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Shadows at Twilight: A Note on History and the Ethnographic Present

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What then is this ethnographer's magic, by which he is able to evoke the real spirit of the natives, the true spirit of tribal life? (Malinowski 1922: 6).
When we look closely at the construction of past time, we find the process has very little to do with the past at all and everything to do with the present (Douglas 1986: 69).

The general focus of these comments concerns matters of method and cultural bias in anthropology. The manner in which I have chosen to address both concerns is to review the history of a phrase and concept well known to anthropologists and adhered to in naive ignorance by interested readers, namely, the ethnographic present. The implicit suggestion is that social and cultural anthropology were created as distinct intellectual disciplines in association with this concept and that as its heuristic and utilitarian value has evaporated in recent decades so too has the discipline's peculiar niche in the realm of human knowledge. The present exercise began as an attempt to locate the first usage of the phrase "ethnographic present," an undertaking that some might deem little more than a trivial pursuit. But I think it merits more serious consideration. Toward that end, the rehearsal of some common anthropological knowledge is necessary, but little more than is critically necessary. In the public mind, anthropologists continue to carry with them the reputation of authority on matters relating to primitive people. But haven't anthropologists more often been, until recently, the historians of non-literate peoples? That they have been assigned the former stereotype is a matter that might invite some interested commentary; that they have never done so is the matter that invites attention here.[1]

[1] A shorter draft of this essay was presented in 1986 at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, in Philadelphia. A number of colleagues and students offered critically helpful comments on working drafts. In this regard, I am especially grateful to Pro-

In its common usage anthropology is a term that conjures images of descriptions and interpretations of alien, sometimes exotic, cultural forms and to some contemporary practitioners, the quality of one's ethnographic contributions is the real measure of one's worth as an anthropologist. It is clear though that the meaning of the term ethnography has undergone significant transformations over the last hundred and fifty years, as has the manner in which its value is assessed. According to Oswalt (1972: 2) the term 'ethnography' was coined by English-speaking people in 1834. A short while later in Birmingham, during the 1839 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science,

> . . . ethnography first came under discussion before the National Historical Section. There, Dr. James Pritchard stressed the immediate need for obtaining descriptions of the physical characteristics of the "threatened" or fast-disappearing races, and proposed a questionnaire be carried by travellers instructing them to make enquiries among such peoples concerning local cultural traditions (Hodgen 1974: 3).[2]

The accounts eventually gathered are in many ways unrecognizable by today's standards of ethnography, but what is consistent across this expanse of time is the central place of ethnographic description within the discipline. Two points need underscoring: first, anthropology was initially conceived of as historical enterprise. Second, two phenomena occur. Ethnography was initially conceived of as an effort to record customs of disappearing peoples, though a disappearing subject matter is usually a given, rather than a problem, in historical studies. In other words, anthropology began at a point in time when interested amateurs were worried about the eclipse of its subject matter. When Malinowski pined for the urgency of ethnographic fieldwork nearly one hundred years after the Birmingham meeting ("Alas, the time is short for ethnology" [Malinowski 1922: 518]), it was hardly a novel battle cry, even though he convinced many that it was. Toward the middle of the present century Levi-Strauss remarked in his quasi-ethnographic study *Tristes Tropiques* that the discipline might be called entropology, the study of

fessor H.D. Juli, Ms. Jessica Ogden and Mr. Paul Hyde.

Among other sources I consulted in the attempt to locate a first usage of the phrase "ethnographic present" are the following: Bohannan and Glazier, 1973; Axtell 1979; Malinowski 1966; Wallerstein 1966; Schmidt 1984; Nickerson 1984; Payne and Murray 1983; Trigger 1982; Lyons 1984; Honko 1983; Gadaez 1981; Shklar 1980; Abler 1982; Appadurai 1981; Shanklin 1981; Chaney 1978; Kabo 1974; Bohannan 1973; Euler 1972; Lewis 1973; Ajayi 1974; Schapera 1962; Gellner 1958; Malinowski 1930; Evans-Pritchard 1961; Hammel 1980; Lowie 1937; Maquet 1964; van Velson 1965; Vansina 1970; Kirsch 1982; Quimby 1948; Gregg and Williams 1948; Kooker 1963; Firth 1951; Lewis 1968; Stocking 1982, 1983, 1984; Lurie 1961; Malinowski 1939; Diamond 1974; Trigger 1984; Thurnwald and Thurnwald 1935; Horr 1973; Voget 1975.

[2] "The British association responded by underwriting a committee of three (Pritchard, surgeon and physical anthropologist; Richard Owen, surgeon-anatomist; Thomas Hodgkin, surgeon and prime figure in funding the Aboriginals Protection Society of London, 1837) to draw up a schedule of questions to systematize observations and guide those in contact with native races. The original schedule of 1843 drawn up by this committee served as the base for the subsequent *Notes and Querries on Anthropology*" (Voget 1975: 105).

cultural decay. Fifty years after Malinowski, the tradition of lamenting the passing of the primitive continues. Reference here is made to Jarvie's (1975: 255) assertion of "the loss of subject matter. Untouched simple societies are fewer and fewer and newly decolonized governments are openly hostile and obstructionist to anthropologists."

As well we know, anthropology and the primitive were concepts born in the public mind almost simultaneously.[3] Yet even at the turn of the century the "observers of man" had begun to wonder aloud whether the embryonic discipline would cease to exist because of its disappearing subject matter or whether it would become one or another specialized branch of history. For a considerable period of time, however, the disciplinary demise was postponed with the emergence of a descriptive, interpretive and literary device, namely, the ethnographic present.

Like all schemes of interpretation the phrase achieved a utilitarian value in historically specific circumstances. Speculative reconstructions of cultural evolution on the grand scale were countered in part by claims that diffusion from a discernible source was the key to understanding human cultural diversity. But the notion of the ethnographic present did not appear simply as a counter to these divergent claims; it gained utility in association with the accidental invention of fieldwork. As Tedlock (1983) has recently noted, there is no such thing as pre-contact ethnography. But that is *precisely* the goal that was sought when a liberal ethic inspired some to know the primitive.

Ethnographic Present, I

Contrary to initial expectations, a search for the first usage of the ethnographic present was more problematic than I first imagined. The phrase does not appear in some of the standard dictionaries of anthropology and it is only rarely listed in the indexes of major texts concerned with the history of theory in the discipline. Some colleagues were certain that Malinowski had coined the phrase. To my surprise and dismay one of the leading historians of anthropological thought could offer little more than good luck in the way of help (Stocking, personal communication). The fact that little attention had been accorded its usage seemed to indicate the degree to which the concept had permeated ethnographic method and discourse. Research suggested that Malinowski did not coin the phrase, but did indeed rely upon the a-temporal style it denotes, and in this regard, functionalism and the ethnographic present are two concepts wedded in time. For example, in Malinowski's reconstruction of the Kula trade he argues (1922: 100),

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[3] As Voget (1975: 143) writes, "The trend in anthropology [1850-90] was toward a special concern for the early history of man. [For Frazer] social anthropology would be a part of sociology, restricted to the 'origin' or rather the rudimentary phases, the infancy and childhood, of human society."

> It is hardly necessary . . . to make it clear that all questions of origins, of development or history of the institutions have been rigorously ruled out of this work. The mixing up of speculative or hypothetical views with an account of the facts is, in my opinion, an unpardonable sin against ethnographic method.[4]

No matter that missionaries and representatives of foreign domination made his visit possible, his depiction of the Kula trade is, as announced six times in the foreword, a *scientific* exercise, holding as a constant any effects of these foreign elements to be irrelevant to his ethnographic narrative. In passing one might note Stocking's (1984: 167) amusing though disturbing anecdote that has direct relevance for an appreciation of this ethnographer's text. According to Stocking, in 1928 Evans-Pritchard wrote to Malinowski "suggesting a correlation between his fieldwork experiences and his theoretical orientation: 'no fieldwork/Durkheim's views; limited fieldwork/Radcliffe-Brown's views; exhaustive fieldwork/Malinowski's views'—which Malinowski had blue penciled to indicate 'a very short distance from God's view.'"[5]

While Malinowski asserted divine truth in his ethnography he also commanded the new ship of functional anthropology (see Leach 1986: 376). If nothing else the functional method of ethnographic depiction excluded time, but more importantly excluded context and history. Little more than a decade following the publication of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* the dogma that primitive peoples lacked history had become institutionalized, a matter of fact. By his own declaration, in 1942 C. Coon coined the phrase 'ethnographic present' (see Coon 1971: xx) which *introduces* a major text he coauthored with E.D. Chapple. In their *Principles of Anthropology* the authors write,

> The ethnographic present is the time at which a given event described in the text took place or takes place. Thus, a description of an event in our society, it is 1941 A.D. unless otherwise specified. . . . Events which are described for primitive peoples are ordinarily set in the period after the people in question had been discovered and observed by Europeans but before their equilibria had been upset by tangent relations with them. Thus the ethnographic present for the Aztecs would be approximately 1519 A.D., the year that Cortez arrived; for the Wampanoag Indians of Massachusetts, 1620; for some of the as yet undisturbed tribes of New Guinea, 1941.

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[4] Herskovits (1948: 528) suggested that Malinowski "promoted the concept of the zero-point in culture, the point from which change in a static way of life began. It is difficult to believe that he did not develop the concept merely to be able to demolish it, for there is no 'point' at which any culture is static." One might also want to recall here Evans-Pritchard's (1950: 120) remark, ". . . in the case of Malinowski, the functional theory, in spite of the wide claims he made for it, was little more than a literary device."

[5] Perhaps we see here the origins, or the further development, of the I-was-there authority of ethnography. A related instance is provided by Evans-Pritchard's (1970: 110) remark that only one fluent in the Nuer language was in a position to question his interpretation of their symbolism. Were this the case, of course, there could be no anthropology.

Coon's (1971: xx) shorter definition of the ethnographic present images a culture "as it was still functioning unimpaired by outside influences." The presumption is of course that the world to be observed was the world that ever was. Primitive peoples were pristine objects to be collected, and later refined like gemstones that would ultimately be transported to museums for public display.

The image of the ethnographic present appears in a number of different though closely related representations. In Oswalt's (1972: 8) more contemporary terms one speaks of a baseline ethnography, or a description

> of a people as they existed just before contact with civilized peoples . . . A composite description of the probable baseline behavior of a people, one in which time is loosely held constant and which is drawn from diverse sources, is a reconstructed baseline ethnography. Here the ideal is to establish as nearly as possible an aboriginal baseline from which to plot changes resulting subsequently from direct or indirect historical contact.

A related notion is that of the "memory culture," a synthetic image of a pristine world gleaned from the memories of "old folks" whose culture lived only through the medium of their language. On this score R. Beals remarked (1953: 627), ". . . it would appear that functionalism was the major reaction in Great Britain to the [American] study of memory cultures." In either case, the effort was consciously made to depict a timeless, primitive order (see Mandelbaum 1982: 44). Imagining a primitive society lay at the heart of the ethnographic and hence anthropological enterprise.

Illustrations of this descriptive time machine are less illusive than its first usage in the anthropological literature. Some few examples may be reviewed. Gluckman (1940: 25) began his essay on the Zulu in *African Political Systems* in these terms: "The account of the Zulu nation in this article is reconstructed from histories, contemporaneous records, and my questionings of old men." A.I. Richards (1956: xiii) began her now famous study of female initiation among the Bemba by noting "In this book the present tense refers to practices current between the years 1930 and 1934, when such phrases as 'in the old days' and 'formerly' refer to customs which were then no longer evident." Evans-Pritchard's less widely read *The Azande: History and Political Institutions* is prefaced by the observation (1971: x-xi) "With regard to 'present' I speak of the period in which I did my research among the Azande of the Sudan, between the years 1926 and 1930. Their political life had by that time been disrupted and much had already disappeared." He then adds the self-evident truth (ibid) "Today it would be impossible to gather the tradition here recorded."

As Malinowski (1939: 45) suggested, many anthropologists of his day were "keen on observing the baseline" from which changes in local traditions developed. In fact, he argued (ibid) that ". . . the anthropologist is under an *obligation* [emphasis added] to reconstruct native culture as it existed before contact." Where this may not have been possible, or where the particular ethnographer was not "keen" on doing so, pure invention, appar-

ently, sometimes sufficed. No more stunning illustration of this recourse comes from an essay written by Margaret Mead titled "Fieldwork in the Pacific Islands," where she writes (Mead 1970: 312) that all the people of the Sepik District of New Guinea

> . . . were cannibals until four year ago; boys of twelve have eaten human flesh and they show merely a mischievous and merry glee in describing their previous diet, but the idea of eating rats fills them with shuddering nausea. And we've had one corpse float by, a newborn infant; they are always throwing away infants here, as the fathers object to observing the tabus [sic] associated with their survival.

My concern here does not center on how any people might survive given a universal practice of cannibalism or the custom of tossing every other newborn into the local river. The more significant question concerns the pervasive and deeply rooted interest in "things primitive." Mead goes on to observe (ibid),

> The natives are superficially agreeable, but we suspect them of being Melanesians nonetheless, with all the Melanesian's natural nastiness. They go in for cannibalism, headhunting, infanticide, incest, avoidance and joking relationships, and biting lice in half with their teeth. Also their language is simply ridiculously easy—has hardly any grammar at all. I've hardly tried to learn it, its so simple.[6]

The fantasy depicted is a virtual paradise of pristine primitiveness though little more than common sense would suggest that the image portrayed is absurd. One should note in passing that inventing a primitive world with an a-temporal order was not limited to the British and American anthropological traditions. As Ellen (1976) has written, there is ample testimony to make the case that anthropology in the Netherlands was inspired by a similar longing. In his words, "The idea of the changelessness and diversity of Indies culture was rooted in Dutch imagery of their colonial territories, and it was a picture which anthropology did much to enrich (ibid: 320)."

A final illustration of the reliance on the ethnographic present comes from one of the classic anthropological texts, Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer*. In the present context one might recall that Evans-Pritchard suggested early on in this study that this particular group of Nilotic peoples offered a "classic picture of savagery" (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 40). The classic quality of the book is its value in illustrating an a-temporal structural and functional mode of interpretation (though I would be the last to question or criticize his otherwise enviable observational and analytic skills). It is probable that the ethnographic present of *The Nuer* invites images of nineteenth-century

[6] One reader of this essay remarked at this point, "I don't think that a literal interpretation of Mead's statements about the Sepik district people is quite fair to Mead." But is it *more* fair to the peoples in question? Mead also made the preposterous assertion that "In complicated societies like those of Europe . . . years of study are necessary before the student can begin to understand the forces at work within them, whereas a primitive people without a written language present a much less elaborate problem and a trained student can master the fundamental structure of a primitive society in a few months" (cited in McNickle 1970: 5).

Nuer society, a world that might have existed prior to the establishment of fixed "tribal boundaries" between these peoples and the neighboring pastoral Dinka, before the transformation of their "customary law" by British officials, before the imposition of a head tax, of forced labor, and so on— these things and more which were there to be observed by their esteemed ethnographer. Indeed, Evans-Pritchard was well aware of these externally generated processes. For example, in 1930 he wrote to the British Civil Secretary of the then Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and observed,

> From our point of view the natives of this area [Luo country] are too unsettled and too resentful [planes from the RAF had been bombing villages and strafing herds] and frightened to make good informants and the breakdown of their customs and traditions too sudden and severe to enable an anthropologist to obtain quick results (cited in Johnson 1982: 236).

However, what the reader is offered is a detailed account of Nuer interests in cattle, the manner of their ecological adaptation, a formal account of their system of patrilineal segmentary lineages and how these are related to an acephalous political order, the way in which lineages combine and divide and the way in which age sets cross-cut other loyalties and thus help to promote expansive webs of social solidarity, all founded upon an unclear and probably misleading distinction between the Nuer and the Dinka. While it is not self-evident to the uninformed reader, a considerable portion of his material was acquired secondhand from British officials. Johnson (ibid: 240) writes,

> The dialogue between Evans-Pritchard and the administrators continues after 1935, and he incorporated the experience of a number of them in his final monographs . . . [officials] were able to give him information on some groups of Nuer he never visited, and in fact all his comments on the Gaawar are derived from data supplied by Jackson, Coriat and Lewis.

The Nuer case attracts my attention for some obvious reasons but this fabricated social order commands critical attention for many others. Again, I think of the many textbooks which cite *The Nuer* as a classic illustration of a society formed on the basis of agnatic descent in association with a "segmentary lineage principle." Aidan Southall (1986) has presented a careful and detailed reanalysis of this and related phenomena and concludes that on the basis of the published record, agnation itself is an illusion among the Nuer. In his own words (ibid: 5), "In the cases here considered, the strict agnatic paradigm existed, if at all, in the minds and memories of the people." Another memory culture? In order that one might have a full understanding of Nuer lineages, Southall suggests, ". . . we may well need historical evidence of an earlier phase" (ibid: 3). Given the consequences of two civil wars, rural capitalism and significant trends of itinerant wage labor, it is hardly likely that this information would be forthcoming in the future. Southall asks the reader of his essay to consider the possibility that in the homeland of the Nuer, west of the Nile, a greater correspondence between

descent ideology and residence might be encountered. However, peoples of western Nuerland experienced contacts wth travelers, traders and slaving expeditions earlier and larger than did those living east of the Nile where Evans-Pritchard spent most of his time. The inevitable conclusion is that the time machine of the ethnographic present reconstructed an order of society that had already ceased to exist so that any effort to employ Evans-Pritchard's observations as a steady point for the assessment of social change is problematic at best, and suspect at worst (cf. Hutchinson 1985).

ETHNOGRAPHIC PRESENT, II

One begins to think that an earlier anthropology was not so much concerned with the disappearance of its subject matter as with its virtual creation (cf. Thornton 1983). One of the paradoxes resulting from the reliance on this method for the creation or recreation of ethnographic worlds is that the effort was inspired as a counter to speculative musings of an earlier evolutionary paradigm. But wasn't the reconstruction based on memory just as suspect?

In 1933 Paul Radin posed a question that inspired to some degree a new direction for anthropological enquiry. He noted the obvious fact that there were no "untouched tribes for the ethnologist or historian" and continued to ask, "And what precisely would be gained if we found them?" (Radin 1933: 126). Soon after phrases such as "culture contact" and "acculturation" became more common in the anthropological literature (see e.g. Herskovits 1938; Beals 1953; Strong 1953), awkward and somewhat mechanistic usages intended to bridge the many gaps between cultural memories and extant social phenomena. Cohen (1980: 199; cf. Medick 1987) characterizes this phase of ethnographic representation by invoking a "missionary in the row boat" model: ". . . the anthropologist follows in the wake of the impact caused by western agents of change, and then tried to recover what might have been." At roughly the time that acculturation studies became fashionable, "the village" also emerged as the proper focus for anthropological attention. Cohen (ibid: 205) notes,

> it seemed logical . . . to study the great civilizations through the study of villages. . . . The village was set apart from cities, considered the site of diffusion of the modern. Hence, the village was thought to be the locus of authentic indigenous culture, now defined as the "traditional."

Anthropological tradition lived on as well: as late as 1945 Malinowski continued to entertain images of the "pristine fullness" of tribal culture, of the "grace of original tribalism," of a zero-point to designate the "conditions of pre-European tribal equilibrium" (Malinowski 1945: 27). Clearly, Malinowski had not kept up with changing views of history. He and many others continued to think that all had been fine in the primitive world up to the advent of western expansion, that change of one sort or another was a

unique event. However Lowie (1935: xviii) had suggested a decade earlier that

> white influence, however devastating its effect, is not a thing *sui generis;* aboriginal peoples have borrowed from one another for thousands of years, and the attempt to isolate one culture that shall be wholly indigenous in origin is decidedly simple minded (see also Herskovits 1948: 482, 528).

Among other anthropological clans, given the obvious consequences of world war, wage labor and colonialism, it was no longer possible to entertain conjectural images of "primitive" cultures as a-temporal steady-state systems. M.G. Smith was one of a growing number ready to discard the baseline approach, which he considered to be the "indispensable basis" for functional analysis. In his words (1962: 75),

> In this type of functional theory, closure and fixity of the social system are essential assumptions without which analysis is hardly possible. Such a theoretical stance rests on a basic fallacy, which I propose to call the fallacy of the ethnographic present. By means of this fallacy, the initial exclusion of change, whether current or historical, is taken as proof that change does not occur; and current processes of change and development are either ignored where recognizable, or where unrecognized, as often happens, they are represented as contributing to the maintenance of changeless conditions (see also Lewis 1968: xiii; cf. also Richardson 1975: 523).

Smith then goes on to make what I think is the most significant point:

> Given this theory and method it is only honest to recognize that the resulting analyses are quite as conjectural and evalutory as those reconstructions of evolutionary and diffusionist anthropology which functionalists reject.

Van Velson (1967: 130) soon followed—noting that the "observational boundaries" of anthropological enquiry

> are generally those of a whole tribe at a particular moment in time. This moment is usually the present, i.e., the ethnographic present, but in fact enquiries have often been pushed back into the past in order to discover a purer tradition unadulterated by European contacts (see also Firth 1951: 80; Schapera 1962: 150-51; Kirsch 1982; Axtell 1979: 3).

The more famous disclaimer of the ethnographic present and the functional chimera of Malinowski was written by one of his own students. In his introduction to *Political Systems of Highland Burma,* Leach (1954: 7) observed,

> The social anthropologist normally studies the population of a particular place at a particular point in time and does not concern himself greatly with whether or not the same locality is likely to be studied again by another anthropologist at a later date. In the result we get studies of Trobriand society, Tikopia society, Nuer society, not "Trobriand society in 1914," "Tikopia society in 1929," "Nuer society in 1935." When anthropological societies are lifted out of time and space in this way the interpretation that is given to the material is necessarily an equilibrium analy-

> sis. The authors write as if the Trobrianders, the Tikopia, the Nuer are as they are, now and forever.

The only disagreement I have with Leach's observation is his implicit assertion that any of these peoples really were the way they were described in 1914, in 1929 or in 1935. In any case, the authors did write this way, and to date, some anthropologists continue to promote the timeless image. Even a quick glance at popular introductory textbooks confirms the suspicion that the Trobrianders, the Tikopia and the Nuer continue to live in the ethnographic present. An especially disconcerting illustration of this tendency is provided by W. Arens in his criticism of the image of anthropology as the study of the primitive. Arens (1979: 175-76) makes reference to a textbook published in 1975 where

> . . . an economic lesson on redistributive systems [is illustrated] by describing how the parts of an enemy captive "are" allocated during a cannibalistic feast among . . . the Tupinamba. The writer uses the present tense to relate the event, even though the case is taken from another anthropologist's essay composed thirty years earlier . . . which relied upon Staden's sixteenth-century reminiscences. The fact that those being analyzed so dispassionately failed to survive the sixteenth century is not mentioned, and apparently this fact did not suggest to the author that it might have been proper to shift to the past tense.

These fabricated, and in the case just cited, mythological societies of anthropological fame exist in what R. Thornton (1983: 507) has characterized as a "kind of disembodied narrative," with hidden objective observers and static structures. The result is that the "zero-point" of ethnographic reconstruction or the ethnographic present comes to serve as the "real," "authentic" baseline from which one then measures or observes social change. Then captured in history, a created world now lives on. In the cases cited here, anthropologists have been studying the present by creating a past.[7]

In some of the literature of the 1970s it was not uncommon to come upon the suggestion that anthropology in its more mature form was largely a consequence or handmaiden of colonialism, that ethnographic accounts served in some measure to advance the interests of foreign domination and oppression. Given the opportunity to take a broader view, it is clear that critiques of this sort were short-winded and perhaps historically naive. The

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[7] Another glaring irony in all of this has been addressed by Thornton (1983:507): while the discipline of social anthropology expanded enormously between the first two world wars,

> War was almost never mentioned in the publications. This has been noted, for example, apropos Evans-Pritchard's ethnographies of the Nuer of the Sudan who were under serious threat from the British colonial government at the time Evans-Pritchard described them. Although this state of war was only fleetingly mentioned in his monographs, we are told that the lineage organization is most salient in situations of conflict. We are not told, however, that the overwhelming emphasis on lineage organization in the ethnographer's description may have been strongly influenced by the Nuers' parlous situation. Of course Callaway, Junod or Roscoe did not write of the background conflict to their own studies of the Zulu, Thonga or Baganda. This lack is especially significant since all three were living and writing in major epicentres of bloody conflict (cf. also Oswalt (1972: 62-63).

few decades of colonial presence in the then anthropological foraging grounds were in effect an aftershock of centuries of "western" and "non-western" contact and change. The colonial period was but a final moment of hundreds of years of confrontation between western societies and the "traditional cultures" anthropologists arrived to discover during the present century. As E. Wolf writes (1982: 18) in his *Europe and the People Without History*, the tacit anthropological assumption that non-western peoples are "peoples without history amounts to the erasure of 500 years of confrontation, killing, resurrection and accommodation . . . Anthropology all too frequently operates with its mythology of the pristine primitive." Modern anthropology began, in fact, with this very premise, and many of the theories on the nature of culture and society that we have inherited are based upon the analysis of societies that had, in effect, ceased to exist at the moment they were constructed in the ethnographic present.

Summary

Much of what I have had to say is best considered a footnote in the contemporary critique of anthropology—and ethnography in particular—an encapsulated, unreflective ideology, and it is intended to be little more than that. What is now considered to be the better ethnography is indeed better informed historically, and it might be added that what seems to be considered to be the better history is that which is more informed anthropologically. In other words, anthropology does not have to choose between being anthropology or being nothing nor, to counter Evans-Pritchard (1961:20), does history have to choose between being anthropology or being nothing. What has to be reconsidered (once again) is what we intend to demand of the concept of culture, perhaps with greater emphasis on its temporality, and maybe a bit less on its presumed integrity.

By way of conclusion, the answer to the first question as posed by Malinowski, namely the nature of the ethnographer's magic, is likely to be found through an examination of literary style (see Payne 1981) with a blind eye to unfolding history. When now considering Mary Douglas's comment on historical memory it is clear that the "ethnographic present" served a certain function for one historical moment: among other things it created the possibility to make the study of "primitive people" an honorable and worthy exercise, sentimentally replete though it was with phrases and concepts which created a-temporal images of the sanguine savage. In 1916 Sapir (1916: 1) argued that "Cultural anthropology is more and more rapidly getting to realize itself as a strictly historical science." Apparently his vision was not attractive to those who wished instead to search for shadows at twilight. Anthropology, like its perpetual half-sibling archaeology, has always been and will continue to be historical exercise in the examination of human knowledge.[8] In her presidential address to the American An-

[8] In her presidential address to the American Anthropological Association Benedict (1948:

thropological Association in 1975 Elizabeth Colson (1976: 262) remarked, "... in almost 40 years as an anthropologist and ethnographer, I have never encountered a primitive." Who, indeed, among the anthropologists, has?

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585) confessed her fear that she would be labeled a heretic for asserting that anthropology, history and the humanities had far more in common than with the so-called social sciences. As is well known, Evans-Pritchard (1950) caused quite a stir in assuming the same stance, though he did not acknowledge Benedict's earlier public convictions, a fact that might attract the attention of some future historian of the discipline.

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