

THE RHODES-LIVINGSTONE INSTITUTE AND INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH IN NORTHERN RHODESIA (ZAMBIA), 1937-1964

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Abstract

This article examines the rise of interdisciplinary research in Northern Rhodesia (colonial Zambia). It does this by exploring path-breaking research conducted by the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute since its founding in 1937 up to the country's attainment of independence from Britain in 1964. The article argues that the rationale for the establishment of the research institute was due to the pressing need for knowledge owing to the emergence of social problems related to urban growth and labour migration by the 1930s. While not pretending to be an exhaustive survey of the work of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, the article notes that research outcomes from the Institute were utilised by the colonial administration and other stakeholders such as mining companies on the Copperbelt in order to understand the human situation in the country. By the 1950s, however, the Institute had become at variance with Government officials as the latter suspected many researchers of being sympathetic to the African political cause.

1. Introduction

Many attempts have been made to define the term 'interdisciplinarity' in research (Berger, 1972; Mayville, 1978; Stember, 1991) although none seems satisfactory. Most attempts at the definition of the term

tend to sub-divide interdisciplinarity into several categories such as multidisciplinary, pluridisciplinarity, crossdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity. In this article, interdisciplinarity follows the definition by Nissani (1997: 203). It implies a research approach involving a combination of two or more disciplines in the search or creation of new knowledge, operation or artistic expressions. For example, historians of the field sciences have shown how the practices associated with tourism partly formed the basis of astronomers' solar eclipse expeditions in the Victorian period and how the practices of painters, mining engineers, and prospectors came to be employed by geologists (Schumaker 1996: 237).

Interdisciplinary research in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) began in the late 1930s following the establishment of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI). It was noted that disciplinarians often commit errors which could be best detected by people familiar with two or more fields of specialisation. Anthropologists dominated research at the newly established Institute, but scholars from disciplines such as History, Ethnography, Economics, Political Science, and Geography were also fused in. These scholars came to be known as the Manchester School, after the university whose seminars were intense and testing *fora* for them and others. As Nissani notes, interdisciplinary approach offers fresh insights and methodologies from other disciplines in the study of social phenomena (Nissani 1997: 205). Brown (1973, 1979) has written evocative accounts of the RLI's members' involvement in the country as an example of Europeans' presence in Africa. Kruper (1973) has characterised the Institute's role in the development of British anthropological thought as a part of the history of ideas, while Van Donge (1985) establishes the connection between the work of the RLI and understanding the state of rural post-independence Zambia. This article makes a contribution to the historiography of social science research in colonial Zambia. It does not pretend to be an exhaustive review of either the total work of the RLI or its contribution to the development of anthropological thought.

2. The need for knowledge

Since the arrival of Governor Hubert Young in Northern Rhodesia in 1929, the colonial Government's intention had been to set up a museum in the country for archaeological and anthropological exhibits. However, before this project could take off, a bloody industrial dispute

took place on the country's Copperbelt in 1935 — the first such mine workers strike. All mining houses were taken by surprise because prior to this mine operations ran smoothly. Mine managers were very relaxed and never thought Africans could strike because they believed workers were happy. The authorities gave an example of the large numbers of people available on the Copperbelt in search of jobs after the Depression as an indication that things on the mines were stable. They also interpreted the low rates of absenteeism and desertion on the mines as indicators of job dissatisfaction. The strike had many characteristics of a spontaneous, unplanned protest against the colonial Government in all its manifestations. It only ended when the police opened fire on a crowd at Roan Antelope mine in Luanshya town, killing six people. According to Henderson (1973: 293) and Meebelo (1970), the subsequent enquiry into the disturbances only revealed how little was known about the conditions in the mine compounds, and about the feelings of African workers.

What this strike revealed was that there were deep-rooted challenges in the country which needed to be addressed. It was in this vein that the government decided to set up a research institute that could tackle challenges that had emerged due to migratory labour, urbanisation and industrialisation. According to Schumacker (1996), the Government used the argument that societies undergoing rapid social change needed to be studied. Thus the RLI was founded in 1937, with the need for more scientific research as one of its justifications. It was envisaged to become part of the life of both African and European communities, and make scientific research important to those communities (Brown 1979: 532). It was envisaged that the running of the country should itself be regarded primarily as a scientific affair and that the administration should thus become "the main mechanism for putting the big scientific plan into operation" (Brown 1979: 533-4). In this way, the sciences were to provide the colonial administration with the knowledge which could make intelligent planning possible. Although an independent research entity, the RLI was controlled by a board of trustees. Its members were drawn from the Government, the European settler community and representatives of the influential mining companies.

The Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt had grown up rapidly since the beginning of mining in the mid-1920s, leading to the growth of towns at Nkana (Kitwe), Mufulira and Luanshya, Ndola and Nchanga

(Chingola). These centres in turn attracted thousands of African and European workers from the region, Britain and the rest of the Empire. The Copperbelt in this way became an unstable mixture of African and European immigrants. Africans were confined to the large compounds with utterly inadequate domestic or recreational facilities (Powdermaker 1973; Berger 1974; Parpart 1983). European miners had much better facilities and working conditions than their African counterparts. What emerged on the mines, therefore, was stark confrontation between the mining houses on the one hand, and a large number of disgruntled Africans, on the other. This state of affairs became a constant source of irritation between the two groups.

3. Understanding change

The onset of the Second World War, however, upset the work of the Institute as some of the staff was enlisted into the army. However, Godfrey Wilson, the Institute's first Director (1938-1941), and his group of researchers set out to create an empirical science of man as a social being during wartime. Their aim was to take living societies as their object and to treat them as natural phenomena to be studied with all the rigour of the natural sciences and to be studied at first hand (Brown 1979: 526). Researchers' fresh data were about the observed social practice of specific, recognisable individuals; events were given in detail, with a characteristic richness. The arguments they advanced gave theoretical force to such concepts as, to mention a few among the many, the social field, situational analysis, perpetual succession, cross-cutting ties, the dominant cleavage, redressive ritual, repetitive and changing social systems, and processual change (Werbner 1984: 157). The potential significance of this approach in the period after the Depression had equally been noted by British colonial officials. In fact Lord Hailey dismissed old methods employed by anthropologists and praised the new ones, whose studies were a necessary basis for improving the living conditions of Africans.¹⁾ Godfrey Wilson (1942) and Lynn Saffrey (1943) presented two significant studies during wartime on Broken Hill town and the Copperbelt respectively. What came out of these studies was that a growing number of Africans were adopting the towns as their homes for long periods. In particular, Wilson formulated some of his problems in terms of the changes in the behaviour of African town dwellers according to the length of time they had resided

in town. Wilson's study on Broken Hill was actually the first done by researchers of a British Central African town.

Nonetheless, it was during the reign of Max Gluckman (1941-1947) as Director that the research agenda of the Institute was streamlined through his Seven Year Research Plan (1945). In spite of vehement opposition to the RLI's work from certain sections of the settler community, the Government was convinced that it could still make a valuable contribution to the well-being of the society. As the Secretary for Native Affairs, Lord Hailey noted the rapidity and intensity of industrialisation and the changes being brought about by the war created a need for information which justified the continued existence of the Institute.²⁾ The Government used the RLI in trying to win the support of Africans during the Second World War. It was in this regard that Gluckman took to the field in the Buluzi flood plains, spreading propaganda in order to win the Lozi people's sympathy and loyalty for the Allied powers war effort. It was actually during the war period that the British Government enacted the Colonial Development and Welfare Acts (1940 and 1945) which also included a scientific research component for the colonies. Hailey (1944) argued the case for more social science research in the colonies when stating that development can only be successfully achieved by a partnership in which the social no less than the natural sciences play their part.

4. Post-war consolidation

When the war came to an end, the Institute became part of the Imperial government's post war colonial development agenda and was lavishly funded by the newly created Colonial Social Science Research Council (CSSRC). As a result, the RLI was able to recruit many more young researchers, many of whom were working on their doctoral studies. Three officers were appointed from the grant received from the Colonial Development Fund. J A Barnes was recruited to study the Ngoni people of the Fort Jameson (Chipata) area; Elizabeth Colson was assigned to study the Plateau Tonga of Mazabuka district, and Clyde Mitchell was employed to work among the Yao of Nyasaland. Gluckman was tasked to continue his study of the Lozi people. Another scholar, J F Holleman, who had been appointed under the Beit Trust grant, went to study the Shona people of Southern Rhodesia. Others were the English social anthropologist Audrey Richards who continued

examining the Bemba people's food culture, nutrition, agriculture, land use and economic organisation; and Godfrey Wilson studied the Nya-kyusa people of Southern Tanganyika (Tanzania). The aim of this group of scholars was to produce a general description of each ethnic group so as to help Government officials working in the region and students seeking to know about the social organisation of different groups. Their research culminated in the publication of an edited volume by Colson and Gluckman (1951). The Luapula Valley had been identified as one of the five main areas of research projected for the Institute in Gluckman's Seven Year Plan. It was selected specifically because it was a typical fishing area unlike the other areas of study. As a research officer of the Institute, Ian Cunnison undertook fieldwork in the Luapula Valley between 1948-1951 from which he published a monograph (1961) and a number of other scholarly articles.

The Institute's researchers attempted to achieve comparability of data on a range of topics studied in different field sites. This went beyond the usual collection of genealogies used by anthropologists to unravel kinship structure, extending to the collection of demographic statistics that the Institute used for comparative analysis of a variety of local societies and their adaptation to changes brought about by labour migration and industrial growth (Schumaker 1996: 239). This resulted in the development of new research methods of fieldwork and analysis such as the case study method, situational analysis, and network theory. The studies of the post-war period were also unique in the sense that they addressed problems of contemporary African life rather than retrospective descriptions of pre-colonial social systems. This helped to remove the dichotomy previously drawn between urban and rural societies, thereby becoming the pioneers of urban anthropology. For example, Mitchell and Epstein (1959: 22-40) examined the degree to which social relationships in an urban setting were being organised in terms of social strata. One method developed to approach this problem was the study of the ranking of occupations by their social prestige. This method had the advantage, according to Mitchell and Epstein (1959: 22), that the techniques used were fairly simple, and could be applied at successive times, thus yielding some measure of change at different places, thus yielding comparative material.

Indirect rule was introduced in Northern Rhodesia in 1929 as a system of giving more responsibility to traditional rulers to run the affairs of state especially with regard to the dispensation of justice, tax collec-

tion, recruitment of labour and public works in rural areas. Before its introduction in Northern Rhodesia, the policy of indirect rule had been tried in other British colonies in Africa. It was first introduced in the Sokoto Caliphate in Northern Nigeria by Sir Frederick Lugard in 1922. Soon it spread to East and Central African territories. For instance, in Tanganyika, it was introduced by Governor Donald Cameron in 1926, and in the Ashante protectorate by James Maxwell. It was Maxwell who would bring this policy to Northern Rhodesia when he was transferred there as Governor in 1929. This system needed to be investigated scientifically in order to gauge its efficacy (Datta 1976). Once again the RLI took the lead. On the other hand, the influx of Africans into urban areas had also brought about the challenge of how to administer them in town in the absence of traditional rulers as in the rural home areas.

Mining authorities, therefore, came up with their own crude methods of administering African workers in towns as the colonial state never seemed too keen in the matter. The evolution of urban administration in Northern Rhodesia, therefore, is almost synonymous with the development of the Copperbelt. As the mining towns grew, it was noted that there was no mechanism on how to deal with urban Africans in the new mine compounds. Worse still was the fact that the new societies were heterogeneous. It thus became necessary to work out some form of channel that would suit Africans from different ethnic groups on the Copperbelt. It was in this regard that the Compound Mine Manager at Mufulira, Francis Spearpoint, introduced the system of Tribal Elders at Roan Antelope mine compound in 1931. This was followed by Urban Native Courts in the period after the 1935 strike. Applying anthropological methods, Epstein (1958) undertook to investigate the administrative and political system involving Africans in an urban community on the Copperbelt.

5. Research and protest

While in the late 1940s and 1950s Government's development goals demanded greater activity by administrators and technical officers in areas of African housing, health, agriculture, the new phase came with other challenges following the influx of white settler and mine workers who were attracted by the country's copper boom. Most of these came from the settler societies in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, where

Europeans lived in relatively large numbers and practised racial segregation as institutionalised, official policy. Many settlers, especially those of Afrikaner stock brought with them distinctly South African forms of discrimination, which they continued on the farms and mines of Northern Rhodesia. At the same time, this was a crucial period due to heightened African nationalism and the rise of African intellectuals. This brought the Institute in variance with Government work. Many state officials began to look at the work of researchers with a lot of suspicion because the latter were sympathetic towards Africans and their desire for political independence. Some researchers at the Institute gave covert support to Africans in the areas where they conducted research. Similarly, when the Northern Rhodesian African National Congress under Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula declared Two Days of Prayer in 1953 in protests against the introduction of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, African Assistants at the Institute organised a work boycott with the full support of the organisation.

6. Conclusion

This article does not attempt a comprehensive survey of the more than seven decades of colonial rule in Northern Rhodesia, but has as its focus the emergence and works of the country's first research institute. In colonial Zambia, the RLI took the lead in interdisciplinary research starting from the late 1930s following its establishment. The setting up of the RLI was due to social challenges facing the country which culminated in the first miners' strike on the Copperbelt in 1935. The country's social problems primarily emerged from industrialisation and labour migration. The Government realised social science research could aid in understanding societies undergoing rapid change. It was envisaged that results of research done at the new Institute could help in correcting some of the maladministration on the mines and other sectors of the society, in this way bring about good governance. It has been noted that by the 1950s, several path-breaking studies had been conducted by researchers, most of who came from Britain. Such studies were utilised by colonial administrators in understanding the human situation at local levels. The social scientists who worked at RLI in Lusaka produced studies which can be found in libraries throughout the world. At Zambia's independence, the Institute was incorporated into the newly established University of Zambia and became known as

the Institute for African Studies.

Endnotes

1. [N]ational [A]rchives of [Z]ambia SEC1/130, Lord Hailey (London) to Governor Hubert Young (Lusaka), 17 June 1937.
2. N.A.Z. SEC1/140, Minutes of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute Board Meeting, 18 February 1941.

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