Isaac Schapera - recollections and thoughts* | Ray Abrahams

Isaac Schapera, who died in June aged 98, was the most senior of the three South African social anthropologists (the others were of course Fortes and Gluckman) who settled in Britain in the 1930s and 40s and exerted a strong influence on the development of the discipline here. By general consensus, Schapera's work among the Tswana provides an unrivalled corpus of carefully collected and analysed material on the political, economic and domestic life and institutions of an African people. At the same time he was keenly interested in comparative work, and although he was convinced that this could be conducted most effectively within a relatively homogeneous regional framework, he also gave important intellectual stimulus and encouragement to Fortes (Fortes 1975, p. 5-6) for the eventual production of the more widely and less systematically based *African Political Systems*.

To use an expression that Fortes once used of himself, Schapera was a 'journeyman' anthropologist par excellence, and the combination of pragmatism and scholarly dedication that marked his studies quickly led him to several conclusions that seem common sense today but gave his work a pioneering quality at the time. One of these was that history, painstakingly extracted from a mixture of oral and documentary sources, was clearly relevant for the understanding of the present. Coupled with this, and well before the idea had begun to form a serious element in social anthropological theory, he insisted (1943) upon introducing into his analyses a strong element of what today is fashionably called ‘agency’. Malinowski had of course stressed the importance of the actor's individuality and perspective, but Schapera went beyond this to explore the role of political leaders and other actors in important processes of social change. Again, as Gluckman (1975) has testified, Schapera was always conscious that a people like the Tswana did not live in isolation from the world around them but, for a century
and more, had actively engaged with and absorbed the influence of political, economic and other forces emanating from outside their boundaries. Long before historians of Africa were self-consciously shifting from writing the history of Europeans in Africa towards a focus on the history of Africans in their own continent, Schapera paid carefully balanced attention to both endogenous and exogenous forces for change among the Tswana, including the influence of neighbouring peoples; and he showed that such change had a longer history in the society than many of his fellow anthropologists were likely to assume. He was also, like Fortes, one of the first anthropologists (1950, 1957, 1963) to embark upon detailed statistical analysis of variations in behavioural patterns within a society in the field of kinship and marriage.

My first direct contacts with Schap, as he was known affectionately, were in the early 1960s, after I returned from my Nyamwezi fieldwork. I saw something of him then in London, and shortly afterwards in Cambridge since he was external examiner here when I first joined the staff of the department. Simon Roberts, in his Guardian obituary, mentions his sharp wit, and this struck me very strongly when I encountered him. The impish jokes flowed full and fast, and it is impossible in print to give a sense of the surprise that his spontaneous outbursts invariably produced as they bubbled forth. Suffice to say that many of them still stick in my mind and make me laugh 40 years later. I have no doubt that had the fancy taken him, he could easily have earned a good living as a laconic stand-up comic or as a provider of one-liners for the likes of Groucho Marx. And of course, all this was from a deep-thinking and subtle scholar. One rather more serious comment that he made also stayed with me. In 1964 Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment, and I complained strongly about this to Schap as a South African. His slightly snappy reply was that it could have been worse - they might have hanged him. I more or less dismissed this as a flippancy at the time, but Mandela's
subsequent release and his astonishing emergence as probably the most respected
statesman in the world has given me some food for thought since then.

Schap's academic influence on me antedated these encounters. In 1956 he
published *Government and Politics in Tribal Societies*, which is mostly concerned with
the comparative analysis of South African kingdoms and chiefdoms. I found his
approach to the definition of politics and his chapter headings and the topics on which
they focused very helpful in the construction of my dissertation. This book was perhaps
uncharacteristic in its extremely close focus on the indigenous elements in the systems
he discussed. Fortunately, however, my own temperament and fieldwork experience
also helped me to share his more general emphasis on perceiving villagers as actors in
a wider field of colonial (and subsequently) post-colonial society.

Schap's ideas on comparative research have also been a matter of some interest
to me, though I have not wholly subscribed to his views. He saw such study as a major
long-term task of social anthropology, and his preference (1953) for conducting at least
the initial stages of such work within specific regions clearly has a common sense
plausibility. His main stress was on the possibility of complete coverage of such an
area, but it is also clear that a relatively large number of variables can be kept under
control when many of the societies concerned may have a common origin and are
subject to investigable similar or different influences. Yet available evidence appears to
give less support to this approach than one might perhaps expect. There are of course
some relative success stories, though they are by no means all of the same kind.
Schapera himself mentions Radcliffe-Brown's comparative analyses of Australian
kinship systems, and his own very different work on the different Tswana groups and
kingdoms is impressive. Some of the work on related East African age and generation
group systems has also been fruitful, to take a case I have myself been involved with,
and there are no doubt many other examples. Nonetheless, some surprising 'holes' appear to remain. Some of the most celebrated and intensive studies of African regions, such as the Mole-Dagbane area and that of the Sudanic and related Nilotes, have not seemed to produce as much significant understanding (as opposed to careful description) of the variations within them as we might have hoped for, though I make this point quite tentatively since I am not as fully up-to-date on work in these areas as I was some years ago. Again, the careful study, based mainly on oral traditions, of age groups and related associations among the Indians of the Great Plains has left us with far more tantalizing questions than good answers.

I raise this, not as criticism of those who have worked in and on these areas, but simply to suggest that such a regional ethnographic focus does not automatically lead to comparative enlightenment even when the ethnography itself is of the highest quality. This must depend in part both on the kinds of data available and on the approach that a researcher takes, and it relates to issues that Schapera himself, with his emphasis on history and 'agency', and others in their different ways such as Leach (1954, 1961), and more recently Jack Goody (1984), have recognised.

A detailed examination of the complex literature on these issues would be out of place here, and I merely venture some of my own reflections on them stemming from my own research. The similarities and differences between neighbouring and/or related societies have a history which can be partly understood as a history of structural choices, including similar or different solutions to similar problems, made for the members of a society by themselves and others. Moreover, one can argue that, many such problems are extremely widespread, occurring well beyond the confines of a region. Thus it seems clear that attempts to maintain the integrity and viability of family farms (and other comparable family enterprises) over the generations regularly
encounter awkward tensions between kinship ties and economic and technical constraints (cf. Abrahams, 1991). Again, wherever people live within State structures, similar questions about the adequate provision of law and order from that source frequently arise, as I hope that my comparative study of vigilantism (1998) brings out. As such, it seems that one's successful recognition of such problems and their possible solutions can be more useful in such contexts than a doctrinaire emphasis upon their regional location. Such recognition is admittedly not always easily achieved, and special difficulties may easily arise if one attempts simply to apply concepts and models developed in one regional context to another as Barnes (1962) and de Lepervanche (1967-8) have trenchantly argued with regard to Africa and New Guinea. Yet one should remember that these and other critics have also wondered about the applicability of the same models within Africa itself, and expansion beyond a single larger or smaller research area can thus offer us a useful opportunity to refine and reformulate our regional ideas.

Having said that similarities and differences have a history, I realise of course that it is arguable that, for a social anthropologist, such history is mainly significant not in itself but for any light it might throw on the present status quo. Indeed, Schapera himself (1962) sympathised with such a view. But a further argument that the structural implications of that status quo for a society's members can in any case be adequately understood without reference to its past is much less convincing, as is the assumption that inconsistencies and conflicts in the here and now, if recognised at all, are relatively new affairs. For, although one clearly needs to be aware of the 'unforeseen consequences' of past actions, many of the problems and dilemmas leading to change have a persistent quality and do not simply disappear when a particular 'solution' to them is adopted. They are thus visible in one form or another both in the present and,
where data are available, in the past, and while one need not know anything approximating to the whole history of a society in order to understand its present form, it seems clear that the 'right kind' of history, if known, can help. Similarly, I would suggest that a careful study of a present situation which considers it as the outcome of decisions and perhaps of struggle and at times uneasy compromise between different 'potentialities' and 'possibilities' (Goody, 1984) can also help us understand the past, so that past and present can throw interesting light upon each other. This does not mean that history simply repeats itself, but - to use a statement I have borrowed before - this 'may not be for want of trying' (Hiden, 1992, 63). Certainly it is an approach which I have personally found valuable in my own work both in East Africa and in North-eastern Europe as well as in more broadly based comparative research.

Despite my reservations about 'regions', all this is quite close to the main thrust of Schapera's own approach. His scrupulous attention to ethnographic detail and to history in comparable social settings, his insistence upon recognising both inner and external forces for change and stability and, one might add, his recognition that, despite classical simplistic functionalist expectations to the contrary, people have often been able to make influential decisions for change without totally wrecking their social system, appear especially powerful in combination. Together they arguably offer a real opportunity to understand the links of continuity and change between past and present in societies, and to perhaps identify in our investigations of the present some of the seeds and possible directions of future developments.

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