A hostile tribe made him their chief: Edwin W. Smith and anthropology

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So far as the topic of this conference is concerned I contributed a piece a few years ago on African Missionaries in Zambia¹ which was related to our theme this year. Today I want to consider the related issue of mission and anthropology. British Methodism has produced many world class scholars but in anthropology Edwin W Smith is unique in being the only missionary of any denomination to be President of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

Anthropology was in its infancy in the nineteenth century. The Aboriginal Protection Society, founded in the 1830s to protect newly colonized peoples 'provided the original intellectual and moral impetus which led ultimately to the formation of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain' in 1871. Conceived of as a comprehensive study of humanity the subject became a discipline in its own right, first at Oxford in 1884 and as 'ethnology' at Cambridge in 1900. EB Tylor (1832-1917), Oxford's first Professor of anthropology, had made field studies as a young man but 'For the most part he culled his data from the reports of travellers and missionaries'. He and JG Frazer (1854-1941) who followed the same method were described as 'armchair anthropologists'. Frazer would raise the subject's standing with editions of the *Golden Bough* from 1890 onwards and in 1908, at Liverpool, became the first Professor of Social Anthropology. Before the First World War social anthropology developed further with courses at the London School of Economics involving the early field worker academics, CG Seligman and WHR Rivers.

Edwin Smith (1876-1957)⁴ was born of missionary parents in South Africa but after early years there he lived in England until 1898 when he felt called to join the Primitive

¹ The stories of two of the African Missionaries (Robert Moalosi and Ezekiel Masunyane) were expanded and appear on the online Dictionary of African Christian Biography; http://www.dacb.org/stories/zambia/masunyane_ezekiel.html

² Lewis, I. M., *Social Anthropology in Perspective: The Relevance of Social Anthropology*' 2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 37. Some relevant histories of the subject are: Goody, J., *The Expansive Moment: Anthropology in Britain and Africa 1918-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; Kuklick, Henrika, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology 1885-1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; Kuper, A., *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The Modern British School*, London: Routledge, 1983.

³ Chris Holdsworth, 'Tylor, Sir Edward Burnett (1832–1917)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct 2006Dictionary of National Biography, Article on E.B. Tylor.

⁴ On Edwin Smith: McVeigh, M, God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity, Cape Cod Massachusetts: Claude Starke, 1974. Young: W. John, 'The Legacy of Edwin W Smith', International Bulletin of Missionary Research, Jul. 2001, Vol. 25, Issue 3, p. 126-130; available online

Methodist mission in Central Africa as a Bible translator. After language study in Lesotho and an extended period in Aliwal North on account of the Boer War he began his work among the Ila in 1902. He reduced their language to writing and published his *Handbook of* the Ila Language in 1907. By that time he had made friends with A. M. Dale, a District Officer, and having realised 'that speech can only be learnt in its cultural context' they turned to anthropology for help and Smith joined the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1909. For guidance they used the available scholarly literature and, as Smith said, Frazer's 'little collection of Questions became for us a golden string leading us through the maze of African life. '6 The result of their collaboration was a famous book, The Ila-Speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia (2 Volumes, 1920). Referred to here as ISP it is often known as 'Smith and Dale' and Smith always acknowledged Dale's contribution although Smith was actually responsible for more than 90% of the text and 82% of the photographs. ISP joined the classic missionary anthropologies of Roscoe (The Baganda (1911)) and Junod (The Life of a South African Tribe (1912)). They were amateurs but later generations of anthropologists admired their work. Elizabeth Colson, in her Introduction to the 1968 edition of ISP, stated that 'The *Ila-Speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia* is one of the great classics of African ethnology. This has been recognised since it first appeared in 1920 and the years have not diminished its reputation'8 She noted that their reading of Tylor and Frazer 'did little to help them in their study of the Ila; but their study of the Ila made an enduring contribution to the field of scholarship.'9 Apart from their treatment of kinship and social organisation she said that 'they succeeded magnificently, 10 and 'They wrote of friends whom they respected as their equals.'11

This great work established Smith's reputation as an anthropologist and became 'a standard work of reference in African ethnography... in the 1920's and later.' In the 1990s Smith's great granddaughter enrolled in a course on medical anthropology and was surprised to hear the lecturer bring in Smith as a significant anthropologist.

Although Smith was involved in anthropology thereafter his interest ran parallel to and fed into several other activities, mostly about Africa. He was involved in the African

at http://www.dacb.org/stories/zambia/legacy_smith.html and Young, W. John, The Quiet Wise Spirit: Edwin W. Smith (1876-1957) and Africa, Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2002. Referred to as QWS.

⁵ Smith Edwin W., Presidential address 'Anthropology and the Practical Man', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 1934, p xvi.

⁶ Smith, *Edwin W., Plans –and People! A Dynamic Science of Man in the Service of Africa*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1948, p. 7.

⁷ Dale died on 1 May 1919. His son Andrew Mapani Dale included some biographical information on his father in, *The Little Bell Boy*, Lusaka, Zambia: ZPC Publications, 1998.

⁸ Colson, Elizabeth, 'Introduction' to 1968 edition of *ISP* p 1.

⁹ Op cit p 2.

¹⁰ Op cit p 5.

¹¹ Op cit p 6.

¹² Letter to author from Professor Sir Raymond Firth, 28 June 1994.

Society (now the Royal African Society) and wrote many of the book reviews for its journal in the 1920s. He helped found and was active in the International African Institute (IAI) which drew together anthropologists and missionaries and created research fellows who investigated change in Africa. Africa World War 2 he edited the IAI journal Africa for a few years. His day job with the British and Foreign Bible Society (1916-39) took him from being an Area Secretary (1916-23) to Literary Superintendent (1923-32) and finally, as Editorial Superintendent (1933-39), he was responsible for the Society's translation work. At the same time he wrote many books and numerous articles and reviews. ¹³ In that context anthropology was one of his main interests.14

Having written such a fine book Smith could advise missionaries on the usefulness of anthropology and did that with an article, 'Social Anthropology and Missionary Work' in the International Review of Missions (October 1924). There he described four kinds of missionary; the uninterested, others who were social anthropologists without realising it and the well-informed who were divided between those who did or did not apply it to their work. He wanted 'to see the science of social anthropology recognized as an essential discipline in the training of missionaries' 15 a sentiment frequently repeated by others to this day. 16 His examples of cultural gaffes included the colonial government's misunderstanding of the significance of the Golden Stool of Ashanti. Captain Rattray, an anthropologist, showed how this led to two unnecessary wars. Smith argued that social anthropology was the best way to understand the socio/cultural situation, avoid mistakes and evaluate the past in relation to the changes coming through contact with the west. Although many people recognised that 'Christianity and western civilization are not identical' they were often confused them in practice. In Smith's view Christianity could adapt itself to many settings because it has 'a spirit which is able to possess many bodies'. 18 To facilitate such adaptations he suggested that missions could learn from the Government which employed anthropologists, Captain Rattray, for example. This ensured that local customs were respected when foreign institutions were introduced to help Africans join the international scene. Smith was sure that missionaries

¹³ These are listed in *OWS*.

¹⁴ He used the Golden Stool incident as the title and opening chapter of his 1926 Hartley Lecture, *The* Golden Stool, a wide ranging survey of Africa at the time. He focussed on the religious aspects of anthropology in describing African Religions in The Secret of the African (1929) and later in his pioneering foray into African Christian Theology, African Beliefs Christian Faith (1936). In his 1940 Powell Lectures (printed as Knowing the African, 1946) he called on missionaries to acquire 'an anthropological mind' (p 35). African Ideas of God approached the subject by considering the social/cultural setting of various tribes.

^{15 &#}x27;Social Anthropology and Missionary Work' in the International Review of Missions (October 1924), p. 519.

¹⁶ Chiefly in the USA from William A Smalley to Charles H Kraft and Darrell Whiteman.

¹⁷ 'Social Anthropology and Missionary Work' in the *International Review of Missions* (October 1924), p. 527.

18 Ibid.

should follow that approach instead of 'ignoring native customs or of otherwise teaching the natives to despise them.' 19

By this time Smith was being recognised by anthropologists and as the subject was emerging from the 'armchair' period he had expert status as a pioneer field worker and 'participant observer'. He had never been to university but universities used him as an examiner. As examples of this he was the external examiner of Isaac Schapera's 1929 PhD thesis at London, ²⁰ 'an external examiner at Cambridge' and in the 1940s was the external examiner for Geoffrey Parrinder's thesis on West African Religion. ²²

The relationship between missionaries and anthropologists²³ has been described as 'ambivalent, uneasy and fraught with contradictions' ²⁴ and with a 'negative attitude towards missionaries' ²⁵ from anthropologists. Hortense Powdermaker in Malinowski's classes learned that 'missionaries were an enemy, except for Edwin Smith and H.A. Junod'. ²⁶ There was some meeting of minds because the International African Institute, founded in 1926, brought the two groups together and in 1930 the leading light in anthropology, Malinowski, was advising missionaries on their work. ²⁷ After Smith was based in London from 1923 he was increasingly involved in the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI). He attended meetings and by the late 1920s was on its Council alongside such distinguished people as Malinowski, R.R. Marett and R.S. Rattray. The Institute awarded him the Rivers medal in 1931 'for his valuable field-work in Northern Rhodesia' and two years later he was elected President of the RAI. This was recognition indeed. He was the only missionary ever to be honoured in this way and shows that the anthropologists respected the quality of his research and the depth and breadth of his knowledge. Of this period, H.J. Braunholtz, a later President of the RAI, wrote that 'his conduct of its affairs inspired general admiration and respect.' ²⁹

¹⁹ Op cit p. 528.

²⁰ Letter to author from Professor I. Schapera, London, 8 August 1992.

²¹ Smith Edwin W., Presidential address 'Anthropology and the Practical Man', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 1934, xxxi.

²² Parrinder, Geoffrey, *In the Belly of the Snake*, Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2000, p 157.

²³ Recently discussed by Whiteman, Darrell, 'Anthropology and Mission: The Incarnational Connection', in Global Missiology, Research Methodology, April 2004.

²⁴ van der Geest, S.,'Anthropologists and Missionaries Brothers under the Skin.', *Man*, 1990 (N.S.) 25, 588.

²⁵ 'Anthropologists versus Missionaries', Stipe, C.E., *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 21, No. 2, April 1980, p. 165. See also E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology*, London: Cohen and West, 1951, who wrote of the 'suspicion with which anthropology has been regarded in missionary circles. The suspicion has not perhaps been unfounded, for anthropology has always been mixed up with free-thought and has been considered, not unjustly, as anti-religious in tone, and even in aim.' p. 113 and went on, 'Nevertheless, many individual missionaries have taken a deep interest in anthropology and have realised its value for their own work.' p. 114.

²⁶ Powdermaker, H., Stranger and Friend, London, 1967, p. 43.

²⁷ Methodist Recorder, 15 May 1930, p. 20.

²⁸ *JRAI* 1931 xiv.

²⁹ The Times, 8 Jan 1958.

So, although anthropologists were regarded as a hostile tribe for missionaries, the Revd Edwin W. Smith was accepted and made chief.

In 1929 Malinowski called 'for the creation of a new kind of anthropology, which would later come to be called applied anthropology.' ³⁰ Smith was already promoting this in 1924 and Darrell Whiteman regards him as the 'leading advocate for applying anthropological insights to mission'. Smith continued this approach when, as President, he addressed the RAI in 1934 on 'Anthropology and the Practical Man'. There he argued that the practical people, missionaries, educators and colonial officers, needed first of all to understand their people and maintained that anthropology was a powerful tool for achieving this. He repeated his convictions about the adaptability of Christianity stating that 'out of the really vital elements of African life I believe the spirit of Christianity can form a body that will at least be as worthy as the European body. 32 He had already argued that churches in other countries should be trusted to do this because they had the Bible and could work things out in their own way.³³ He was ahead of his time for, as Darrell Whiteman wrote 70 years later

in 1953 the common understanding among most Bible translators and missionaries was that if we could just get the Scriptures into indigenous peoples' languages, then they would come to think like us in the West. And so anthropology was pressed into the service of Bible translation and other aspects of mission. It would not be until the 1970s that we would come to appreciate the importance of contextualization and to realize that people in different cultures should not only not come to think like us once they have the Bible in their own language, but also have the mind of Christ within their own culture.34

Smith's second Presidential Address, in 1935, was entitled, 'Africa – what do we know of it?' H.J. Braunholtz described it as 'a monumental survey, summarizing our knowledge to date of the geography, prehistory, ethnology, and linguistics of the continent, and running (in print) to more than 80 pages.'35 Smith consulted experts in those and other fields and concluded his massive survey of the knowledge base at the time by answering his question with 'Very little as yet'. 36 Nevertheless, he suggested lines of research for the future, especially into the

³⁰ Whiteman, Darrell, 'Anthropology and Mission: The Incarnational Connection', in Global Missiology, Research Methodology, April 2004, p. 8. ³¹ Op cit., p. 10.

³² Smith Edwin W., Presidential address 'Anthropology and the Practical Man', *Journal of the Royal* Anthropological Institute, 1934, p xxvii.

^{33 &#}x27;Happily the Churches overseas are very largely literate, and they have access to the Bible. We need have no fear of their future while this is the case.' Smith, Edwin W., The Shrine of a People's Soul, London: Church Missionary Society, 1929, p 202.

³⁴ Charles E. Van Engen, Darrell Whiteman, J. Dudley Woodberry, Eds, *Paradigm Shifts in Christian* Witness: Insights from Anthropology, Communication, and Spiritual Power: Essays in Honor of Charles H. Kraft, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York. pp11, 12.

³⁵ The Times, 8 Jan 1958.

³⁶ Smith, Edwin W., Presidential Address JRAI, 1935, p81

cultural changes in Africa's growing urban areas. In 1994, Raymond Firth, Secretary of the RAI in 1935, said that this address 'did much to launch the systematic research interest in Africa which developed in the decades after 1934 [sic].'³⁷ Indeed, Colson and Gluckman in 1951 dedicated their book, *Seven Tribes of Central Africa*, to Dr Edwin W Smith and agreed that *ISP* 'founded anthropological research in British Central Africa'.³⁸

Smith promoted applied anthropology again after World War Two. On October 23, 1946 he gave the Frazer Lecture in Social Anthropology at Liverpool University. These 'lecturers have been among the most eminent anthropologists in the world.' After describing his meetings with Frazer in the 1920s, Smith surveyed the subject's history and development since 1908 before advocating applied anthropology as a practical science to benefit humanity.

He argued that anthropology was no longer the study and preservation of exotic societies 'the antiquarianism of the older anthropologists has given way to the study of societies as they actually are to-day'. Such research included the changes affecting previously isolated societies and was particularly pertinent in Africa where the colossal effects of contact with Western civilisation far outweighed anything in the past. He pointed out that the Wilsons' research showed that Central Africa was influenced by Western patterns of education, administration and religion and new groupings appeared as conservatives and progressives responded and adapted to social change.

Although some anthropologists ignored these changes Smith argued that anthropologists should not only study them but also advise on the likely effects of proposed developments and contended that anthropologists were more than suited 'to take part in social engineering'. This was particularly important after World War Two when the colonial Government, too slow in working towards self-government for colonies, was at long last funding 500 development schemes for Africans who by that time were generally malnourished, disease-ridden and illiterate. These schemes covered health, agriculture, town planning and education and success would depend on technically competent Africans and their willing cooperation along with wise planning by people who knew the continent and with detailed evaluations of the total environment of areas being developed.

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³⁷ Letter to author from Raymond Firth, 28 June 1994.

³⁸ Colson, E., and Gluckman, M., eds, *Seven Tribes of Central Africa*, London: Oxford University Press, 1951, p. ix.

³⁹ Ackerman, Robert, *J.G. Frazer: His Life and Work*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, 288.

⁴⁰ Smith, Edwin W., *Plans – and People! A Dynamic Science of Man in the Service of Africa*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1948, p. 10.

⁴¹ Smith had been the examiner for Monica Wilson's thesis later published as *Reaction to Conquest*.

⁴² Op cit, p. 21.

Smith reminded his hearers that research by IAI Fellows into cultural interactions in Africa had 'produced monographs which set a new standard of excellence'. 43 Lord Hailey's huge African Survey (1938) also called for further research into the social conditions of Africa and in Smith's view the results could contribute to human welfare. Here he parted company with any anthropologists who regarded applied anthropology as unscientific. He had once thought that anthropology did no more than submit data but recent events (i.e. the atom bomb) showed that 'science divorced from ethics might be the enemy rather than the friend of mankind.'44 He concluded that facts and values go together so 'our claim as anthropologists to be engaged simply and purely in fact-finding is illusory'45 and therefore, 'Research values and purposes should be explicitly stated'. 46 Recent anthropologists admit that the subject's task 'with respect to "culture" is hardly "innocent". Its use has never been divorced from moral and political value. It would be to our academic, as well as moral, advantage to recognise the significance of this fact. '47 Smith nailed his own colours to the Kingdom of God but thought that although anthropologists involved in development work had various value systems there was enough common ground for them to join their 'efforts with those of other scientists.'48 He concluded by hoping that more social scientists would be included in development programmes.⁴⁹

This approach to anthropology raises many questions. Relatively recently it has been said that 'governments and social scientists have tended to be opportunist: suggesting ad hoc ameliorations of particular contingencies in line with, generally, Western liberal aspirations... in recent years many anthropologists and some missionaries have adopted varieties of Marxist approach in relation to change and reform.' It may thus be argued that anthropology, mission, development etc are forms of dominance. This should be enough to make such workers tread cautiously but it would be rash though to react by returning to antiquarianism and preserving societies as they were. This preservationist approach is now known as essentialist anthropology and Rappart and Overing mention that 'The Caribbean

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⁴³ Op cit, p. 37.

⁴⁴ Op cit, p. 55.

⁴⁵ Op cit, p. 57.

⁴⁶ Op cit, p. 59.

⁴⁷ Rapport, Nigel, and Overing, Joanna, *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010, p. 120.

⁴⁸ Op cit, p. 65.

⁴⁹ This was not Smith's last contribution to anthropology. In 1948-9 he went to Africa and revisited the Ila and from his visit updated some aspects of the *ISP* which he published in *African Studies*. It is a pity that this was not included when the *ISP* was re-issued in 1968. Finally, in 1952 he gave the fourth Henry Myers lecture to the RAI. These lectures were on the study of religion and Smith devoted his to 'African Symbolism'.

⁵⁰ Burridge, Kenelm, *In the Way: A Study of Christian Missionary Endeavours*, University of British Colombia Press, 1991, p. 218.

⁵¹ This is discussed very thoroughly in Van Rinsum, Henk J., *Slaves of their Definitions*, Maastricht: Shaker Publishing, 2001.

Nobel Prize-winning author Derek Walcott warns against the 'patronising gaze' that insists upon the purity of culture' and in their discussion point out that

contrary to popular ideas about the matter, indigenous people are often quite open to change... and are not opposed to accepting new practices. It is not unreasonable to say, however, that they themselves prefer having a say in deciding on what is good or damaging to their communities and on their desired ways of living.⁵³

Smith would agree for, in 1934, he said that

Africans have a right to be Africans. They also have a right to take over whatever they may wish from our own culture. But we have no right to impose it, to act as if all that is handed down to them from the past is valueless under the new conditions.⁵⁴

And, as far as missiology was concerned Smith was acutely aware of cultural imperialism. Again in 1934 he said,

too often missionaries have regarded themselves as agents of European civilization and have thought it part of their duty to spread the use of English language, English clothing, English music - the whole gamut of our culture.⁵⁵

Smith visited India in 1938/39⁵⁶, met Nehru, Gandhi and others and in 1940 stated that a supreme need was 'to purge our missionary enterprise of all taint of cultural imperialism.'⁵⁷ That may seem obvious today but Smith's deep study of people and their cultures helped him to see such things more clearly than many other missionaries in the first half of the twentieth century and possibly in the first half of the twenty first century too for recently Darrell Whiteman has observed that

This pattern of confusing the gospel with one's culture is being repeated throughout the non-Western world and missionaries from these cultures are making the same mistakes that Western missionaries made in the age of Colonialism when the gospel was first brought to their cultures. ⁵⁸

Brian Stanley, in discussing the legacy of Edinburgh 1910 with respect to Africa, argues that the conference's faulty essentialist anthropology was the basis for 'the very aspects of the conference's pronouncements which present-day Christians are inclined to view with greatest sympathy, namely its consistent enthusiasm for indigenous agency and cultural diversity in the expression of the Christian faith, and its opposition to imperial exploitation of indigenous

⁵⁴ 'Anthropology and the Practical Man' p. xxi.

⁵² Rapport, Nigel, and Overing, Joanna, *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010, p. 204.

⁵³ Op cit, p. 206.

^{55 &#}x27;Anthropology and the Practical Man' pp. xxvif.

⁵⁶ This was a six month tour on behalf of the BFBS to assess the position in Bible translation and the need for new versions.

⁵⁷ Knowing the African, p. 18.

⁵⁸ Whiteman, Darrell, 'One Significant Solution: How Anthropology Became the Number One Study For Evangelical Missionaries Part II: Anthropology and Mission: The Incarnational Connection' p4. 2004?

people." He then claims that this also led to 'theories of cultural plurality and hence of "accommodation" or "indigenization" theories that were the necessary precondition for the development of Asian and later African theologies." It seems, and I find this hard to believe, that Stanley thinks that there should be no cultural diversity in Christianity and that imperial exploitation is okay. This clearly needs fuller discussion for it could be argued that the links between essentialism and indigenization etc are not nearly as strong as he claims. Indeed, indigenization etc could be reached by other routes than essentialism; for example, by respecting people and their cultures and their ability to absorb and adapt to new situations.

Edwin Smith certainly followed the latter path. For him anthropology was part of an integrated bundle which included historical, religious and mission studies. He distanced himself from the essentialist anthropology of his day and freed himself from the notion that Africans were in civilisation's bottom class. In his Preface to *ISP* he advised readers not to 'forget that these Ba-ila are flesh and blood, and soul as you and we are.' ⁶¹ and years later wrote, 'As I came to know them intimately I became aware that we shared a common humanity... Such unlikenesses as existed were mainly accountable to environment and tradition.' ⁶² Following Huxley he stated 'that as soon as the concept of *race* is subjected to dispassionate analysis it turns out to be pseudo-scientific.'

We may say that Smith saw humanity as one race with a great variety of socio/cultural forms and summarised his thoughts as follows:

'Differences ... are a pre-condition of co-operation. Society is a community of unlike individuals bound together by mutual respect for their equal dignity. This, says Brunner, is the unique character of the Christian idea of Society. It combines the two principal elements of equality and unlikeness which everywhere else are in conflict with each other.' 64

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p. 309.

 $^{^{59}}$ Stanley, Brian, The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009,

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ ISP Vol. 1, p xiii.

⁶² Smith, Edwin W., *The Blessed Missionaries*, London: Oxford University Press, 1950, p. 136

⁶³ Op cit., p 137.

⁶⁴ Smith, Edwin W., *The Blessed Missionaries*, London: Oxford University Press, 1950, p. 141.

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