

Beyond the Hamites, the ethnography: Reflections on the works of C.G.Seligman in the "decolonising the curriculum" era

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Introduction

It is an honour to give a talk like this in this location: the Anthropology Department at LSE; but more, the Seligman Library, a place currently the focus of an important debate around anthropology's long-standing links to colonialism and how these play out in the present, an era in which calls to decolonise the academy seeming to be growing stronger all the time.

I am here today because I once made the mistake of mentioning to William Matthews that I found the ethnography in Seligman's writings useful for my own work. This is true, and this will more or less be the main focus of my discussion. The greater point, however, is to highlight that one should always be careful what you say, as my working knowledge of both Seligman and his work is significantly greater having had to prepare for this presentation!

I will begin with a brief biography of Seligman and his achievements, as although I want to talk more about his ethnography than anything else, I think it is important to situate our anthropological ancestors within their appropriately historicised contexts. This is something Seligman would have agreed with, as apparently he was fond of saying that although theories come and go, the data they are based upon will always be useful.

Although Seligman's views on the so-called Hamitic Hypothesis are probably now his most infamous work, I will leave that for later in the discussion. First I wish to highlight the ethnographic contributions of two of Seligman's many works: the 1925 Presidential Address of the Royal Anthropological Institute titled "*Some Little-Known Tribes of the Southern Sudan*" which was later published in JRAI and which I will call the "*Presidential Address*", and a book building upon and greatly extending the *Presidential Address* called "*Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan*" (1932), which I will simply call "*Pagan Tribes*".

When I was asked to speak about Seligman's ethnographic contributions in relation to the Seligman Library debate, I was immediately struck by its resonance with the current, and I think linked, global push towards "decolonising the academy". As such, my focus in this talk will take a two-fold approach: firstly, I will discuss the benefits of accessing and using "old" ethnographies as a generative methodology in contemporary anthropology. I will then relate this back to problems with the enduring legacies of such work, especially on any decolonising debate. This should not be construed as indicating support of the Hamitic Hypothesis, nor should it be understood as taking a position in the renaming debate *per se*. Indeed, in writing this paper I could not help but feel this whole subject is one fraught with numerous potential ways to destroy my reputation or career! However, as any claim of neutrality is actually a politicised position, and a political act, I will pre-empt my conclusion to note that I feel one of anthropology's greatest strengths is in speaking truth to power, so that is what I will do and, as this issue is crucial for the future vitality of our discipline, I will end with some reflective questions and provocative announcements. Finally, a caveat: despite being from "the colonies" myself, as a white cis male my voice is not best positioned to speak either of African truths or the processes involved in decolonisation, here or anywhere. For this reason, I will try and let the ethnography do the talking.

A brief history of Seligman's time

Charles Gabriel Seligman (centre) was born on Dec. 24, 1873 and died September 1940. An early pioneer of British anthropology, he conducted significant periods of anthropological and archaeological research in China, Egypt, Melanesia, Sri Lanka, and, most importantly for what I will be discussing, Nilotic South Sudan, where he undertook fieldwork with his wife Brenda from 1909–12 and again between 1921–22. This was also the general area of my own Doctoral fieldwork, and I still work in that area today. Apparently, this is why I am here. Seligman's Sudanese trips not only resulted in the two pieces on which I focus here – the "*Presidential Address*" (1925) and "*Pagan Tribes*" (1932) – but, perhaps unfortunately, also provided the physical and linguistic bases for Seligman's racialized theories of African history and peoples, most famously set out in *Races of Africa* (1930).

More on this later.

Regarding his accomplishments and contributions, in 1910 Seligman was appointed as the first lecturer in ethnology at LSE and he maintained a part-time professorship here from 1913 to 1934. After leaving LSE he was awarded the title of Emeritus Professor and took up a visiting professor post at Yale in 1938. In 1915 he served as President of the Anthropology Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. In 1919 he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society, and he served as President of the RAI from 1923-25. In 1925 he also received the Rivers Medal for excellence in fieldwork, while he was Huxley Memorial Lecturer and Medalist in 1932 and Frazer Lecturer in 1933. Rather randomly, in 1921, he was also the author of the first ever study of Egyptian prehistory. He taught some of the most famous names of 20th century British anthropology, including the men shown here: Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Raymond Firth, and Meyer Fortes. It has also been argued he was instrumental in moving the focus of British anthropology from the Pacific Islands to Africa.

In fact, his significance to the development of anthropology at LSE was such that when Professor Kuper gave a talk on “Sligs” here during the Department’s centenary celebrations several years ago, he argued that without Seligman:

“Malinowski’s career would not have flourished as it did, perhaps not even surviving the difficult early years after World War I. And certainly without Seligman’s groundwork, and his nurturing of Malinowski, the LSE would not have become the great centre of social anthropology in the 1930s”.

Indeed, Seligman personally helped fund Malinowski’s fieldwork and ensured he was later given the first Chair of the Department in 1927. So, without Seligman, possibly no Malinowski, a different LSE Anthropology, and perhaps no British anthropology as we currently know it.

Charles Seligman and the ethnography of Acholi South Sudan

But I am here to talk about Seligman the ethnographer rather than Seligman the man. I should note that for the purposes of brevity, in what follows I often mention “the Seligmans”, by which I mean both Brenda and Charles, who, following their marriage in 1904, not only undertook all their fieldwork together but who also co-authored *Pagan Tribes* (1932), their most important writing in my own work.

My own fieldwork has been in Uganda and South Sudan, where I have spent 3 of the last 5 years undertaking ethnographic fieldwork: firstly within the remote, rural Acholi-speaking village of Pajok in southern South Sudan in 2013 and 2014, and then again in a settlement for South Sudanese refugees in Uganda during 2017 and 2018, the occupants of which – probably 65-70% – also mainly originate from that same South Sudanese community. Briefly put, my Doctoral research sought to investigate the entanglements between indigenous religious systems and those of an increasingly influential Evangelical Christianity. Such a focus meant that understanding entanglements in the present also necessitated a better historical perspective, one which was, unfortunately, difficult to find.

Thank God for the Seligmans.

There is little of any relevance written on Acholi South Sudan. This is due to several factors, including the various civil wars, many years of violence or refugee exile, and a lack of any real colonial penetration until the second decade of the 20th century. Given this lack of information, it is particularly problematic to develop a comprehensive history of the area. Further, as the majority of Acholi live in Uganda, most sources are based on Acholi in that country, and overwhelmingly focused upon the long-running LRA or Lord's Resistance Army conflict. Outside the Seligmans', then, there are only two other sources on Sudanese Acholi before the mid-1980s: Samuel Baker's accounts of his search for Lake Albert in the 1860s, and a single paper in the 1919 edition of *Sudan Notes and Records* by colonial officer Captain E.T.N. Grove.

As Seligman himself noted in the *Presidential Address*:

“The greater part of the anthropologically little-known area which I propose to discuss ... was not taken over by the Sudan until 1914, and was not, I believe, effectively administered until 1916; before 1914, on the east bank of the Nile it had been Uganda territory, and, except between Nimule and Gondokoro, had received little attention, while on the west a considerable area had been included in the Lado enclave ceded by the Belgians in 1910. The Bari-speaking tribes had thus been under two different national systems of administration, while the Lotuko- speaking tribes, with the Acholi and Madi, had lain

completely outside Sudan territory, and but little concerning them had been published”.

Regrettably, then, historical data is limited and fragmentary. The early literature falls into three differing (but not mutually exclusive) types. The first two could be described as ‘missionary ethnography’ and ‘colonial ethnography’. The third is the work of the Seligmans, although even in this the Acholi are relegated to relatively brief and somewhat stereotyped generalisations in larger works dedicated to other Nilotics, something of a footnote to analysis of ‘more important’ Sudanic pastoralists further north.

The literature on early Acholi religion is even smaller, and often very Christian in orientation. Again, the Seligmans’ provide some of the few non-Christianised examples. Thus, despite their use of now outdated physiological methods and an uncritical acceptance of the now-discredited Hamitic Hypothesis, both of which I discuss later, the Seligmans’ provide two of the few useful accounts about early Acholi spiritual life.

The most significant elements within the indigenous Acholi religious field are: ancestor veneration and their associated shrines; the presence of spirits of the dead in the realm of the living; the omnipresence of ambiguous cosmological power called *jok* (sing., *jogi* pl.); a variety of magically-endowed witch- or sorcerer-like entities; and rainmakers and rainstones. The Seligmans wrote about all of these. Further, for almost all these, they also provide not only the first – and in some cases, only – accounts of early Sudanese Acholi ritual practices, but these are given in such a way to allow access without needing to subscribe to the same theoretical paradigm.

Due to the size and history of the debates around African witchcraft as well as the nature of *jok* among Nilotic peoples, ancestor veneration and rainmaking are the two topics I will talk about here. Luckily, these were also the areas of the Acholi and wider Nilotic religious fields that the Seligmans considered most important. Thus, in both works under discussion they provide excellent if brief descriptions. Take, for example, their writings on the Acholi ancestral shrine – variously called the *abila*, *kac*, *joktwol* or *ot jok*. As an example of the sort of data which Seligman provides, I quote here the description of the lineal shrine provided in the *Presidential Address*:

The *kac* is built opposite the door of the hut, the reason given that the *tipo* [souls of the dead] might watch what went on in the dwelling. In one instance the *kac* was four yards from the hut entrance, and probably this may be about the usual distance. Typically, the *kac* consists of a roughly-built rack ... supported on four uprights at a height of 3-4 feet from the ground; with this platform there is commonly associated one or more groups of four pegs of wood arranged as in the *joktwol* to be described immediately. In addition, there were often other objects, such as a stake supporting the skulls of animals sacrificed ... The *joktwol* (the word appears to be a compound of *jok* and *twol*, "snake," but no explanation of its meaning could be elicited) consists of four short pegs or lengths of wood inserted into the ground close together at the angles of an imaginary rectangle, each peg inclined towards its opposite fellow... According to my limited experience, where this arrangement occurred at the side of the house (away from a *kac*) it was called *joktwol*, and referred to a female ancestor; but the same arrangement might, and often did, occur in relation to the platform *kac* and then it was not called *joktwol*, and apparently had no reference to a dead woman ... Where a stone formed part of the shrine... this was avowedly that the son of the deceased might sit on it and commune with the *tipo* below... A notched stake called *lotdiel* (literally goat-stick) is not an uncommon feature of these shrines.

As can be seen from the pictures provided, many of these same features continue to be replicated in the present: the location opposite the (unphotographed hut), the *kac* rack, the *joktwol* – although in the Pajok case, they have the rather more Ugandan look of an *ot jok* or Spirit House – and the stake to support skulls, bones, or other ritual materials. Indeed, the whole arrangement demonstrates significant similarities with the shrines detailed not only by the Seligmans but also the missionary Malandra, who says that Ugandan Acholi call the same complex an *abila* (clan shrine). Having access to the Seligmans' material prior to fieldwork pre-warned me of these and similar differences and allowed me to better investigate the multiple dimensions of the indigenous Sudanese *abila-kac-ot jok* distinction. In Pajok, for example, the ritual experts I spoke with saw the important difference of the *abila-kac*

distinction as being that between clan and lineal shrines rather than constituent parts. In other words, it was how the everyday playing out of local politico-religious authority which was the primary issue. They did not think that Malandra's Ugandan distinctions were relevant to them and, in using the Pajok vernacular, my own work ended up following the Seligmans'.

The other elements of the southern Sudanese religious field I wish to discuss are 'rain chiefs' (*rwodi kot*) or 'rainmakers', and the presence of rain-making stones, literally called "*kot*" or "rain", the name of which aptly signifies the analogical reasoning bordering on the literal common to the worldview of many Acholi I know, especially those with only minimal formal education.

Rainmakers and rainstones are central to the Acholi religious system, almost constituting, *a la* Evans-Pritchard, a means of controlling the realm of nature. Or, in this case, allowing an especially gifted and cosmologically-empowered individual of the right ancestry the ability to manipulate magically endowed stones, literally embodying rain, to bring forth and send away life giving or crop destroying rains; a skill of no small import in an area in which drought-related hunger is relatively common.

But, to make this sort of rather abstract statement is one thing. To provide the underlying evidence is another, especially in a contemporary context in which, on first observation, decades of conflict and exile as well as the well-established demonising influences of evangelical forms of Christianity have made it difficult to gain access to the practices and beliefs of indigenous cosmological systems.

Or, put in another way, some of the people who should have known about the stuff I was researching had been killed or died in refugee camps while others had joined evangelical churches. Knowing who I *should* ask about what was therefore incredibly useful. And, again, this is where the Seligman's proved methodologically helpful: both *Pagan Tribes* and the *Presidential Address* provide not only a local vocabulary but also a range of pictures and specific descriptions that allowed research to progress despite a lack of initial success. In this way, for example, I was able to show this very picture of these Bari rain stones to people who I thought *might* know something about Acholi rainmaking and get them to comment. Or, likewise, I could talk about this picture of the Acholi homestead and *kac* with an elderly person

and get them to reflect upon how things were done when they were younger, how they had changed in the present, and what they thought the reasons for these changes might be.

In themselves, such lines of investigation proved extremely fruitful but later, when my wife and I were eventually accepted into and generally trusted by the Pajok community, people started directing me to people who could provide the information I was looking for, sometimes on the basis of the pictures I had previously shown them. And at this point, again the Seligmans' work proved useful, as they provide some of the only decent information available about early rain making practices. Indeed, the Seligmans consider rainmaking so important to Nilotic religion that in the *Presidential Address* they give lengthy examples from the southern Nuba and Bari as well as the Acholi, while in *Pagan Tribes* they provide detailed accounts for nearly every one group in the region. Thus, by triangulating my own observations and interviews with the descriptions available in *Pagan Tribes*, I gained a clearer comparative and historical understandings of these crucial cultural practices.

And, in some ways, I think I naively believed that I did not necessarily need to engage with the far less desirable and deeply disturbing racialized material to do so. But is this true? Can we *really* pick out and use those elements of earlier or ethically-dubious work that seem relevant and ignore or side-line the rest? Once maybe I thought this. Now I am not so sure.

[The Races of Africa, Cranial measurement, and the Hamitic Hypothesis](#)

First, however, I want to discuss Seligman's connections to what has been broadly labelled "the Hamitic Hypothesis". Like many of his contemporaries, Seligman believed that Northern invaders from the "Hamitic" branch of the "Caucasoid" racial group had mixed with the African "Negroid" population, introducing their superior cultural and genetic material. Seligman considered that this intermixing produced two major forms of human variation. The first was two groups of "Hamiticised Negros": "Nilo-Hamites" like the Maasai or Tutsi who were considered to have received a relatively large dose of Hamitic cultural and genetic material; and Nilotes such as the Dinka and Nuer who demonstrated much less Hamitic influence. These groups were divided according to linguistic and physical similarities allegedly demonstrating the degree of Hamitic influence, with the origin of these influences primarily explained through the diffusion and transmission of physiological characteristics – what might

be called 'genes' today – and material and ritual culture. This formed the basic thesis put forward in *Races of Africa*.

In *Races of Africa*, Seligman wrote what is perhaps now the most quoted statement explaining the theoretical and ideological underpinnings of the Hamitic Hypothesis. He said:

“Apart from relatively late Semitic influence... the civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites, its history is the record of these peoples and of their interaction with the two other African stocks, the Negro and the Bushmen, whether this influence was exerted by highly civilized Egyptians or by such wider pastoralists as are represented at the present day by the Beja and Somali... The incoming Hamites were pastoral 'Europeans' – arriving wave after wave – better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural Negroes”.

In this way, all developments in African culture and civilisation were said to be traced to supposed historical movements of mostly-white-or-brownish-looking peoples.

Nonetheless, despite its apparently obvious racial and colonial biases, *Races of Africa* received positive reviews from the time of its first publication in 1930 right up to the final print of its 4th edition in 1979. Moreover, each revision was reprinted several times and it was used as a standard teaching text, on both sides of the Atlantic, right through the 1970s. The well-received third edition is especially notable as, although it was published nearly 20 years after Seligman's death, none other than Max Gluckman considered that the further input of 17 premier British anthropologists had helped bring the text “up to date”, making it “invaluable reading”. This being the case, I think it is worth questioning how much of the racial and colonial biases under discussion can be imputed to Seligman and how much is actually a part of our real disciplinary history.

The other form of racialized human variation Seligman promoted was physiological typing based on cranial measurement. Originally created by Swedish anatomist Anders Retzius to date and classify early humanoids, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries cranial measurement was closely associated with the development of physical anthropology and racialized evolutionary theory. The cephalic or cranial index is the maximum width (bi-pareital diameter or BPD) of the head multiplied by 100 and then divided by its maximum length (occipito-frontal diameter or OFD). The maximum width is supposed to be taken from behind the

cheekbones and the maximum length from between the eyebrows to the most easily noticed point on the back part of the head. Needless to say, at best such a definition allows for a significant element of subjective evaluation and human error.

So, in Seligman's work, cranial measurements were used to determine the Cephalic Index of the various 'tribes' of the Nilotic Sudan then divide them into the "do-lichol-cephalic" or "long-headed" Nilotes and the "mes-ati-cephalic" or "medium-headed" Nilo-Hamites. Indeed, cranial measurement seems the principal methodology of his main theoretical contributions, and he used these to create a typology of Sudanese tribal variation crucial for the development of *Races of Africa*. As you can in the figure on the left – taken from the *Presidential Address* in 1925 – Seligman provides the average Cephalic Index and height of each of the 'tribes' studied. What this diagram does not show, however, is the total number of people these figures derived from, a number in some cases shockingly small: for example, only 10 Madi, 10 Lugbara, and 11 Kakwa are measured to determine the average "types" of populations who now contain well over 2 million individuals combined. Although populations are much greater now than at any time in the past, there is still a significant discrepancy here and, at best, Seligman might be accused of basing his theories upon limited data.

Problematic from the beginning, these divisions only became less convincing the more ethnographic, historical, and physical evidence was discovered. As Sanders argued in her much cited 1969 paper on the historical development of the Hamitic Hypothesis:

"Racial 'scientific' classifications, which had to face the physical diversity of the various 'Hamites', established a separate Hamitic branch of the Caucasian race, closely following the creation of a linguistic entity called a family of Hamitic languages. Linguistic typologies were based on racial types and racial classifications on linguistic definitions. Confusion surrounding the 'Hamite' was steadily compounded as the terms of reference became increasingly overlapping and vague. The racial classification of 'Hamites' encompassed a great variety of types from fair skinned, blonde, blue-eyed (Berbers) to black (Ethiopians)... [while] Linguistic classifications were based on geography, racial characteristics and occupation, rather than on rigorous methodology pertaining solely to language. Grammatical gender became the main diagnostic of the so-called Hamitic languages. [But] Although grammatical gender exists

in many unrelated languages of the world, it was not found in the languages of the 'true' Negro (racial category again). Thus linguistic typologies had racial bases just as racial typologies were based on linguistics”.

The Hamitic Hypothesis in Africa Today

Sanders is just one of many critics from the last half century and, although it has not entirely disappeared in western discourse, it has been intellectually and ethically discredited, only really remaining the ideology of what might be called a fundamentalist or lunatic fringe. Unfortunately, however, the same cannot be said to be true of parts of Africa, certainly not those areas I know best. Indeed, there exists a continuing dependence on a myth of Abrahamic origin among some African intellectuals, a fantasy about a certain people or peoples being “The Black Jews” or “The Lost Tribe of Africa”. These myths largely derive from the haphazardly hybridised confluence of: oral histories; Biblical prophecies; early racialized Eurocentric scholarship; sub-standard and selective comparative linguistics; and what might be called “interpretative historiography”.

The results of this continuing African fascination with the ‘truth’ behind the Hamitic Hypothesis covers a lot of ground, and is made to do much tribalist, nationalist, and other political work. These include a variety of mostly harmless and generally self-published books, all of which seem to make the same basic claims: for example, in four of the five works shown on this and the next slide, two (Bulimo and Pascal) discuss separate Lwo-speaking Kenyan groups while another (Paito) discusses the Lwo-speaking Acholi, the largest Nilotic group in Uganda, and Madut-Kuendit’s book narrates the history of South Sudan’s most populace people, the Nilotic Dinka.

Each of these books seemingly sets forth to prove the author’s hypothesis: that their particular people of choice (and, strangely enough, origin) are actually descended from one or both Ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia; that they were the original progenitors of at least part of Pharaonic Egyptian culture; and that, being tall beautiful pastoralists, they are necessarily superior to other surrounding groups. Indeed, these books generally also claim also that this genetic and cultural superiority is Biblically based and condoned, implying a level of infallibility defying critique. Similar practices go beyond the printed word, in the literal sense,

to manifest online, not only in specific ethno-linguistic websites and forums, many of which produce some form of ethnicised hate speech, but also Wikipedia: for example, since 2013 I have been following with interest the aggressive back-and-forth editing of the Acholi wiki page seeking to affirm and then remove the claim of “The Acholi as Black Hebrews”.

More worryingly, however, is how some current interpretations of the Hamitic Hypothesis are used to manipulate everyday identity politics in Africa, particularly now through online media and the hate speech just mentioned. Thus, the Hamitic Hypothesis was used to justify ethnic hatred and domination in both Burundi and Rwanda, resulting in several generations of large-scale violence and displacement as well as the infamous genocide.

Presently more concerning for myself, however, is that the same myth is perpetuated within the propaganda underpinning the current violence in South Sudan, where a particularly divisive version of the Hamitic Hypothesis – the thesis that one ethnic group or another are the only true Sudanese descendants of Biblical Israel – has been used to popularise and condone a wide range of barbaric acts in an incredibly brutal war. Moreover, in its Dinka versions, its proponents argue that ‘truth’ of their ideology is further proven by recourse to Isaiah 18, a Bible passage often referred to as “The Prophecy of Kush”. Well-known in South Sudan, Isaiah 18 is said to prophesise that a tall, slim, dark-skinned people will eventually come to rule all South Sudan following a great and bloody war. It had previously been hoped that the war referred to was the Second Sudanese War and that the people mentioned were South Sudanese more generally, but it is now used as the basis of much propaganda about the Dinka role in the war, on both sides of the ethnic divide.

But, in case the point just made seems like only citizens of ‘the dark continent’ still trumpet the ‘truth’ of the Hamitic Hypothesis, I draw your attention to the paper by Dierk Lange on the right. Published in *Anthropos* in 2011, it is one of several similar publications that attempt to use oral history and linguistic analysis to prove the allegedly Yoruba claim that they are originally descended from Biblical Israel and only migrated to their current location after 605 B.C. To be honest, I am not sure what to make of this publication, but I think the fact it and others like it get published at all is an excellent example of what Simigai Chigudu mentioned at the “*Decolonising the Curricula*” event which took place here at LSE last week: that there are double standards at play when it comes to knowledge production and reproduction, with white scholars trained in “the art of the citation” able and allowed to publish things which, if

attempted by an African, would likely get rejected as being “too parochial”. Indeed, I might accuse myself of having done exactly this right now.

Conclusion: What do we mean by decolonisation?

Godfrey Lienhardt once also wrote a short piece on Seligman’s legacy in his own work, in which he concludes with a point about the significance of *Pagan Tribes*. Lienhardt says:

“I once had a copy [of *Pagan Tribes*] of my own. I digested it before I went to the Dinka, I interleaved it, I took it with me. Naturally, younger at that time, I wanted to contradict the Seligmans, and in some matters, of course, I could easily do so. But as I remember, some of my observations on the interleaved pages were merely carping, and what I got from it was certainly far, far more than what I ... could add to it.”

And it is here, I think, that we come to the meeting place between decolonisation, this talk, and this library. Because, at its heart, the call to change the name of the Seligman Library seems, to me at least, to speak to some much deeper things; to the differential power dynamics that underlie historical inequalities in access and representation; to rights over knowledge and its production; to how colonial legacies and disciplinary power structures – and here I mean disciplinary in both senses of the word – continue into, and continue to structure, the present. And then, by necessity, the future.

This, I think, is part of the point: if we are being honest, our anthropological ancestors are probably *all* a little colonial and a bit racist. If we are being even more honest, many of us probably are too. And maybe one day a century from now, someone reading something we have written will question our personal or disciplinary ethics, perhaps with good reason. But neither is this the *whole* point, I think. Indeed, I would hope that scholars of the future could still find things of relevance within our otherwise flawed works, that they could look at the ethnographic ‘facts’ and use it to continue to make claims, push envelopes, change agendas.

As Alcinda Honwana noted in the same *Decolonising the Curricula*” event I just mentioned, for her “decolonisation is the process of disordering the established order”, with the practice of decolonisation therefore requiring “a deep understanding of how colonial domination and white supremacy informed and shaped institutional cultures, values, practices, processes,

appointments, and curricula”. Last Wednesday, Simigai Chigudu mentioned *#RhodesMustFall*. A better example for anthropology might be the continuing saga of *#Hautalk*.

Thus, whatever we think, whatever we tell ourselves to help us sleep better at night, the same elitist hierarchies which underpinned the colonialist, racist, classist, and misogynistic ideologies of Empire continue into the present. And they will continue to do so, no matter the name of a single, small library. If this is true, then what do we *actually* mean by decolonisation? Do we mean beyond the academy, or simply anthropology? Or simply anthropology at LSE? Or even just the rather tokenistic gesture of renaming a single room? How important *is* a name? To what extent would changing the name simply allow us to feel good about ourselves – we did something significant, right? – without *actually* interrogating what that change really means for doing business as usual? How far is too far, or far enough? And who *actually* benefits from any of this, and how?

It is important to note, then, that a common reply to charges about the historical legacies of colonialism, racism, or other inequality is that the person or concept involved was a product of its time, contextually dependent to the extent that they or it should in some way be absolved of their sins. That they should be appreciated for their positive contributions rather than castigated for their mistakes. Maybe, but all such an answer *really* does is justify a silencing of the historical legacies of marginalisation, exploitation, and oppression. And such a silencing can be nothing but a political act which ultimately suits the needs of those in power and the maintenance of the status quo.