

# Max Gluckman

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Born Johannesburg, January 26, 1911 • died Jerusalem, April 13, 1975

## Professional Career

Max Herman Gluckman was born of Russian-Jewish parents and grew up in South Africa where he also graduated from secondary school. He studied law and social anthropology from 1928 through 1934 at the University of Witwatersrand under Winifred Hoernlé and later under Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown. In 1934, he was granted a Transvaal Rhodes Scholarship and continued his studies at the University of Oxford, Exeter College, where he took his D.Phil. in 1936 (1938). He conducted his main fieldwork between 1936 and 1938 among the Zulu of South Africa.

From 1939 through 1941, Gluckman was an anthropological assistant at the **Rhodes-Livingstone Institute** (RLI), founded only one year earlier. The institute was the first anthropological research institution in British colonial Africa and was planned to provide knowledge to the colonial administration. Godfrey Wilson, its founding director, saw it in his inaugural speech, later published as an article in the journal *Africa* (13.1 [1940]), as an institute for applied anthropology. Sir Hubert Young, then governor of Northern Rhodesia and an instigator of its foundation, wrote that the RLI was "... a contribution to the scientific efforts now being made in various quarters to examine the effect upon native African society of the impact of European civilization." The initial research agenda was hence set by colonialism. During his time as "research officer" for the RLI, Gluckman conducted field research among the Lozi of Barotseland.

From 1941 to 1947, Gluckman directed the RLI. Though the institute was expected to provide public services, the researchers enjoyed a considerable autonomy both with regard to the topics of their research as well as to the anti-colonial orientation of their interpretations. Yet Gluckman was able to form a more or less coherent approach that almost all anthropologists working at the institute adopted. Through field visits, he directed their research and also influenced their analysis and theoretical understanding of ethnographic findings.

Between 1947 and 1949, Gluckman was teaching at Oxford University, where Edward E. Evans-Pritchard was holding the chair of social anthropology. He then became familiar with the more social-structural approach that Evans-Pritchard had developed together with Meyer Fortes who would become professor of social anthropology at Cambridge in 1950.

In 1949, Max Gluckman was appointed first professor of social anthropology at the University of Manchester and became the founding father of the Manchester School. Among his students were many anthropologists that considerably changed the course of the discipline from the 1950s through the early 1980s. Among the best known were Elizabeth Colson, Anthony L. Epstein, J. Clyde Mitchell, Victor Turner, Bruce Kapferer, William Watson and, a little less closely associated with Gluckman, Edmund Leach, Frederik Barth and Richard B. Werbner. As a school, the group of researchers were closely knit together by a common approach (see below), but perhaps more so by a polemical critique of other approaches, a shared style of writing, a culture of joint debates and discussions, reciprocal quotations, re-analyses of earlier ethnographic publications, and not least by being fans of the football club Manchester United. The Manchester School is probably the most corporate group that ever existed in social anthropology. It attracted many gifted scholars from Britain and other countries, among them several former fellows of the RLI. Gluckman retired from his position in 1971.

## Main Ideas

Having lived in South Africa, Gluckman was very sensible to the contradictions of high colonialism. He was a radical critic of colonial ideologies and racism. Due to his experience at the RLI, he also became a major critic of Bronislaw Malinowski, then the leading and probably most influential anthropologist in Britain and the English speaking world. He rejected in particular Malinowski's conceptualization of "culture contact" as the main force of social change. He argued that the division of inner and outer forces obscured the fact that colonialism forced many Africans into completely new economic, social, and cultural settings. The contradictions were internal and not simply a matter of one culture influencing another culture which, according to Malinowski, would have persisted in an equilibrium without any change. Through the system of migrant labor, Africans and Europeans in Africa had already become part of one "single social system".

Gluckman developed the basic theoretical assumptions of his anthropological approach early in his life, long before he was appointed as professor at the University of Manchester. Unlike Malinowski, but also deviating from the classical position of Oxford anthropology, he insisted that conflict was an essential part of any society. Segmentary opposition, as put forward by Evans-Pritchard and Fortes, was not enough to understand change in "tribal society". The two had argued that segmentary opposition produced coherence and equilibrium, based on the neat integration of social groups by shared norms and values. Conflicts were framed by such oppositions, making them positively functional and stabilizing the society. Gluckman argued instead that, at least today [i.e. at his time], no society is stable, "...being constantly affected and changed by many factors, ... the different authorities stand for entirely different, even contradictory values" (Gluckman 1940 in his contribution to *African Political Systems*). He claimed that any analysis that did not take the presence of colonial domination into account would fail to explain contemporary political organisation in Africa. In 1940, his basic conviction was exceptional. Gluckman's contribution to *African Political Systems* was the only that dealt with the context of racial and colonial domination in the book.

Because equilibrium must not be taken for granted, it emerges, said Gluckman, from a dialectical process that is informed by factual oppositions. Its outcome is by far not certain, and most groups, he claimed, have an inner tendency to split (or to segment) and then, as Colson wrote later, "...to become bound together by cross-cutting alliances" (*Seven Tribes of British Central Africa*, 1951). But they could also fall apart, constitute different entities with different kinds of social organization, and even sliding into anomy. Conflicts were real and not simply an expression of an inner opposition.

Recognizing the possibility of rupture and fragmentation led away from Malinowski's image of modernity as alienation. It was related to Gluckman's former studies in law that had taught him to realize that social processes may well lead to a definite separation of social units. His approach also meant to re-insert a critical analysis of history in social anthropology. Hence also the frequent re-studies of older ethnographies by the scholars of the Manchester School.

## Main Works

1954: *Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa*. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press. (The James Frazer Lecture 1952)

1955: *Custom and Conflict in Africa*. Glencoe: The Free Press.

1963: *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa*. London: Cohen and West.

1965: *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.

1972: *The Allocation of Responsibility*. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press.