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Anthropological and other ‘Ancestors’

Notes on Setting up a Visual Archive

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Collecting the materials

In 1982 Jack Goody decided to make a film record of some of the senior figures in social anthropology. At that time this could best be done in a studio. With the help of Steven Levinson, he organized three seminars to be filmed at the Audio Visual Aids Unit in Cambridge, under the supervision of Martin Gienke. There was a lecture and discussion by Meyer Fortes on ‘Divination’, a talk and discussion ‘On Fieldwork’ by Audrey Richards, and a talk and discussion ‘On Looking Back’ by M.N.Srinivas.

In June 1983, using the new generation of portable low-band u-matic cameras just becoming available, I organized the filming of a three-hour interview of the life and fieldwork of Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf. This was different to the earlier filming in two ways. It was done in a more relaxed atmosphere outside a studio and it was an interview rather than a talk with discussion.

The following month at the Association of Social Anthropology Decennial Conference at Cambridge, with the help of several Ph.D. students, I did interviews, lasting between twenty and forty minutes of several senior anthropologists; Raymond and Rosemary Firth, John Beattie, Jeremy Boissevain, Ronald Frankenberg, Philip Gulliver, Emmanuel Marx, Adrian Mayer and S.J.Tambiah. Unfortunately the sound technology was faulty and the picture not very good, but they are viewable.

Over the next twenty years I organized the filming of another six interviews in which the interviewer’s interests overlapped with the interviewee. These were by Caroline Humphrey of Owen Lattimore; Jack Goody of John Barnes and Jean La Fontaine; Eric Hobsbawm of Jack Goody; Piers Vitebski of Robert Paine; Jean La Fontaine of Lucy Mair; Laura Rival of Peter Rivière.

I interviewed Nicholas Allen, George Appell, Laura Appell, Raymond Apthorpe, Michael Banton, André Beteille, Ursula Graham Bower, Peter Burke, Lionel Caplan, Pat Caplan, Ronald Dore, Scarlett Epstein, Peter Gathercole, Clifford Geertz, F.K.Lehman, Peter Loizos, Iona Mayer, Philip Mayer, Malcolm Ruel, Anne Salmond, Peter Worsley and Nur Yalman. Many of these were filmed by Sarah Harrison.

Carole Pegg and Roger Blench interviewed Laurence Picken. Mark Turin interviewed and filmed David Snellgrove, Asen Balikci, Terry Turner and Bernd Lambert.

A number of lectures were filmed to give a sense of the individuals concerned. These included the Frazer lecture (1992) by Godfrey Lienhardt, a lecture by Ernest Gellner on returning from a year in the Soviet Union in 1989, seminars by Jean Claude Galey (1989) and Philippe Descola (2004), and the Huxley lecture (2004) by Marilyn Strathern. With Xiaoxiao Yan I filmed the Raymond Firth memorial meeting in 2002 with contributions from a number of distinguished anthropologists (Marilyn Strathern, Maurice Bloch, Adrian Mayer, John Davis, Charles Stafford, Stephan Feuchtwang, Jean La Fontaine, Jonny Parry, Janet Carsten).

As the technology improved it was possible to use smaller and higher quality video cameras and radio mikes. So the quality of the films taken during the last two or three years on a three-chip camera is far better than the earlier films: thus, for example, the films of Ahmed, Geertz and Yalman, taken in 2004, when compared to the films of the 1980's, are markedly improved.

Preserving and making the materials more widely available.

By 2003 there were about 45 interviews and lectures in various formats. With the help of a small British Academy grant, we decided to convert these into a form where they could be available to scholars all over the world. Without conversion, many of the early interviews would be lost as they were on vanishing formats and deteriorating tapes.

Furthermore, unless converted onto a web format their value would be very restricted, since copying onto a VHS tape and sending to specified people who happened to have heard of one of the interviews is very inefficient .

With the help of Mark Turin, the interviews were converted to digital format from VHS, U-matic, video 8, hi-8 and other formats, using the last of old players we had preserved. They were then edited for various kinds of defect, and, very occasionally, for potentially libellous or damaging comments.

In order to make them more useful, a summary of the interviews was needed. This is, in many ways the most time-consuming part of the project. These varied from a full transcript (Haimendorf), to very full summaries (Worsley, Lattimore, Barnes, Lambert) to shorter synopses. The Haimendorf transcript was made by Mark Turin, and almost all the rest by Sarah Harrison.

Then the films were compressed onto MPEG4 (a high quality compression CODEC only available from about 2003). This was again a fairly time-consuming process. An hour of film characteristically took over four times that period to transfer using the Cleaner 6 software on a MAC 4. With a MAC5 this is reduced to about a quarter of that time.

Until 2004 it would have been impossible to have held these large files (even when compressed) on a server to make available to the academic community since each hour occupied about 400 MB. Fortunately, the Universities of Cambridge and M.I.T. were launching a new virtual or digital library project in that year called Dspace (Digital Space) and the anthropology collection was chosen as one of the first batch of trial materials.

As with all such new ventures, at the start there were difficulties. Much time was spent on repeated re-tries to send these very large files across the internet to the digital store. But the system has been much improved and a wider band width in the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge means that an hour can be transferred in about ten minutes.

Since the possibilities of this kind of work were only just opening up, we were working out the methods as we went along. Each 'ancestor' took one to three days work, not including the half day or full day that was taken setting up and filming the interview. We have now converted fifty-five interviews or lectures, each lasting from between twenty minutes and three hours.

Once the interviews were on DSpace we had to design an interface system to access them. This involved making short, lower quality extracts, (with much higher compression) to give a sample of the interviews, making stills (JPEGs) from the films, and setting up an HTML page which allows the user to navigate through the system.

This allows a user to watch a short extract, or to look at the full interview in real time (with 'Fast Start', which has to be added through a special program we have acquired). Alongside the film is a scrolling text showing the time-coded synopsis of the interview.

It is also possible to go to DSpace and download the whole interview onto a personal computer (characteristically an hour takes about 10 minutes with reasonable broadband and occupies about 400MB). This can then be burnt to CD or DVD and used in teaching and research. This film archive currently constitutes the largest data set on the Cambridge Dspace server.

The set of interviews, lectures and seminars is currently held on my web-site, www.alanmacfarlane.com (off the front page with an icon 'Ancestors'). The interviews are indexed by Google, so typing in, for example, 'John Barnes', takes one quickly to the site.

Some themes and subjects in the interviews.

The current interviews can be grouped in various ways. There is generational stratification. The generation of the structural-functionalists who were pupils of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown (and others) in Britain include John Beattie, Raymond and Rosemary Firth, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, Meyer Fortes, Edmund Leach, Lucy Mair, Audrey Richards and M.N.Srinivas. Hence there are many insights into the teaching methods, paradigms and contexts of British social anthropology between the World Wars.

In America, the memories of teachers such as Margaret Mead, Clyde Kluckhohn, G.C. Homans and others are provided by George Appell, Clifford Geertz, Terry Turner and Asen Balikci.

The next generation, who reminisce about Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Gluckman and others include Michael Banton, John Barnes, Andre Beteille, Ronald Frankenberg, Jack Goody, Jean La Fontaine, Peter Riviere, S.J. Tambiah, Peter Worsley and Nur Yalman.

There are a number of interviews with a particular slant. A number of them represent the hugely diverse field of people who are half-anthropologists, so to speak. Peter Burke is a cultural historian who has used anthropology extensively. Laurence Picken was an ethno-musicologist who describes (with musical instruments) his work in Chinese and Turkish. Ronald Dore is a distinguished sociologist of Japan. Owen Lattimore was a documenter of the history, geography and cultures of central Asia in the middle of the twentieth century. G.I. Jones was one of that large class of colonial officers turned anthropologists and collectors. Ursula Graham Bower was an amateur anthropologist who documented the peoples of the Assam border and led a troop of Nagas against the Japanese.

Scarlett Epstein, a distinguished development anthropologist, talks mainly about her experiences of growing up in Vienna as a Jew just before the Second World War. Polly Hill describes the world of those poised on the inter-section of economics and anthropology. Raymond Apthorpe describes some of the contributions he made to anthropological theory before he became a development economist. Peter Gathercole illuminates some of the connections to archaeology and the museum world.

The accounts are rich in relation to the question of the colonial context of anthropology and the last days of the British Empire. Akbar Ahmed reflects on this in relation to Pakistan, Fürer-Haimendorf in Assam, and G.I. Jones, Lucy Mair, Audrey Richards and Philip Mayer in Africa.

Many of the most important ethnographers of the twentieth century talk about their fieldwork. They worked in Africa (Mair, La Fontaine, Goody, Barnes, Gulliver, Hill, Geertz, Banton, Pat Caplan, Iona and Philip Mayer, Ruel), the Middle East (Marx), Europe (Loizos, Boissevain, Paine, Frankenberg), South America (Rivière, Turner), North America (Balikci), South and South East Asia (Allen, Ahmed, Tambiah, the Caplans, Epstein, Leach, Adrian Mayer, Snellgrove, Srinivas, Yalman), the Pacific (the Appells, the Firths, Geertz, Salmond, Worsley, Gathercole), East Asia (Dore, Picken).

Among the insightful discussions of fieldwork methods and problems are Allen on work in Nepal, Geertz in Bali, La Fontaine in East Africa, Salmond in New Zealand, Tambiah in Thailand, Iona Mayer in South Africa, Fürer-Haimendorf in India and Nepal, Beteille in South India.

A number of the interviewees were pioneers in visual anthropology. Haimendorf talks about photography filming, Balikci on visual anthropology and its potentials, Turner on the Kayapo project and Loizos on visual anthropology and film making.

Many of the interviewees reflect on the ethical and other problems of work, including the discourse of human rights (George Appell), and the problems of anthropological advocacy (Paine).

The Marxist strand in anthropology runs right through the interview of Peter Gathercole, as it does in relation to Peter Worsley who provides a particularly rich account of the development of the Marxist movement in Britain.

Jack Goody, Anne Salmond, Peter Burke and others reflect on the relations between anthropology and history throughout their interviews. Pat Caplan and Rosemary Firth are among those who discuss the role of women in anthropology. Other notable sections are by Akbar Ahmed on Islam and anthropology and Geertz on reflexivity and writing.

Further work

A number of further interviews are lined up for the next couple of years. It would be excellent if others were to participate by filming older colleagues on their lives and works. The great American, French and other traditions are not well represented in what has, up to now, been largely a small project by myself with help from Sarah Harrison, my colleague Mark Turin and a few friends and students. The methods have been *ad hoc* and developed as the technology improved. The potentials are now much greater than they were even ten years ago.

It would also be excellent to know of other film interviews that exist, either to add them to the web-site, or at least to list them so that people are aware of their existence.

It is to be hoped that parallel projects will be set up in the many countries where anthropology has spread. For example, after a talk at Yunnan University in China in 2003, we found that by the following year members of the anthropology department are conducting similar 'ancestor interviews' of elderly Chinese anthropologists.

Once one thinks about the idea, it may seem strange that anthropologists have devoted so much energy to investigating other people's tribes (including filming them), and so little time on their own. When the 'ancestors' are encouraged to talk, they do so with a frankness and insight which it is a pleasure to be involved in preserving. This modest project, done in odd moments and with little funding, will hopefully enable our descendants in a hundred years time to catch a glimpse of a rich period of anthropological research.