

‘A bit of this and a bit of that’: an obituary for Elizabeth Colson

In describing her research among the Tonga of the Zambezi Valley, Elizabeth Colson said in an interview conducted on 11 April 2006 by Alan Macfarlane: ‘Well, if you ask me about my own work, I have done a bit of this and a bit of that.’¹ The description must stand as the greatest understatement (if that is not a contradiction in itself) of an anthropologist’s ethnographic scope and achievement. It contrasts with Bronislaw Malinowski’s early confident reach for academic domination (1967) – but then she did not admire him or his theories.

Elizabeth worked among the Tonga people of Zambia over a period of seventy years (1946 to 2016), initially with the Plateau Tonga and then among the Gwembe (or Valley) Tonga of the Zambezi Valley, almost entirely on the Zambian side of the river.

Her magisterial ethnographic work encompassed almost every aspect of Gwembe Tonga society and traced the changes from settled agricultural life on the rich soils of the riverbanks to the despair of dislocation and the establishment of a new pattern of existence. The change was wrought by the drowning of their land and the loss for some 57,000 people of their homes, fields and resources when Kariba Dam was filled.

In 1956, she set out to trace the effects of the construction of the damming of the Zambezi River on them and, in 1971, she concluded:

Tonga lost their land when the waters of Lake Kariba swallowed it up. The people still mourn their loss although they have adapted to new environments. The Tonga had no part in the creation of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland or the decision to build a dam. They had no vote and no influence with political leaders who headed the federal and territorial governments.

Insofar as the majority understood what was happening, they regarded it as a theft of their land by powerful Europeans. They opposed the move, though the government-appointed chiefs and councillors gave their formal approval to the scheme. They regard the period associated with the resettlement, lasting roughly from 1957 to 1962, as a time of troubles.

Only gradually did they recover from the shock of removal. (Colson 1971: 5)

Elizabeth’s sober record of the profound dislocation of the people, their despair and resilience is invaluable. The fate of the Tonga on the Zimbabwe side of the river was worse.

It is in character that Elizabeth chose to work long term in a society that she described thus:

On the whole the Tonga might be defined as culturally a have-not group. They have never had an organised state. They were unwarlike and had neither regimental organisations nor armies. They were and are equally lacking in an age-grade set-up, secret societies,

¹Elizabeth Colson, interviewed by Alan Macfarlane, 11 April 2006, Cambridge. See <https://vimeo.com/106817319>

and social stratification of all kinds. The Tonga would not even have attracted those fascinated by the intricate rules of lineage or organisation, for while they have clans and smaller matrilineal kin-groups, they have them in a characteristically unorganised fashion which leaves the investigator with a baffled, frustrated desire to rearrange their social structure into some more ordered system. It is only in the rain-rituals that the Tonga show a half-hearted groping towards the establishment of a larger community than that which existed in the village or in the ties of kinship. (Colson 1948: 272)

This account belies the fascination that the Tonga held for her in the patterns of their relationships; the value they placed on generosity, on obligations met and on clever trickery; on bravery in hunting elephant, hippo, rhinoceros and buffalo; their ritual attention to the ancestors; and their craftsmanship. She admired 'the emphasis on individual responsibility, and the general lack of dependence on specialized leadership [and saw it as] a characteristic feature of Tonga life' (Colson 1971: 237). She observed that 'Tonga interest in individualism goes hand-in-hand with an emphasis on a person's rights and obligations as a member of society' (*ibid.*). Her interest stretched from old men, who were more likely than old women to be accused of witchcraft, to children, whose freedom, she noted, 'lies in the fact that once old enough to move about ... [they] have a choice in the matter of their residence and thus of their guardian' (Colson 1958: 224). Elizabeth gained a depth and breadth of understanding that could not be bested.

We met, she and I, a number of times, and she wrote a wonderful introduction to the book, *Lwaano Lwanyika: Tonga book of the earth* (1991) that Colleen Crawford Cousins and I produced with assistance from many others, especially the Tonga adults and children who live in Chitenge, Mola on the Zimbabwe side of the Zambezi River. It is a book on the society and resources of the valley and its foundation is Colson's research.

Early in her career, Elizabeth rejected the very notion of culture and acculturation, then in high fashion. Instead she was fascinated by society and by what people did every day and through time. Her ethnography is impeccable and her insights fertile. I wrote in the book I published on child labour on subsistence farms among the Tonga of Mola in Zimbabwe that it was dispiriting to have 'found out' something only to see it already described in one of her texts. Without her ethnographic knowledge I could not have undertaken what I call a second-order study, one that leans on existing description and analysis. Elizabeth's oeuvre will form the bedrock for many future projects.

She was called, as were a number of founding women anthropologists, 'formidable'. Once, in 2001, she came to lunch with me at the cottage I was renting north of Berkeley. It was winter and the cottage was heated only by a small stove. Having been taught in the Zambezi Valley to light a fire with three twigs and to feed it diligently and sparingly until the pot cooked, I was cautious in drawing from the woodpile. Elizabeth shivered and said, 'This is ridiculous.' She, then aged eighty-four, leapt to it and made a roaring fire.

I remember, too, lunching with her at the Berkeley Faculty Club when she looked out of the window across the lawn to the trees and said, 'It used to be when I was a faculty member in Anthropology we would gather out there after lunch and discuss for hours our work and our ideas. Now no faculty member has time even for lunch.'

She found time, at the end, in the valley and with her generous hosts on the farm in Monzi, Zambia to talk to Tonga people and to relish being in Africa. During her life she found the time to collect details of the Tonga form of life until the mass of her manuscripts was as tall as the anthills on the banks of the Zambezi River. There is a Zezuru saying: 'Acquiring knowledge is like climbing an anthill.'

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