Introduction

A New Encounter

Social anthropology is one of those fields which many people have vaguely heard of, but few know how to define. Even students of the subject dread that inevitable party-stopping question, ‘just what is it you are doing at university?’ and several rather pat answers have been invented to snuff out the interest. Once started on an explanation, however, an enthusiastic student may be hard to stop, and for many, social anthropology comes to change their lives in a profound and irreversible way. It may still be difficult to say quite why, but they will share an understanding of life with others who have ventured into the same pastures, an understanding which will also stand them in good stead in all kinds of future endeavours, despite the blank looks their employers may give them when they ask about the precise content of their degree.

Social anthropology is not an esoteric, difficult subject, however. Quite the contrary, it is concerned with the most mundane aspects of everyday life and it should, up to a fairly advanced point, be relatively plain sailing. There are one or two mind-bending exercises in which one must engage to cross the threshold of initial understanding, however, and a few problems may arise for those who, for whatever reasons, find it hard to suspend deeply ingrained ideas and values. Those who have been brought up bilingual or bicultural, or in a society different from that of their parents, often have an initial advantage in this respect, and social anthropology may help them to find a niche of their own in the world. Others just need a little more time.

This book is written to help with this initial experience. It does not claim to be comprehensive, or even to give a broad summary of the basic works in the field. References to the anthropology discussed are provided at the end of each chapter, along with further reading, and together these should offer a sound introduction to anyone embarking on the study of the subject. The later chapters also cover several of the traditional sections into which it is divided. The main aim, however, is to help initiates over some of the first hurdles they are likely to encounter, and to make this process an enjoyable one. My own first tutor warned me to expect to be confused for the best part of a year, and some difficulty may be inevitable because of the very nature of the subject, but this book aims to smooth the way.
The text is written primarily for students taking up the study of social anthropology, or thinking about taking it up, but it is also written for their mothers, brothers and friends, for their future employers and any number of other sundry people who feel bemused by the name. It is written (I hope) in a style open to any to follow, making no assumptions about prior knowledge or background, and it is written in such a way that one can use it to refer back to the parts one feels unsure about later. Most of all, however, it is written in an effort to make the whole venture enjoyable. It is a subject I discovered almost by chance when, during my youth, I was setting out to enjoy myself. Imagine my delight when I found I could spend the rest of my life doing just that for a career.

This book is based on a series of lectures presented annually to my first year students at Oxford Brookes University, and the lectures are only part of the experience we inflict upon those students. They also play games, watch films, read other books and articles, and write about what they are learning in missives which are (rather boringly) called essays. During the later part of their university career we send out some of the students into Oxford, or further afield, to carry out their own investigations. In a cosmopolitan society, there are plenty of ‘other people’s worlds’ to investigate, and over the years these have included studies of greyhound racing, public houses, churches, witches’ covens and college dinners.

What Social Anthropologists Do

Since it is difficult to say in a few words what social anthropology is, and, indeed, this whole book is dedicated to answering that question, let us start by looking at what people who call themselves social anthropologists do, or have done to achieve that title. As a social anthropologist myself, I know for a fact that most people I mention it to glaze over in a haze of incomprehension. Even those who nod knowledgeably may well be labouring under a complete misapprehension about what the subject is – in Mexico, for example, the words are well known, but they generally refer to archaeology rather than what we, in Britain, call social anthropology.

What social anthropologists generally share is an interest in different ways people have of looking at the world they live in. These different ways are not individual idiosyncrasies, but different views of the world learned as people grow up in different societies, or within different groups which make up one larger society. It may be the differences between people who live in Birmingham and Glasgow, or between those in Paris and Bangkok, or even the variety of views across a number of diverse groups within one of those places. There is an almost unlimited variety of world views for anthropolo-
gists to look at, and each social anthropologist tends to specialize, at least for a

time, in looking at one of them.

Most social anthropologists gain their specialist knowledge by going to live

in the society of their choice. They do not just go there for a week or two with

an interpreter and a set of questionnaires. They go for a year or more, set up

home with the people they are interested in, and try to live as far as possible as

those people do – in every respect. The idea is to find out exactly what it is

like to be a member of the society in question, and they operate on the

assumption that the best way to do this is to live with them and share their

lives. This form of investigation is called participant observation, because the

observer finds out what he or she wants to know by participating in the lives

of the people under study.

He or she participates in the routines of everyday life, perhaps trying out

the activities of a number of different members of the society, practising their

customs, taking part in their rites, and observing as far as possible their most

intimate ceremonies. If the people concerned get up early, the anthropologist

gets up early; if the people stay up all night, the anthropologist should do the

same. If the people take hallucinogenic drugs, so might the anthropologist; if

they stand for long periods of the night in a freezing stream, again, so should

the observer (this example may sound far-fetched, but it was part of a study

carried out in the Andes on which a book called The Coming of the Sun is

based (Tayler, 1997). The idea is to experience what it is like to be a member

of that world, for otherwise one could not begin to understand how it looks

and feels.

An important part of this exercise, more technically though rather quaintly

known as fieldwork, is to learn the language of the people concerned. This

was absolutely vital in the case of far-flung tribes with whom the outside

world had previously had little contact, for otherwise communication would

have been well-nigh impossible, but it is essential anywhere to gain an

understanding of the way the world is seen and described by the people

concerned. Anthropologists have found that working with interpreters gives a

wholly inadequate view, for first-hand knowledge of a language is the only

way to become fully aware of the meanings and implications of the words

used, which might be very different from straight dictionary translations.

This concern with language is important even for anthropologists who

choose to work in a society where their own idiom is the native tongue, for

there are many versions of any particular language. Teenagers who claim that

their parents do not understand them, for example, are not merely being

adolescent and rebellious. They are also usually quite accurately referring to

differences in language (and values) which have developed between genera-

tions. Within the English language there are also clear regional differences,
and differences based on other allegiances such as class and occupation. An anthropologist working in his or her own language must be especially careful to look out for these sometimes rather fine distinctions.

Sometimes anthropologists experience great difficulties in finding ways to fit into the society of their choice. People may be very suspicious of a stranger whose main aim in life seems to be to poke their nose into the affairs of those around them, and considerable ingenuity may be required in order to allay the reservations they encounter. In remote areas, anthropologists have even been killed, and one I know, who went to work in the South American rain forest, claimed he had spent several weeks living off food thrown out for dogs. It may be necessary to carry quantities of gifts or medicines to make an initial bid for acceptance, or to arrange to be adopted as a fictitious relative of a member of the society so that others know how to relate to you.

Many have found it useful to arrive with their whole family, for this helps to overcome problems of crossing local barriers of age and gender. In some parts of the world men and women lead very separate lives, and a man may find it virtually impossible to investigate the lives of women, and vice versa. A female anthropologist who worked in Mexico reports that she found it essential to adopt an ‘anomalous sexless’ role so that women would not be jealous of her talking to men, and men would not misinterpret her intentions. In rural Japan, at gatherings where men and women sat separately, but in age order, I used to be seated between the youngest man and the oldest woman so my role must have been ambiguous in this respect too. Working with my children in Japan opened doors to subjects I had never even anticipated.

My own experiences have been relatively easy: first in Mexico, where anthropologists are thick on the ground even if the local population is not always clear about their intentions, and then in Japan, where the pursuit of academic inquiry of any kind is regarded with great respect. In both cases, I received much co-operation from the start, but each had its own problems too. In Mexico, people would sometimes express their suspicion of outsiders asking questions by telling quite blatant lies, even in matters as basic as the number of their children. In Japan, people were more likely to tell me things they thought I’d like to hear, a more subtle form of deception.

Both of these problems, and indeed many others encountered by anthropologists, are solved at least to some extent by the fact that the study is carried out over a longish period of time. A year is regarded as a bare minimum, in order to see the complete cycle of annual events, seasons and so forth, but many spend much longer, especially if they are starting from scratch with a new language. Thus the initial reservations of the informants, which is the word used for members of the society under study, are usually dispelled, and their views become more transparent as they relax and operate in normal
Introduction

everyday life. It also proves beneficial to anthropologists to return to the place of their research after some years have elapsed and place their findings in a long-term context.

Other aspects of the method of investigation help too, for it is usual to choose a relatively small group of people so that the anthropologist can get to know everyone well, and observe their relationships at first hand, as well as being told about them. The group may be a village, a school, perhaps an occupational unit such as a factory, bank or advertising agency, or a large extended family. One of my acquaintances in Oxford took up the study of a group of criminals, whom he used at first to meet largely in public houses, although later he had to spend a lot of his time in prisons. Another decided to observe an enclosed order of nuns. The authors of two PhD theses I examined recently on Japan worked in a bridal parlour (see Goldstein-Gidoni in the references to Chapter 12) and a regional museum.

In all such cases, the anthropologist is observing people in what we call face-to-face relations. This is a great advantage, not least because such people will talk of each other as well as of themselves, and this offers sources of information which reinforce each other and go deeper than a few one-to-one interviews might. More importantly still, members of such groups are likely to share a system of values, and although they might disagree with one another on specific issues, there will certainly be a set of underlying assumptions which they will draw upon in their communication with each other. It is this set of shared assumptions which defines in broad terms the language they use and the way they see the world through that language.

Anthropologists learn that language, and that world view, by living among the people. They may start out by asking questions, indeed most do, for there are a lot of practical details to amass. Later, however, they may find they learn more by sitting quietly and listening, by joining in with the work of the day, or even by simply observing the activities of others. In Japan, as elsewhere, much is communicated at a non-verbal level, perhaps in silence, in slight movements of the body, or by exchanging gifts or other material goods such as plates of food. Too much verbosity could blind the investigator to this level of interaction.

Listening also allows one a chance to check the validity of statements made in answer to questions. In Japan, for example, there is something of a controversy about whether love marriages are better than those arranged by elders. One old man told me how much he approved of love marriages, winking and confiding that his own had been such. Later I learned that he had refused to consent when his own daughter wanted to have such a marriage, and, even later, I heard him telling one of his friends how dangerous he thought it was for young people to initiate their own
relationships. This man was often sought as a go-between, as it turned out, undoubtedly because of his charm and diplomacy – the same qualities which probably lay behind his initial reaction to my investigations, since he knew love marriages were the norm where I came from.

It is this kind of information which adds an extra dimension to the findings of social anthropologists who carry out long-term participant observation, and it goes beyond the more limited fieldwork or statistical surveys of the sociologist or economist. There are of course drawbacks in the case of social anthropology, because much depends on the character and interests of the investigators, and their own cultural background, but the depth of understanding which can penetrate the cool front of a diplomat has a value which should not be underestimated, especially in the multicultural world in which most of us now live. To respond to criticisms about the personal element involved, anthropologists now usually provide information about their own background and experience when they write up their work. This subject is discussed again in Chapter 1.

Translation is the anthropologists’ next task. After learning how to live with the people under study, they must come back to their own cultures and explain what they have found in their own languages. They must discover ways to analyse and make sense of their findings that are comprehensible to their colleagues and compatriots, which is not as easy as it may sound. Other anthropologists who have parallel experiences are usually sympathetic and encouraging, and provide models in their own work for the subsequent reports from the returned fieldworker. These basic accounts are called ethnography, literally writings about a particular ‘ethnic’ group of people, though ethnicity has been defined in different ways (see Banks, 1996 for further detail), and groups may anyway be characterized in other ways, as we saw for the criminals and nuns mentioned above (and see MacClancy, 1996, in relation to sport).

Comparisons are usually made with previous work, and much time may be spent trying to assess the extent to which areas of apparent similarity are comparable with phenomena observed elsewhere. Findings which seem to be peculiar to a particular group may be especially interesting, but they may also dissolve into general features of society which are manifested under a different guise in other places. The more accomplished scholars among these returned fieldworkers will use their material to contribute to or to formulate general theories about social life and human behaviour, and this venture has been one of the most important aims of social anthropology.

It should be emphasized straight away, however, that these theories do not always build upon one another. Indeed, many set out to contradict the theories of previous anthropologists. There are some classic works, which are
accepted by most people in the field, and these will be discussed quite early on in this book. There are also several areas where different interpretations exist side by side, and there is no consensus about which is better than another. Some of these will be mentioned too. This book is inevitably informed by the British anthropological traditions which exist in Oxford, where I was trained, but the book is intended as an introduction to the subject that is accessible and engaging no matter what the reader’s background. An important thing to remember, however, is that the study of society is not simply the learning of a body of facts. The study of ourselves and our social worlds is an area of much interpretation and many differing views.

Writing for the general public, on the one hand, or working with them, on the other, is less often the aim of social anthropologists, at least at first, for colleagues share much of the same background and they have parallel experiences on which to draw. This book is an attempt to bridge the first of those gaps. A growing number of anthropologists afterwards bridge the second by putting their new understanding into practical applications in the wider world, an area known as applied anthropology, which we shall consider in the last section of this introductory chapter. Some also make, or advise on, TV documentaries about the area where they worked, and there is now a superb worldwide collection of visual ethnography. Reference to some of the classic films is made at the end of each chapter of this book, and their availability is listed in a ‘Filmography’ at the end.

Other students of anthropology go out into the world to do quite unrelated tasks, but always informed by the knowledge that their world, their way of thinking, is only one of many. They are equipped with the skill to see the other’s point of view, whether the other be Chinese, Czech or from Church Hanborough, and it is this skill which can be acquired through the study of social anthropology. Even without becoming a professional anthropologist, students of the subject can gain a great deal from at least a smattering of practical experience, carrying out a project in a ‘world’ different from their own. This book offers only the first key to the first door to this experience, but it is a door that many people fail ever to open.

A History of Social Anthropology

The subject of social anthropology as it is practised today has developed only within this century, and some of the stages in its development will be illustrated in the chapters which follow. However, its intellectual foundations go back much further and it is useful before embarking on these chapters to have an idea of the background to the inquiries discussed. A thorough history
of the subject would form the subject matter of a book in its own right, and indeed, several have been written (see for example Kuper, 1983, listed under 'Further Reading'), but this section will summarize some of the issues which have been addressed and help enthusiastic new devotees to avoid trying to reinvent the wheel.

People have probably speculated about their strange neighbours since time immemorial, but the European interest in social life became more focused when travellers’ tales began to show striking similarities between societies found in different parts of the world. Some of them, described as ‘primitive’, were at a much earlier stage of technological development, and these were at one time thought to shed light on the prehistorical past of the investigators’ so-called ‘civilized’ worlds. In the eighteenth century, when the natural sciences were becoming established, various theories were advanced in France and Britain that society should be regarded as a natural system, subject to laws like the objects of study of the other sciences.

In France, for example, Montesquieu set out in the eighteenth century to discover laws of social life by analysing and comparing various types of political institutions, and examining religious beliefs as social phenomena, which he argued were usually suited to the society in which they were found and therefore difficult to transport. In Scotland, during the same period, David Hume was investigating the origin of religion in human nature, and he posited a development from polytheism through monotheism to the inevitable decline of religion. He was part of the school of Moral Philosophers which included Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, one of the early thinkers to argue that contemporary ‘primitive’ society could throw light on the past history of ‘higher’ societies.

It was in France, though, that a science of society was seriously proposed, first by Saint-Simon, who followed Condorcet’s assertion that social phenomena were just as natural as those of organic and inorganic sciences and should therefore be studied by the same methods. The subject was named sociology by Comte, who drew up a ranking of sciences ranging from mathematics and astronomy as the most general, through to psychology and sociology at the extreme of greatest complexity. His laws of social life were based on the assumption that all societies evolved through the same stages, and that the human species has a fundamental tendency to ameliorate itself.

This evolutionary approach characterized the thinking of the nineteenth century, when several systematic attempts were made to trace the development of social institutions through different stages. A study of marriage was made by J. F. McLennan, for example, and one of law by Henry Maine. In Britain the most influential theoretical writer of the time was probably Herbert Spencer, whose ideas about the ‘survival of the fittest’ were later
attributed to that other great evolutionist of the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin. Spencer made many biological analogies in his consideration of society as 'superorganic', and he also advocated looking at how the parts of a society related to one another rather than taking them out of context as others were wont to do.

This was later to be the cornerstone of two schools of anthropology known as functionalism and structural functionalism, led by twentieth-century scholars, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, respectively. These approaches, each seeking an explanation of social behaviour within a particular society at a particular time, were something of a reaction to the previous evolutionary method, and were later criticized for neglecting history. They entailed spending a long time with a particular people and really learning their language in all its complexity, and this was what came to distinguish social anthropology from sociology.

Bronislaw Malinowski, the Polish-born anthropologist who was the first major proponent in Britain of the value of this long-term study, was interned in Australia at the start of the First World War, and spent several years in the Trobriand Islands, where he discovered the great advantages of time for properly understanding the ways of thinking of another people. The functionalist approach he advocated was grounded in the idea that all social and cultural behaviour could be explained as responding to various human needs. He taught social anthropology at the London School of Economics on his return to Europe, and inspired a cohort of anthropological fieldworkers who produced a body of detailed ethnography. Some of Malinowski's work will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 7.

Radcliffe-Brown's long-term fieldwork was carried out in the Andaman Islands (Bay of Bengal) from 1906 to 1908, but it was less intensive than that of Malinowski, and his interests were in the value of social behaviour for the maintenance and well-being of a network of social relations he called the social structure – hence the phrase structural functionalism. He taught in Sydney, Cape Town and Chicago, so his work was very influential around the world, though it has remained known as British social anthropology. We will look at an example of Radcliffe-Brown's work in Chapter 9.

In the United States the emphasis on intensive fieldwork dates back to the earlier work of Franz Boas, a German immigrant of Jewish origin, who argued in 1896 that all cultures were equal but different, and a great deal of work needed to be applied to each one. He spent long periods of time studying with groups of native Americans, and trained his followers to collect detailed empirical data about their material culture, as well as language and social behaviour. His work became known as cultural anthropology, and he introduced the idea of cultural relativism, which argues that because cultures
are based on different ideas about the world, they can only be properly understood in terms of their own standards and values.

In Europe, a French sociologist who had a profound influence on the subject of social anthropology, particularly when Radcliffe-Brown returned to lead the profession from a chair in Oxford, was Emile Durkheim, whose concerns were still evolutionary, but who insisted that society must be looked at as more than the sum of individuals who make it up. He advocated the identification of social facts which exist outside the individual and exercise constraint ‘like moulds in which our actions are inevitably shaped’. Examples are legal and moral regulations, religious faiths, financial systems, and taste in art, all of which form part of our socialization and education in a particular society. He led a group of scholars who were largely wiped out in the First World War. Some work which he wrote with another member, Marcel Mauss, will be discussed in Chapter 1. Mauss will reappear in Chapter 3.

The first chair in anthropology was created in Oxford at the turn of the twentieth century, and it was held by Edward Tylor, who reacted to the idea that ‘savages’ were somehow different from ‘civilized’ people. He had travelled in Mexico as a young man and he continually argued that ‘human nature is everywhere similar’. He encouraged the comparison of ‘primitive’ and ‘civilized’ practices, but he was still an evolutionist. Another school of thought argued for a cradle of civilization from which practices had spread or diffused around the world, as people influenced and copied one another, but eventually another influential Oxford professor of anthropology, Edward Evans-Pritchard, pointed out the futility of speculation about how societies had developed, or evolved, and even rejected the idea of social laws.

He argued that societies are systems only because human beings need to order the world rationally, and anthropologists should study this structural order, and seek meaning in the context of a particular society. He advocated representing a particular society by establishing sets of related abstractions which could then be compared with those of other societies. These structures could undergo transformations, which would represent change, an advance on the earlier structural functional explanations which seemed to ignore history. Evans-Pritchard worked in British colonies, as did many of the British anthropologists of his time, which inevitably imposed change on the people they studied. Some examples of Evans-Pritchard’s work are discussed further in Chapter 7 and Chapter 10 of this book.

Perhaps the most influential anthropologist in Britain this century has been another Frenchman, Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose brand of structuralism is a little different from that of Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown. We shall discuss his work in Chapter 7. Throughout the chapters of this book the work of many anthropologists will be discussed, and other influential
characters from the history of the subject will be introduced. As this book goes to press, the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences is preparing for a conference in Williamsburg, Virginia, entitled ‘The 21st Century: The Century of Anthropology’. Clearly this international body feels that our history is still short.

The Contemporary Importance of Social Anthropology

It is now quite unacceptable to talk of ‘savages’ or ‘primitive people’, because all people, whatever their stage of technological achievement, have been shown to have complex, rational systems of thought and valuable contributions to make to the knowledge and wisdom of the world. This understanding is in no small part due to the work of anthropologists, who still have important roles to play in facilitating communication between indigenous people and representatives of the ‘developments’ of multinational enterprise, whose views of the world are so different. Anthropologists can help at both ends, and their contemporary roles are by no means limited to the study of distant tribes.

Another big conference, this time of the Association of Social Anthropologists, held in Oxford in 1993, addressed the theme, ‘Globalization and Localization’, which neatly summarizes the contemporary potential for anthropologists to contribute to an understanding of what has become known as ‘the global village’. Developments in communication technology, the products of multinational companies, and television advertising have permeated the world at large with an apparently shared culture of Coca-cola, sushi and brand-name trainers, to name but a few of the material markers. In local contexts, however, this global culture is interpreted and used in quite different ways (for some examples see Howes (ed.), 1996), though its apparent uniformity tends to mask these differences.

Anthropologists are therefore at last making some impact in the arenas of big business and finance, which until recently resisted our insistence on cultural relativism in the mistaken belief that the world was converging towards a kind of global homogenization. The so-called ‘tiger economies’ have illustrated forcibly that it is possible to contribute both successfully and less successfully to world markets, with many of their cultural differences firmly in place. Likewise, the oil barons of the Middle East retain their own distinctive views of the world. Anthropologists are now not only called upon to help companies set up outlets in foreign countries, but also to understand their own corporate culture from a social point of view.

Other features of the phenomenon of globalization are the increased numbers of people who travel outside their own home territories, whether for
business or pleasure, and the increased tendency for individuals to grow up in one place and settle in another, and for children to be born and raised in a mixture of cultural arenas. Schools around the world are realizing the advantages of employing teachers whose anthropological training will help them to understand the plurality of backgrounds of the members of their multicultural classes. At a local level, anthropologists can help schools reach the children of isolated or itinerant groups – even in Oxford, some of my ex-students play such roles in building good relations with Traveller Gypsies, for example.

Health workers, carers and counsellors are also taking time and trouble to find out about the variety of attitudes and beliefs which exist among their patients and other clients, so that these may be taken into consideration in the treatment and advice they offer. Medical anthropology is a thriving branch of the subject, and many universities now offer one-year courses to train health professionals in the contribution the subject may make to their work, as well as opening their eyes to the values of indigenous methods of coping with ill health. Anthropologists have also had an important contribution to make to world health programmes, especially, for example, where the administration of inoculations may offend local cultural values.

Anthropologists are also now employed to advise on the realization of development projects, whose administrators have gradually come to appreciate the advantages of taking into consideration the views of the people they are aiming to help before imposing expensive projects on recipients whose unwillingness has rendered them useless and wasteful. There have been some classic cases of misunderstanding, dotting the underdeveloped ‘third’ world with crumbling constructions, rusting machinery, and local boycotting of perfectly good health measures, simply because the people they were designed for were neither consulted, nor their views of the world taken into consideration.

The application of anthropology is not new, but sometimes the subject has become associated with endeavour which is now politically unacceptable at a local level. Some early anthropologists were expected to help colonial administrators rule the peoples in their charge, for example, so they set out to understand the customs, language and political systems of aboriginal or tribal people so that their compatriots could subdue them. Anthropologists also adopted a role of advocacy, helping the people they knew so well to represent their own interests comprehensibly to the outside world; but local people have also complained about feeling patronized and diminished by such help, so the aid situation is not without complications.

One of the most famous studies of Japan – *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, by American anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1954), grew out of an
assignment for the United States’ Office of War Information during the Second World War, when she was commissioned to help the Allied Forces to understand their most threatening enemy. Benedict’s book was translated into Japanese after the war ended, and it became very popular there, as she impressed local people with her level of understanding; but some objected to being represented in this way, reading expressions of superiority into the American cultural examples she used to compare with those found in Japan. The book is still widely read, but it also still causes controversy, some 50 years later (see Hendry, 1996).

One of the problems at the time of Benedict’s writing was that anthropologists had tended to study people who were called ‘primitive’ and underdeveloped, and some Japanese readers felt that they were, by implication, being classed in this way, despite her use of America as a comparative base. Since then there have been great changes in the focus of social and cultural anthropology, which is now applied to any part of the globe, including the most industrialized nations. In 1982, for example, Anthony Cohen published a collection of papers by anthropologists who had worked in British communities, defined geographically, and there have been many studies of North American cultural forms.

Another problem, especially from a British perspective, was a legacy of biases and assumptions left over from our own colonial history, and it has taken the anthropology of scholars from some of those former colonies to make clear the way their compatriots felt to be the objects of outside studies. Residents of our former colonies have now settled in Britain, too, and some of the most exciting new studies for students of anthropology here concern the contested nature of social and cultural identity in just one location. Gerd Baumann’s (1996) study in Southall, a multi-ethnic area of West London, draws on the lives of young people born in Sikh, Muslim, Afro-Caribbean and Irish families, all as English as members of the white minority who would appear to have few ‘cultural’ features to distinguish them.

The phenomenon of multiculturalism is of course already familiar in other parts of the world, and anthropologists may have another role to play where inter-ethnic relations have broken down in contemporary war zones, such as Serbia and Mozambique. They are not in a position to wave a magic wand, of course, and there is undoubtedly a limit to the value of mutual understanding in resolving disputes. Continuing difficulties in the Middle East and Northern Ireland provide an almost continual poignant reminder of the expression of deep rifts, couched in ethnic and religious terms, cited to underpin issues of political history. Anthropologists have also addressed the subject of disputes in areas where there are a variety of cultural influences, however, and this is a subject to which we shall return, in Chapter 9.
Politicians in the new European Community, set up as a long-term solution to the terrible results of war, find themselves regularly in situations of difficult intercultural encounter. The solutions they have devised to deal with this situation have become the subject of recent anthropological study, and this interest has apparently coincided with a realization on the part of the European leaders of the advantage of anthropological knowledge. For some of the fieldworkers, remuneration for their advice has helped them to afford the expensive life-style of cities such as Brussels and Strasbourg where they carry out their research. The study of intercultural communication of this sort can also be carried out among, and be of help to diplomats, international business people and a multitude of other citizens of the world.

With the speed and efficiency of electronic communications of one sort or another, some anthropologists are able to specialize in a completely new way on religious and cultural diasporas, people scattered geographically, but now easily able to keep in touch. One of my colleagues seems to be following up his initial fieldwork in Africa with a second bout on his computer, keeping up with Cameroonians living in different parts of the world. Other diaspora studies involve examining the plight of cultural refugees. The term was originally used for Greeks living abroad, but other examples are the communities of Chinese and Jews who maintain to different degrees their internal associations over their integration, or otherwise, to the outside world they occupy physically.

My own upbringing was as part of a Scottish community only as far away from the homeland as central England, but it is said that there are 20 million people around the world who describe themselves as Scots, while the population of Scotland is less than six million. In Chapter 4, we will consider one of the ways in which Scottish celebrations are held abroad, but here we encounter another interesting anthropological subject, for it seems that many of the people who recently enjoy (or try to enjoy) eating haggis on Burns Night (see Photograph 0.1) are actually not Scottish at all. Nor were there many Chinese people at a Chinese New Year party to which I was recently invited. In other words, ‘culture’ has become a kind of theme for leisure activities, and people not only seek food from cultures other than their own when they eat out in restaurants, but organize whole events around cultural themes.

This phenomenon may be related to the relatively recent propensity for large numbers of people to travel outside their own countries for holidays, which introduces them to cultural difference when they are relaxing, away from their usual lives. The anthropology of tourism is another new and exiting branch of the subject, which addresses the problems tourists bring for local people, as well as the issues associated with ‘representing’ cultural forms
in special shows. Young travellers, known as ‘backpackers’, apparently vie
with one another to find ‘real’ people in ‘real’ situations, tramping through
fields and villages, while those for whom resources are relatively abundant
watch shows of dancing and singing, selected for them and brought to their
expensive hotels.

Around the world, leisure parks choose culture as their theme, sometimes
to represent images and experiences of local culture for the visitor to enjoy in
a kind of encapsulated form, elsewhere they choose foreign countries. In
Florida there is the Disney-dream Epcot Centre, for example, where displays
from a series of countries may be visited, and their food tasted, but in Japan
whole days may be spent apparently visiting foreign lands such as Canada,
Spain and Germany, without leaving Japan’s shores. These parks have
imported houses, streets and museums from the countries concerned, as well
as employing artists to demonstrate the skills associated with the area,
performers to entertain, and a huge range of goods to be purchased.

Clearly the excitement of cultural difference is now shared beyond
anthropological circles, and such positive attitudes are infinitely preferable
to the fights and wars which break out because of such difference, but there is
a danger in making cultural variety appear too trite and shallow. Increasingly,
a person is likely, wherever they live, to encounter people from backgrounds different from their own, and they may find themselves in situations which conflict with the expectations of their own upbringing. The study of social anthropology is an important step towards breaking down prejudices and misunderstandings about strangers we encounter, at home or abroad, and it provides a basis for the deep understanding of other people and their worlds. Let us build on the excitement, but remember the depths when we return home.

References


Further Reading


Novels

Lodge, David, *Nice Work* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1989) is an amusing fictional account of an anthropologist and a business man who trail each other at work.