An Introduction to Social Anthropology

Second Edition

Lucy Mair

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SECOND EDITION

1972

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

NEW YORK LONDON

Oxford University Press

GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON
CAPE TOWN IBADAN NAIROBI DAR ES SALAAM LUSAKA ADDIS ABABA
DELHI BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI LAHORE DACCA
KUALA LUMPUR SINGAPORE HONG KONG TOKYO

FIRST EDITION 1965
SECOND EDITION 1972
This reprint, 1974

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Preface to the Second Edition

MY AIMS in revising this book have been two: to put more clearly some of the issues in matters of controversy, notably the relationship between our subject and sociology, and to extend the discussion of aspects of social anthropology which are receiving more attention today than they were five years ago. It has also been possible to take account of recent writing on old themes. Thus I have been able in the chapter on economics to revise the account of the *potlatch* in the light of Drucker and Heiser's reinterpretation of Boas's texts. I have added to the same section of the book some account of the economy of food-collectors, who until recently have been neglected by anthropologists; some discussion of the notion of surplus and its significance for the development of exchange; and some more recent views on the question of primitive money. The chapter on law contains a more extended discussion of the treatment of this subject by British and American anthropologists; I think it important to note in this context that the principle of reciprocity, now widely treated as a discovery of Lévi-Strauss, was first introduced to social anthropology in Malinowski's *Crime and Custom*. I have added to the section on land law an account of the rather unusual Tiv system described by Bohannan. I have also revised the chapter on the study of social change; in the course of doing so I was happy to read the argument of a distinguished historian that the most significant aspect of his subject today is the nature of the changes produced by industrialization, and I am grateful to Professor Plumb and the editors of *Encounter* for permission to quote his words.

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CHAPTER 1

What Social Anthropology Is

ANTHROPOLOGY means 'talking about man', as psychology means 'talking about mind'. The cliché 'I'm interested in people', and the exclamation 'Aren't foreigners extraordinary!' must have been current in some form or other since man learnt to use language. The greater part of all human discourse is concerned with what people do (sometimes the speaker, perhaps more often other people), and everyone who has the opportunity of travelling away from his own home is struck by the differences between the way of doing things that he is used to and what he finds elsewhere.

Anthropology is sometimes thought of as the study which tells us 'all about man'. To those who take this view, it comprises in fact the subjects that were flourishing about the middle of the nineteenth century, when the idea of a 'science of man' first began to take shape—physical anthropology, social (or cultural) anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics. An alternative view is that social anthropology is a branch of sociology, and its nearest neighbours are the other social sciences. That is the point of view taken in this book.

Differences between societies

Sociology, then, is the study of society, and social anthropology is a branch of this. Why should anyone be asked, or wish, to study society? We all live as members of society. It might be thought that we know all about it from our own experience. Most of us grow up learning how to behave towards our fellows, and by the time we are grown up we take it for granted that there *is* only one way to behave. Then perhaps we may go abroad, for a holiday or for longer, and we very soon find that the rules are different in other countries. Some of us just take this as proving the inferiority

of other nations, and few of us ever learn that in the eyes of the other nations, who take different rules for granted, *we* are the inferiors. 'No Other Country,' said Dickens's Mr. Podsnap, 'is so favoured as This Country.' 'And other countries?' asked a foreign guest at his dinner table. 'They do how?' 'They do, sir,' replied Mr. Podsnap, 'they do—I am sorry to be obliged to say it—*as* they do.'

Social anthropology has been very largely concerned with peoples who 'do' very differently from 'This Country' or from any other of the industrialized nations that are commonly called (with a fine disregard of geography) 'western'. Its centre of interest has always been the peoples who are called 'primitive', or, when there is time to speak at greater length, 'peoples of simple technology'—peoples who have to get on without our array of gadgets, not only without radar and mechanical transport, but without money and without writing. Lacking these means of conducting their affairs, they have to organize their lives very differently from ourselves. But if we study the kind of societies that they live in, and compare them with those of the western world, we can see that certain fundamental principles of life in society are to be found both among 'them' and among 'us'. It is by comparing many different kinds of society that people find the common principles.

The 'primitive' or 'simple' societies differ very much from one another—perhaps more than the industrialized societies do. Can we account for these differences? Sometimes people think they are due to the character of the different peoples—to qualities that they have 'in their bones' or 'in their blood', that they all inherit from their parents. Or is there some determining influence in the environment, in the sources of their livelihood, for example, or in the climate?

The explanation of differences between peoples—and sometimes even between individuals—as manifestations of 'national character' is extremely popular. Most of us have a mental picture of a typical German, or Russian, or West Indian, and when we hear that the German government, or the Moscow Communist Party, or a coloured bus conductor, has done something that we don't think we would do in

their place (or something that we don't like) we account for it by the peculiar character that we associate with this mental picture.

You will often hear people say, of outsiders whom they don't like, that characteristics such as 'cruelty' or 'laziness' are 'in their blood'; and if a man or woman is very good at something, you may hear it said that navigation, or music, was 'in his (or her) blood'. In fact, if you find that a musical genius is raised in a musical family, this is much more likely to be because he was set to practise at the age of three than because of anything he has inherited. The question of the relation between the capacities we were born with and the kind of people we become is a very complicated one, which will have to be dealt with fully in a later chapter. But every student of anthropology should be warned at the outset of two things. First, the physical qualities that we do inherit are *not* carried in our blood, although this has been assumed for so long that it is sometimes difficult to avoid using the popular phrase 'blood relatives'. Second, the question how individual persons behave and the question how different societies are organized are quite separate questions; you cannot explain differences between societies by saying they are made up of different kinds of people. Some differences between societies reflect differences of technology; there are broad contrasts between the industrialized societies which use mechanical power on a large scale and those that have to get on without machines. But within each of these two broad classes there are all kinds of differences, and these simply cannot be accounted for by differences in hereditary make-up.

What about the explanation in terms of geography? The people who live in countries where water is desperately short have to organize themselves so as to take advantage of what water there is—moving with their cattle in search of grazing, or building their houses near permanent water and sending their young men away with the cattle. People who live in countries infested with tsetse fly have to do without cattle. People who live on islands generally build sea-going craft and learn to sail by the stars; but there are people in the Nile basin who have never made canoes. People who

grow their food on limited areas of land have to have rules saying who is entitled to use the land.

But we do not find that all cattle-keepers, or all islanders, have the same kind of society, by any means, and many of the differences between them cannot be correlated with environment at all. A very difficult environment limits what people can do. An extreme example of a people constrained by their environment are the Turkana of Northern Kenya. In their arid country they have to be constantly moving with their cattle in search of grazing and water. Half a dozen people or so move together. Even what we think of as the population of a small village—say a hundred people—could not find subsistence for themselves and their flocks at one time in the same place. So the Turkana have no villages, no village headmen, no village moots where people can discuss and settle their quarrels; they are as nearly without political organization as any people we could think of. But of all the peoples of the world only a small minority have to cope with such extreme difficulties. The majority are able to live in permanent villages or larger concentrations, where the generations succeed one another in the same place. They are by no means all alike, and where they differ one cannot account for this by rainfall or temperature, or the kind of vegetation that the soil will produce.

Perhaps at this point we should ask what kind of differences matter to the social anthropologist. The casual traveller notices that some people eat cheese for breakfast, and some would rather entertain you at a restaurant than invite you home; some seem to like talking all at once in loud voices, while others orate one after the other, nobody's remarks having any very close connection with those of the previous speaker. These are very superficial differences. Anyone who spends rather more than a holiday fortnight will probably become aware of more significant characteristics of the foreigners he is living among. He will notice that they have different rules about whom one may marry and what must be done to make a marriage legal; about who has claims on the property of a person who dies; about who is entitled to give orders that must be obeyed, and how such rulers are chosen; and different ideas about the nature

of the world and of unseen beings who concern themselves with human affairs.

This is the kind of question that social anthropologists are interested in; not just the kind of things you can see people doing every day, but behind the everyday behaviour, the way they are *organized* so as to be a *society* and not just a lot of people who happen to be in the same part of the world.

The rules of behaviour in which this organization consists, the *social facts*, are the subject-matter of the student of society. Can they be explained by something behind and apart from the society whose rules they are—by the peculiar quality of some men's minds or the length of the rainy season in different parts of the world? Durkheim, the great French sociologist from whom British anthropologists have drawn much of their inspiration, said No. The social, he said, can be explained only by the social. In other words, one can see that certain kinds of arrangement are characteristic of peoples of simple technology, or that certain inheritance rules and certain marriage rules are often found together; but it is no good going outside society for explanations of what happens within it.

The scope of social anthropology

The earliest anthropologists would have said that what they were interested in was 'all about man'. They could not foresee that the range of studies that throw light on man's history, on his social behaviour, on his biological and physiological characteristics, would grow to be so vast that nobody could hope to master the whole field. Today there are different views about the best way to group these various subjects. Some believe in the 'integration of anthropological studies'. This means in practice the retention, with the addition of one more subject, of the group that were thought of as together making up the science of man at the time when the Royal Anthropological Institute was founded in 1843.[1] For adherents of this school social anthropology should be linked with physical anthropology, or the classification of humanity into races, with archaeology, or the study of the

[1] As the Ethnological Society of Great Britain.

buried relics of earlier societies, and with linguistics, the study of the principles of language. As all these studies have grown into separate specialisms, and a whole new family of social sciences has grown up, some have thought it preferable to link social anthropology with these latter, and physical anthropology with biological studies. In any case, the field of social anthropology is now so large that few people can hope to make themselves experts at the same time in it and in any of the other branches of anthropology in the wider sense. Every social anthropologist must speak the language of the people he works with, but few can make an intensive study of linguistics.

The new subject of *ethology*—the study of the behaviour of living animals—is clearly linked with social anthropology. Specialist studies in this field are generally made by zoologists. The interest of the subject for social anthropologists is that we can see in the behaviour of animal populations many parallels with our own, and so can expect to learn which of our tendencies are genetically 'built in'; for example, many animal species recognize a relationship of dominance and submission, an elementary form of that recognition of authority that is the basis of all political systems. At present ethologists differ on the rather important question whether animals are naturally 'aggressive'. Some of them tend to forget that humans have gone further than other animals in the capacity for checking their impulses, and try to interpret our behaviour as if we were more like apes than we are. But as the subject develops it is bound to throw more and more light on the springs of human behaviour.

The social science that is closest to social anthropology is sociology. Yet there are strong, and divided, views on the relation between them. Each claims to study 'society'; not a single aspect of it, such as economics or politics, but all of it. Sociology is much older than social anthropology; it began with Auguste Comte (1798–1857) in France, and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) in England. The two men who are regarded as the founders of the British tradition in social anthropology, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, the latter in particular, drew on the ideas of the French sociologists

of the late nineteenth century; and Radcliffe-Brown, in a presidential address to the Royal Anthropological Institute, said he was 'quite willing to call the subject comparative sociology if anyone so wishes'. He himself certainly liked to frame his generalizations in terms of society as such, and not of particular kinds of society supposed to belong to the special province of the anthropologist. A contemporary sociologist, Donald MacRae (one of the few members of his profession to have followed a university course in social anthropology), has said categorically: 'I cannot see that there is—or can be—anything but an identity in our theory.'[2] Many of the newer British universities have combined departments in sociology and anthropology, and one of them proudly calls itself anthropology although it has two professors of each subject (all of them with degrees in social anthropology).

What is the division then? One basis of it is implicit in the last statement: universities give separate degrees in the two subjects. But there must be a reason for this. The reason is a simple one, but it is a matter of practice rather than theory: they deal with different subject-matter and to a large extent by different methods. It might be said that they are branches of the study of society, as botany and zoology are branches of biology. Sociologists expect to study the industrialized societies that have come into being in the last century and a half. They do not claim to take these vast organizations as wholes, but look at different aspects. They get their background from records, historical and statistical, and their contemporary material largely from questionnaires, which obtain information on a limited number of points from a large number of people. They do not have to begin every book with a description of the society they are dealing with, because it is the type of society in which their readers live.

Anthropologists work in alien societies—'other cultures', as they are called in the title of an introduction to the subject by the Oxford anthropologist John Beattie. These are, in the main, societies that have got on until recently with-

[2] D. G. MacRae, *Ideology and Society*, 1961, p. 48.

out the machine technology on which industrial societies rely, and often without such means of communication as writing and a generally accepted currency. Anthropologists in 'pre-literate' societies have little in the way of records to work on, and they have to produce a picture of the whole society before the reader can begin to understand the particular problem that the anthropologist has been examining. Although their fundamental interest is the *structure* of the society—the relationships of claim and obligation that knit the society together—they must also record the *culture*, or, as older writers would have put it, the customs or ways of behaving of the people who form it. Many of them are concerned with symbolism and with people's interpretation of the world they live in; neither of these matters is part of the normal concern of sociologists. The anthropologist's technique is what is called 'participant observation'; he lives in a village (or a neighbourhood in town), speaks the local language, watches and joins in activities, follows the process of quarrels or crises. This technique is appropriate only to work in small populations, and some of the most revealing anthropological work has been done in a village of a dozen huts.

Of course individual scholars cross the boundaries, and of course the boundaries are not always as clear in real life as I have made them. Japan is one of the leading industrialized nations of the world, but it is very exotic to Anglo-Saxons. A distinguished sociologist who worked in a city ward in Tokyo said, as anthropologists say when they want to demonstrate the value of their subject, that you do not know how to judge or interpret your own society until you have looked at something quite different. From the other direction, anthropologists have worked in such institutions as mental hospitals and factories, treating these as 'whole societies' for the purpose of their studies; others have sought to apply their experience in the analysis of kinship to London populations.

In British usage social anthropology is distinguished from *ethnology*, which is interested primarily in the past history of peoples without written records, and is therefore closely

allied with archaeology. Another technical word, *ethnography*, refers to the process of collecting data by direct inquiry and observation, whatever the theoretical purpose of the inquiry, and also to books in which the emphasis is on the description of the society studied rather than on general theoretical problems.

Some key terms

A few anthropologists in Britain, and a great many in America, call themselves *cultural* anthropologists and maintain that their primary interest is in *culture*. These people are in the direct line of descent from Tylor and Boas. Those who call themselves students of *society* are the intellectual descendants of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown.[3]

Tylor, in a book published in 1871, defined culture as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'.[4] This definition—which is really an enumeration—has sometimes been compressed into the statement that culture comprises all kinds of learned behaviour; and in practice the distinguishing feature of the study of culture is often said to be that it is concerned with customs and 'ways'. By 'art' Tylor meant 'techniques', and because some leading students of culture, such as Boas in America, have been concerned with the collection of specimens for museums, the objects which the techniques create are often called 'material culture'. A culture is the common possession of a body of people who share the same traditions; in social terms such a body is a society. At the time when Malinowski's pupils were embarking on their first fieldwork, they chose the 'society' they would go to and prepared themselves to study 'its culture'.

They did not, however, suppose that all they had to do was to enumerate the traits that made up the culture. Such an approach can easily lead to absurdity, as when customs of such widely different significance as parliamentary government and eating with chopsticks are treated on the same level, as just 'ways' (a genuine example). Malinowski did

[3] See pp. 26–8.

[4] *Primitive Culture*, 5th edn., 1913, Vol. i, p. 1.

not let his pupils make that kind of mistake, for he insisted that culture was to be analysed not into traits but into institutions; for him parliamentary government would have been an important element of culture, but chopsticks would have been a small part of the complex of institutions meeting the needs of nutrition.

If people are thought of simply as bearers of culture, it may be dangerously easy to think of a culture as a set of rules and techniques with independent existence; this is what is sometimes called the *reification* of culture. But in America one school of anthropologists has pursued a line of study that brings people into the picture, the study of culture and personality. Very roughly, this implies the assumption that a culture both reflects and creates a typical personality in the people who share it. It has not found many adherents in Britain.

When British anthropologists say they are interested in social rather than in cultural facts, they mean that they are interested in the interactions of people living in society, and not in the personal characteristics of individuals, even when these are thought of as the product of their culture. We are still apt to say that a field study is concerned with *a* society, and it is worth asking what we mean by this.

Radcliffe-Brown said that an anthropologist's field of study could be 'any convenient locality of suitable size,'[5] and that, having selected his 'society' in this way, his task was to study its *structure*. This word is now the central concept in a large part of the work being done in social anthropology. It means that we think of the *society*, not the culture, as an orderly arrangement of parts, and that our business is to detect and explain this order. It consists in relationships between persons which are regulated by a common body of recognized rights and obligations.

In the discussion of social structure two concepts first made popular by Linton in America are very widely used: *status* and *role*. *Status* means a person's position relatively to that of others with whom he is in social relationships. Terms denoting status always imply a relationship with

[5] *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, 1952, p. 193.

somebody else: for example, son, headmaster, husband, shop steward. One person may have many statuses, as these examples show. He can also be said to have a total status, which is relatively high or low in relation to other members of his society. But status as such is a neutral word: when it is used to describe something that people strive for, it is incorrectly used. Status may be *ascribed*, as by the rule that Queen Elizabeth II must be Queen of England because she is the elder daughter of King George VI; or *achieved*, as by the political career that brought John Kennedy to the position of President of the United States. For every status there is an appropriate role. People are expected to *behave as if* they loved their wives and respected their headmasters, whatever their actual sentiments may be; and while the psychologist may be interested in the reasons why some people find marriage or school intolerable, the social anthropologist is concerned with the way the roles are defined by society and what happens when they are not properly performed. Roles comprise duties of leadership, command, protection, obedience, co-operation, the making of gifts or payments on appropriate occasions, and so forth. In ordinary language a role means a part in a play, and this is just what makes it appropriate here. The lines are written for the actor, but he can play them well or badly, forget them or gag, present the audience with a new conception of the character he is playing or with one so far from what they think it should be that they reward him with catcalls instead of applause. In the same way we all do what we can to play our less spectacular roles, and it is largely when people get new ideas about how to play them that social change comes about. The rules defining the roles are called *role expectations*. *Social control* comprises the whole range of social pressures directed to make people play their roles in accordance with these expectations.

In one sense the actor has to stick fairly closely to his lines—in the sense that every society has its recognized ways of expressing the relationships in which the roles must be played. To take a very simple example, for Hindus the polite way of greeting is to put both hands together in the attitude that Christians associate with prayer; for Chinese