azande wichcraft, with the viva being conducted on the phone according to the candidate.

and Scientific Method, Ogden was the author, with I.A. Richards, of the *The Meaning of Meaning* which contained an important contribution by Malinowski on 'The problem of meaning in primitive languages' and called for 'a Science of Symbolism and Meaning'. Another figure who crops up as a referee, this time in Fortes' application to enter the Gold Coast to carry out field research, is that of Lancelot Hogben, whose works on social aspects of mathematics achieved great popularity. These intellectual contacts give some idea of the milieu in which he lived and worked when he started to study anthropology, a subject to which he was drawn by his liberal, Jewish background in South Africa and his increasing concern with the social aspects of psychological phenomena.

Malinowski's seminar in 1931 was clearly an intellectual and professional turning point for Fortes. His original intention was to carry out psychological research on the African family, but his plans were strongly modified under the influence of Malinowski's teaching, the friends he made and lastly the financial opportunities for research. It was through the seminar that he met E.E. Evans-Pritchard, and through him in August 1931 Radcliffe-Brown who was on his way to take up a Professorship in Chicago and had come to London to attend the centenary meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science as President of the Anthropology Section. His long-standing friendship with Evans-Pritchard was of the greatest importance. They met at the time when his interests in cross-cultural psychology led him in the direction of anthropology, just as his involvement with racial tests and juvenile delinquency pushed him in the direction of sociology and, in particular, of studies of family and kinship. At this time he was working in the clinic in East London and teaching for the London County Council Evening Institute which he had been doing since 1929. Evans-Pritchard at once began negotiating for his appointment as head of a new department of experimental psychology at the University of Cairo, where he himself was teaching at the time.[5] When he applied for a Fellowship at the International African Institute, it was Evans-Pritchard who sent a very strong letter in his support. When he eventually went to the field in West Africa, Evans-Pritchard wrote to him constantly, offering suggestions for topics to investigate, asking for information on matters that interested him, sending gifts of food and of reading matter. They sent each other draft papers to read and made severe comments on each other's work. In 1941 when Evans-Pritchard was trying to persuade Fortes to take up a post in South Africa, he commented 'I can't do without the inspiration of your mind.'[6] Despite a cooling of the friendship in the late

[5] Evans-Pritchard to Fortes, 29 August, 1932.
[6] Evans-Pritchard to Fortes, 18 February 1941, Malakal, Sudan.

1940's, partly as the result of a disagreement about Fortes' observations on the contemporary family published in a popular journal, they continued to correspond throughout their lives. The relationship went on being important to both of them, with Evans-Pritchard asking Fortes' advice on psychological matters and Fortes looking upon Evans-Pritchard as his 'elder brother' in anthropology.

The most significant factor in enabling Fortes, and many others, to carry out research in Africa was the sudden access of funds for anthropological research which came from the Rockefeller Foundation of New York. In 1926 the Foundation extended its fellowship scheme to anthropological fieldwork and operated in the Pacific through the Australian National Research Council and Radcliffe-Brown at Sydney. Some years later Malinowski approached the Foundation with a view to instituting a scheme for research in Africa centred on the International African Institute, which it was already supporting in other ways. His success enabled the Institute to offer a number of fellowships to established scholars for field research in Africa, in many cases on condition that they carried out a year's training with Malinowski in London beforehand. The year 1932–3 brought together Fortes, S.F. Nadel from Austria via Berlin and S. Hofstra from Holland, all of whom were preparing to carry out research in West Africa and who were required to work out a joint scheme for theoretical and empirical collaboration. In addition there was Lecoeur from France, killed in the Second World War, who carried out work in Tibesti. These were the active members, the 'mandarins', of Malinowski's famous seminar at the London School of Economics, attended not only by his advanced students such as Audrey Richards and Margerie Perham, but by scholars from abroad, such as Talcott Parsons and Alison Davis.

As a result of his apprenticeship, Fortes' project to study the African family from a comparative psychological point of view moved in a more sociological direction. Despite his difficulties with Malinowski, which were more than shared by Evans-Prichard, his research plans were greatly influenced by him in many ways. While Evans-Pritchard kept his distance, obtained his research funds from elsewhere and had an independent income, Fortes was more closely tied to his patron through the Institute which provided him with generous support over a period of five years.

That support enabled him to undertake research in the Gold Coast with his wife, Sonia Donen, a fellow student at Cape Town, whom he had married in 1928 and with whom he collaborated in writing about the domestic economy. The actual location for the work among the Tallensi of the Northern Territories was decided upon after discussion with R.S. Rattray, the well-known administrator-anthropologist who had already

visited their ritual centre in the Tong Hills. Fortes had considerable difficulty in entering the colony, partly because Malinowski insisted on him doing longer preparation than he wanted, partly because the colonial authorities were suspicious of his radical and Jewish background which was not helped by the fact his wife had been born in the USSR and had been a Young Komsomol member.

They eventually set sail for Africa on the same boat as Nadel and his wife in December, 1933. The research he carried out no longer took the focussed form of his earlier proposals but extended widely across the whole spectrum of the social life of the people, although he did give special attention to some of his early interests. His initial papers covered a wide variety of themes. The first was on 'marriage laws' and was published by the Government Printing Office. He also wrote on 'incest', on 'communal fishing festivals' (in a Durkheimian manner), on demography, on the domestic economy (with Sonia Fortes), on culture change (the theme of the Rockefeller project) and especially on *Social and Psychological Aspects of Education among the Tallensi*, a valuable contribution whose approach to learning theory was praised by many, including the American psychologists, Dollard and Miller.

Fortes returned to London temporarily in 1935 and again attended Malinowski's seminars. Before he left he was invited by the new head of the colony's model secondary school at Achimota to join the staff in order to help prepare the way for coming social changes. The administration was not keen on the idea, although by now Fortes was viewed not so much as a radical, wanting to change the world, but as a conservative anthropologist, wanting to keep all as it is. In the event, Fortes preferred to continue his fieldwork which he did until 1937.

Fortes returned from the field in mid-August after spending some time in South Africa on the way. He then applied to the International African Institute for an extension to his Fellowship until August 1938 so that he could write his book on Tallensi 'social structure', which he now decided was his priority. 'My plan is to do a book dealing mainly with that segment of the culture of the Tallensi which is of most immediate concern to people working the area, officials and others. Its topic will be the social structure: Local and kinship grouping, political organization, the economic system, law and family government'. And he adds, 'Apart from utilitarian considerations there is sound theoretical justification for dealing first with the social structure'.[7] While it is true that Fortes was attracted by practical concerns, and while most anthropologists hope that their work

[7] Application of Dr Fortes, Document C for item 2 of the Agenda of the 16th meeting of the Executive Committee of the International African Institute, 12–13 October, 1937.

may be of some 'use' to the local population and its administrators, his main interest was undoubtedly 'theoretical', in a sociological sense. At this point he seemed to have set aside his earlier psychological and psychoanalytic interests under the influences of Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski and his contemporaries. Fortes has himself suggested that the 'brilliant success of the sociologically oriented fieldwork of the 'functionalist' contingent (Firth, Evans-Pritchard, Richards, Schapera, Hogbin *et al.*)' led to 'a marked hostility to having dealings with psychoanalysis' (1978: 7–8). But there was also, under broader Durkheimian influences very apparent in Evans-Pritchard, resistance to the so-called confounding of sociological and psychological levels of explanation. So that although Fortes was initially encouraged to carry out psychological research, he decided that he had first to analyse the social structure along the lines of his colleagues.

At this point in his career it was understandably difficult to obtain yet further funds for research and, in the absence of available academic posts, Fortes had to look round for part-time teaching which he found at the London School of Economics. By this time Radcliffe-Brown had been appointed the first Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford in 1937 while Evans-Pritchard had already been giving lectures there for three years. The latter persuaded Fortes to join them to write up his notes, envisaging his move as the beginning of the creation of 'a school' which would be more scholarly, more scientific, less applied, than that of Malinowski. Plans were made for their active collaboration, the first material evidence of which was *African Political Systems*, a series of studies published by the International African Institute in 1940, with a preface by Radcliffe-Brown and an introduction by Fortes (mainly) and Evans-Pritchard. Like the companion volume on *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (1950), which had a long theoretical introduction by Radcliffe-Brown, these works exerted an important influence on world anthropology, not simply of Africa, for years to come.

The introduction to the first volume attempted to lay out a broad framework for the analyses of political systems in the simpler societies by putting forward a tripartite distinction between states, segmentary or acephalous societies and 'primitive hordes'. The distinction between the first two owned much to Durkheim, who was concerned, as Spencer and many philosophers before him, with 'the problem of order', in particular how it was possible to maintain social control in the absence of legal institutions such as the courts of Europe. The problem went back to Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau, and it was one that gave rise to a useful discussion as well as further investigation in anthropology on the nature of 'law', on the role of the lineage and on alternative fields through which social

control might be maintained. For at this period in time it was still possible to enquire into political systems that had not been overly transformed by the advent of colonial rule and its successor, the nation state.

This early collaboration was soon interrupted by the outbreak of war. The two men worked out a scheme, which they subsequently felt failed to get Radcliffe-Brown's complete approval, whereby they would be sent to the parts of Africa they knew, partly to carry out research, partly to further the war effort.[8] The plan did not work out but Evans-Pritchard took off on his own for the Sudan to engage in a minor guerilla war, while Fortes stayed in Oxford, took over Evans-Pritchard's work and completed his two-volume manuscripts on the Tallensi.[9] Eventually he went out to Nigeria in connection with Lord Hailey's *African Survey* and was caught up in intelligence activity in the Gold Coast. He also became heavily involved in moves towards the development of higher education in that country, looking in the utopian way characteristic of wartime Britain, towards the future of Africa and the world.

At that time he was himself being considered for a post at Achimota. He had earlier been asked by the Principal to help draw up 'a comprehensive scheme for the establishment of an Institute of West African Culture', which would make provision for the teaching of 'West African sociology and arts and crafts'. Fortes wrote a memorandum indicating how such a programme might be linked to the proposed University level teaching but the whole project was postponed until after the war. At that time the situation was more favourable, with the allocation of considerable funds for development. In 1943 Fortes wrote two other memoranda, one for a West African Institute and another for a new University of which the Institute would be a part. When the Institute (WAIASS) was established Fortes became its first director and organised one of its first and certainly its most important research project, namely the Ashanti Social Survey of 1945–6, an interdisciplinary scheme directed by Fortes himself, by Robert Steele, a geographer, and by Peter Ady, an economist, as well as recruiting some 40 local field assistants. He had long wanted to study the matrilineal Ashanti as a contrast to the patrilineal Tallensi, especially as he had been interested in such forms of social organisation through Malinowski. The survey enabled him to do this but it was also

[8] When their scheme for sociological research on modern political systems in Africa (essentially following up *African Political Systems* which was about to appear) was put before the Hebdomadal Council on 8 March 1940, Radcliffe-Brown expressed his 'very strong support'. But Evans-Pritchard felt he had not done enough.

[9] Evans-Pritchard's account of this war is given in the *Army Quarterly* for 1973 (pp. 470–97). The article has been discussed by Clifford Gertz in a chapter of his book, *Works and Lives; the anthropologist as author*, Stanford, 1988.

one of the first major socio-economic enquiries in a non-literate culture, making use of the most modern techniques of data processing. Apart from the publications of Steele and Ady, the project led to two major articles by Fortes, one a general analysis of Ashanti kinship and marriage, the other a study of social change. More generally his work there served as a continuing source of interest and contributed a considerable part to the Morgan lectures, which he delivered at the University of Rochester.

The early war years had enabled him to complete his two major monographs on the Tallensi, *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi* (1945) and *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi* (1949). The first had been largely written in 1938 and analysed the workings of this social system at the macro level, with the hugely complex intertwining of political, religious and kinship relations in which each boundary was contextually important but there were no clear-cut tribal groupings or levels of hierarchy. Much attention was paid to the minute analysis of descent groups, especially the patrilineal lineage; the result was a brilliant presentation of the overall structure of the workings of a political system in pre-colonial times, his research being carried out within some thirty years of the conquest.

But it was on the second volume on the family that Fortes was to bring his expertise most powerfully to bear. Influenced by the studies of Raymond Firth, the work achieves a subtle marriage of quantitative data on the composition and cyclical structure of domestic groups with an extremely perceptive analysis of the social and psychological relationships of its members. Having worked among a related group of people, I am well aware of the skill that has gone into its construction; indeed I doubt if we have any monograph about the family in any part of the world that can stand comparison.

It was on the promise of these two volumes that Fortes had been appointed to a Readership at Oxford in 1946. Together with Evans-Pritchard, Gluckman and Srinivas, they built up a powerful department which attracted students from all over the world at the moment when anthropology, and particularly African anthropology, was expanding rapidly. that period of intense co-operation was short. In 1949 Gluckman accepted a Readership in Social Anthropology at Manchester, with the prospect of a Chair, and in the following year Fortes was appointed to the William Wyse Professorship at Cambridge with Evans-Pritchard's strong support, and became a Fellow of King's College. This post he held until his retirement in 1973, during which time he built up the Department to become arguably the most prominent in the country, having made the imaginative appointment of E.R. Leach to a Lectureship as soon as a post became free.

At the beginning these were tough but exciting years for Fortes.

Competent social anthropologists at Cambridge were few and he did most of the teaching and training of graduate students himself. But he soon established field research as an important feature of the department, attracting lively speakers, organising a post-graduate seminar, stimulating the publication of the results in *Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology* and in the monograph series, *Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology*. He thoroughly reorganised undergraduate teaching, introducing a specialist degree in social anthropology as well as encouraging options in social psychology, statistics, linguistics and development economics. Administration was not much to his liking, but he played a notable part in bringing distinguished sociologists to Cambridge and indeed in extending the social sciences themselves.

In terms of his own research, one aim was to complete a volume on Tallensi religion and towards this end he gave a number of named lectures, which were later published. Outstanding among them was the Frazer Lecture for 1957, *Oedipus and Job in West Africa* (published 1959). In 1966 he gave a presidential address to the Royal Anthropological Institute on 'Totem and Taboo', in 1972 the Emmanuel Miller Lecture to the Association for Child Psychology and Psychiatry on the subject of 'The first born' (published 1974) and in 1973 a memorial lecture for Ernest Jones, the biographer of Freud, entitled 'Custom and conscience' to the British Psychoanalytic Society.

These titles already indicate the continuing role of psychological ideas which became most explicit in his later studies on religion. That was especially true of his work on ancestor worship, which had early on fascinated him as a link between the domains of kinship and religion, an acting out of familial conflicts on a supernatural plane. In this he was stimulated by his second wife, Doris Meyer, M.D., a psychiatrist whom he married in 1960, four years after the death of his first wife, and with whom he collaborated in writing on mental problems ('migrant madness') among the Tallensi. The broad outline of his approach had already been sketched out in his major monographs in which the political and jural role of the cult of the ancestors was fully analysed. In *Oedipus and Job* he pursued the theme in a more subtle manner, attempting to explicate what Horton has called the 'social psychology' of the Tallensi, including their conceptions of the spiritual and psychic make-up of human beings. Such an enquiry entailed a deep knowledge of the language and behaviour of the people themselves, a knowledge which few scholars of non-literate societies have possessed to the same degree. While this analysis, like much of Fortes' work, does not make for easy reading, it has had a pervading influence on the field. But he did not complete the book on Tallensi religion he had hoped and these essays were gathered together after his

death under the title of *Religion, Morality and the Person* (1987), a phrase that gives a flavour of his major interests in the field, that is, in the moral consequences of religious practice and belief, and in the notion of a person, essentially a moral person for whom kinship and the family were of supreme importance.

It is for his studies in the field of kinship and the family that Fortes is best known. Following his monographs on the Tallensi, his major published work was an expansion of the lectures appropriately given at the University of Rochester in the name of Lewis Henry Morgan, entitled *Kinship and the Social Order* (1969). The empirical material on which the book is based derived from his research among the Ashanti of Ghana. But the lectures themselves were a wide-ranging investigation of the sphere of kinship studies, as he saw it, dwelling in particular on the role of the lineage (in this case, matrilineal) and on what he called 'the principle of amity', the cathectic aspect of kinship relations which had impressed him from his early studies and no doubt from his earlier background. Fortes' work on both the political-jural and domestic aspects of the lineage have been seminal for countless scholars, both those working on Africa, in New Guinea (where comments have been made on the introduction of 'African models') and on Chinese studies, initially through the research of Maurice Freedman. The influence came not only from his empirical and general work on the lineage contained in his monographs and in a much-quoted theoretical article on 'The structure of unilineal descent groups' (1953), but also from his studies on the associated aspect of ancestor worship, which is what drew him to Chinese and Japanese studies. Once again it was the complex contribution of the ancestral cult to the maintenance of moral behaviour on which he dwelt, the function of filial piety in social life.

In stressing the role of the lineage, some social anthropologists may have been led to underplay the role of domestic groups as such. Fortes worked in lineage societies and with Evans-Pritchard, so that he was inevitably impressed with the nature of their operation. But he was also deeply interested in the domestic domain, in the effects of demographic variables (as in his insightful contribution to Lorimer's *Culture and Human Fertility*, 1954) and to its psychological components. One of his most influential contributions was on cyclical change among domestic groups (1958), including the family, an interest that derived from developmental psychology but which was given an important sociological and demographic dimension. As with notions of morality, the ancestors and family life, his interest was embedded in his first research proposal to the International African Institute, well before he had undergone his anthropological apprenticeship. But it was the ability to combine the sociological and the psychological that enabled him to

analyse interpersonal relations among the Tallensi and the Ashanti in such a profound manner.

Both at Oxford and at Cambridge, Fortes supervised the post-graduate work of an array of students, mostly Africanists, from a variety of countries. He was always glad to be able to contribute to the training of those from the Third World and was especially proud of having taught Kofi Busia, author of *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti* (1951), first Professor of Sociology at the University of the Gold Coast, and later Prime Minister of Ghana. His other Ghanaian student was Alex Kyerematen who wrote on Ashanti law and rituals of royalty, but he also encouraged others outside social anthropology to pursue academic careers, always seeking to instill high academic standards. Although he was also interested in wider social problems, he became sceptical about developmental studies and, possibly with Malinowski in mind, did not greatly welcome anthropologists becoming engaged in work of this kind. Like many of his contemporaries he was also hesitant about admitting students who wanted to carry out research on modern or modernising societies, being worried in both cases of a descent into the higher journalism (the very charge levelled by Malinowski at his first research proposal and later on by Evans-Pritchard). He was equally wary of the belle-lettrism and of the intuitions of many 'cultural' approaches as well as of the scientism of 'billiard-ball' sociology. That did not prevent him using case-histories, psychological deductions, linguistic and statistical data. But there was nothing in his view that could match the understanding derived from linguistically competent, intensive fieldwork within a sociological framework, directed not so much to problem as to topic. He was above all committed to the interlinking of empirical observation and theoretical analysis; one without the other was of little interest to him.

Meyer Fortes died in Cambridge on 27 January 1983. He was the recipient of two festschriften, *The Character of Kinship* (1973) and *Changing Social Structure in Ghana* (1975). He was elected to the British Academy in 1967, became an Honorary Foreign Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, received honorary degrees from Chicago and Belfast, and was especially proud of being an honorary fellow of the London School of Economics (1975) and of King's College, Cambridge.

Meyer Fortes played a prominent and responsible part in the running of anthropological affairs. He was President of the Royal Anthropological Institute, to which he was much attached, partly because of the efforts made by Charles and Brenda Seligman, his early allies in the struggle with Malinowski, for its support. He was equally devoted to the International African Institute, which had supported his fieldwork and published his major monographs, serving on its Council until he retired from the

William Wyse Chair in 1973. He played an important part in founding the Association of Social Anthropologists and later became its Chairman. He delivered most of the distinguished lectures in the field, the Frazer lectures, the Morgan lectures in the United States and was widely known, through his work and through visits, throughout the English-speaking world. As the result of his work and that of a handful of other scholars, mostly from overseas, social anthropology in Britain led the field for the three decades between 1930 and 1960.

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Note. I am grateful for the help of Doris Fortes, John Barnes, Raymond Firth and M.N. Srinivas.