

Travels through anthropology-land

Alan Macfarlane, March 2006

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I first heard of the existence of a new subject and its practitioners, a strange, exotic and exciting tribe that I wanted to learn more about, in Oxford in early 1964 when I was just 22.

I had read history as an undergraduate in Oxford and after a false start on my D.Phil. had decided to choose between myth, sex or witchcraft in seventeenth century England as possible topics for my research. I went to see Keith Thomas, not knowing that he had already started to investigate the relations between anthropology and history, having given a talk to Peter Burke's seminar on this subject (see Burke interview) in the previous year. This which was to be published as 'History and Anthropology' in the influential journal *Past and Present* in 1964 and would be my guide for a number of years.

Keith had also started to collect materials for the work he would publish in 1970 as *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. He generously suggested that I choose witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England on my list. He told me that I should attend lectures in the Institute of Social Anthropology in Oxford and, if possible, meet Evans-Pritchard. I followed his advice and suddenly a whole world opened out in front of me, a previously never guessed land which seemed to offer answers or at least discussion of many of the questions I was then asking. I remember reading the broadcast lectures by the leaders of anthropology at that time, E-P, Fortes, Leach, Lienhardt, Gluckman, in *The Institutions of Primitive Society* and several text-books, especially Clyde Kluckhohn's *Mirror for Man*, with enormous interest and excitement.

I even thought of changing to anthropology mid-way through my D.Phil., but was dissuaded from doing so by Christopher Hill, the Marxist historian whose work I so much admired and Evans-Pritchard himself. They urged me to complete my D.Phil. and, by chance, ended up as its Examiners.

So I read what I could of social anthropology, including Evans-Pritchard's famous Cairo lectures on Levi-Bruhl and others, and I attended some coffee mornings, occasional pub drinks and a number of lectures at the Institute. I began to meet my first generation of tribal elders at Oxford, the Lienhardts, Peter and Godfrey, Ravi Jain, John Beattie, Rodney Needham and above all Evans-Pritchard himself. Several long conversations with Evans-Pritchard, with E-P treating me with that direct and flattering intimacy and talking about his relations to Malinowski, Raymond Firth and others, may have helped to kindle that interest in the folklore of the new tribe I had discovered. As a partial and continuing outsider, historian as well as anthropologist, I

have filled in some of the faces and characters of many of those he mentioned and I have thickened the gossip web.

As soon as my funding and D.Phil. were starting to end, I looked for a place I could be properly trained in anthropology. I visited Cambridge and remember being interviewed by Edmund Leach and Audrey Richards. They were sympathetic, but said there was no money available and I should try the L.S.E. I was interviewed by Raymond Firth and offered a scholarship, which I accepted, for the two-year conversion M.Phil. in Social Anthropology.

So I went to the L.S.E. in 1966, unaware that I was only just in time to meet and be taught by another part of that group of social anthropologists of the E-P and Lienhardt generation, and their senior pupils, who had dominated British social anthropology in the twenty years since the founding of the ASA in 1946. Isaac Schapera was my supervisor, and I must have been one of his last students. Lucy Mair was writing her book on witchcraft and I had several long conversations with her as she asked me to read the typescript. Among the slightly younger colleagues who taught me were Maurice Freedman, Robin Fox, Anthony Forge, James Woodburn and Stephen Morris.

There were four people I met in these years who had an especial influence. One was Raymond Firth himself, whose famous graduate seminars, the successor to the Malinowski seminar, I attended. I felt it a great honour to give the final speech when Firth retired in 1968 from running the seminar, never dreaming I would continue to know him for another 30 years. Firth linked me to the past, while the others linked me into the present and future. Another was Ernest Gellner, who would later become a close friend and Head of Department. His courteous and egalitarian personal manner, combined with the excitement of finding such a wide and universalistic thinker was striking.

Thirdly, Jack Goody examined my thesis in a viva with Schapera, and though I did not get to know him, he would become one of the major influences in my intellectual life and his writing on incest and marriage were already affecting my thinking.

Fourthly, there was Mary Douglas. I attended the inter-departmental seminars at University College and elsewhere and for a while became a part of Douglas' inner circle and got to know others in that circle a little, including Adam Kuper and Ioan Lewis. Through Mary I was invited to give a paper at my first A.S.A. conference, that in 1968 in honour of Evans-Pritchard on witchcraft. There I personally met many of the people whose books I was reading and I particularly remember Edmund Leach, Julian Pitt-Rivers, Esther Goody, Reo Fortune and W.M. (Bill) Williams. It was all enormously exciting, with new worlds opening up.

Yet in order to be a proper anthropologist I needed to go through the fieldwork rite and the Ph.D. course. I had been born and spent a few years in Assam and always wanted to return so it was natural that I should have then met Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf and through him been offered scholarships to work in Nepal (Assam being politically impossible). I became almost his last student and by transferring to

SOAS met another group of the older anthropologists like Adrian Mayer and their younger colleagues, Abner Cohen, Lionel Caplan and Audrey Cantlie.

After my real induction into anthropology in Nepal, I returned to write up and gained a little distance from my new tribe by becoming a historian again for almost four years as a Senior Research Fellow in History at King's College, Cambridge. Yet I was still on the edges of the tribe, for S.J.Tambiah, Edmund Leach and particularly Meyer Fortes were kind and supportive and gave me further insights into the discipline and its methods. I also got to know some of the previous generation better and listened to their accounts of the Malinowski and J.H.Hutton era of anthropology, in particular Audrey Richards and G.I.Jones.

In 1975 I started as a Lecturer in anthropology and became a very close colleague of Jack Goody who was immensely influential because of his wide interests and cosmopolitan curiosity. He helped me to start various projects in relation to the then SSRC, two of which had a particular influence as a background to this collection of Ancestor interviews. One was in encouraging me to use new technologies of recording discussions.

In 1975 the ESRC asked me to put in a proposal for four workshops on history and anthropology. I set these up with help from the Audio Visual Aids Unit so that three of them could be filmed and a fourth recorded. I invited many members of the anthropological tribe whom I thought I would like to hear talk and be recorded. These, with Jack's support, included Maurice Godelier, Julian Pitt-Rivers, Edmund Leach, Jack himself, Maurice Bloch, Joel Kahn, Marshall Sahlins and Audrey Richards amongst the anthropologists. I also invited some of the historians whose work was either of most interest to anthropologists, or most influenced by them, including Edward Thompson, Raphael Samuel, Peter Burke, Keith Thomas, Sally Humphreys and others.

The other encouragement was that I should join the anthropology committee of the ESRC. At this time, this was a very active group, where I met people like Peter Riviere, John Davis, Andrew Strathern and renewed acquaintance with many others, including Adrian Mayer and Wendy James. Some nine years on this committee meant that I came to know the research community of social anthropologists in Britain in the 1970's extremely well.

I mention all this background because it perhaps helps to explain the later interest in recording on film further bits of the history of the anthropological archive through video interviews. I would not have done so without Jack's influence as described above, while he in turn was influence by the 1976 experiment, fed back into this as well. In 1982 Jack and Stephen Levinson, a socio-linguist associated with our Department, set up studio talks and lectures by Audrey Richards, Meyer Fortes and M.N.Srinivas, again working with the Audio Visual Aids Unit in Cambridge with whom we had previously worked.

I don't know precisely what made me decide the following year to do the first of the longer interviews with anthropologists. It was partly that the technology which meant one could more easily film outside a studio became available, partly the realization that we are constantly doing interviews in our fieldwork and it was strange

not to do the same to the anthropological tribe. So I undertook a very long (over two hour) interview with my ex-supervisor Furer-Haimendorf, which incidentally prompted him to mention the fact that the interview could be supplemented by his films and photographs and when we went to see them, donating the whole unique film collection to myself and my wife. From 1983 onwards I have sporadically interviewed and filmed the lectures of over 60 people (as of 2006), mostly anthropologists, and another eight have been added filmed by others, especially Mark Turin. It is a patchy sample, haphazardly random, and we missed many important figures, especially Evans-Pritchard and Max Gluckman. But something has been saved.

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We hear all too frequently that we live in a global world. The C21 will be the century when Asia comes to power and the western dominance and imperial phase within which the first four generations, whose members I have briefly talked about, will be less important. Yet the influences are not over. Already new waves of students and teachers are developing, especially in China, who continue to be influenced by that very small group whom I got to know in the 1960's.

There were not many of them, perhaps two dozen or so key people, ten of whom founded the Association of Social Anthropologists. Compared to other tribes I have known, historians, economists, natural scientists, they were a tiny group. They could all fit onto the steps of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1946 and even since then the ASA has remained small, especially when compared to the AAA and other associations.

Yet as an outsider, who became a semi-insider, engaged in participant observation, I have found them to be a tribe whose breadth of interests and global vision continues to sustain me. I believe that the work of cultural translation, of mutual understanding, of documentation of the rapidly altering otherness, of understanding what is universal and what is particular about human groups, has been immensely advanced by their work.

They had their frailties, but when I face the problems of understanding the rapidly changing and interconnected world, I do not find in any other discipline a better approach or way to understand things. Anthropology has always been eclectic – it draws on history, philosophy, law, economics, political theory. But out of these it fashions its own special, non-exclusive, connecting, ‘cosmopolitan’ if you like, sort of truth which I still find helps me to understand my own life and the world around me.