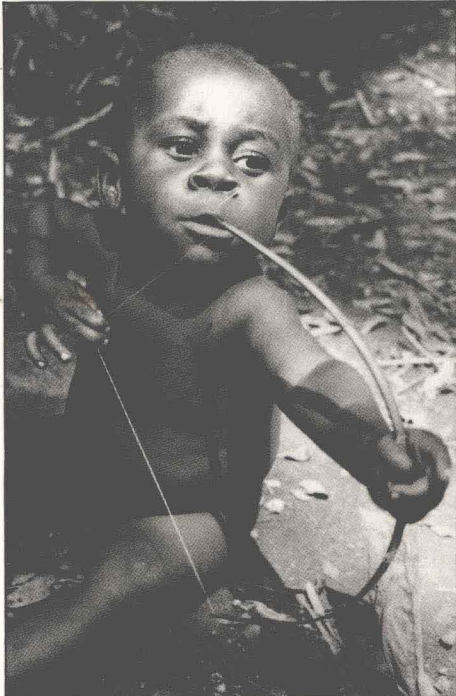


ANTHROPOLOGY,
CULTURE &
SOCIETY

SMALL PLACES, LARGE ISSUES

An Introduction to
Social and Cultural
Anthropology

THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN



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*An Introduction to Social and
Cultural Anthropology*

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

Pluto  Press

LONDON • STERLING, VIRGINIA

First published 1995 by
PLUTO PRESS
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA
and 22883 Quicksilver Drive,
Sterling, VA20166-2012, USA

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ISBN 0 7453 0952 6 (hbk)

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library and the Library of Congress

Reprinted: 05 04 03 02 00 99 10 9 8 7 6 5

Produced for Pluto Press by
Chase Production Services, Chadlington, OX73LN
Printed in the EC by
The Cromwell Press, Trowbridge, England

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PREFACE

To write an introductory textbook feels like trying to juggle too many balls at once – or, to use another metaphor, trying to kill as many birds as possible with as few stones as possible. In working with various versions of this book (a different edition has been published in Norwegian), it has repeatedly struck me what an incredibly diverse discipline this is. The comments and suggestions I have received from sympathetic readers and referees have been extremely useful, but I am afraid it has been impossible to take every good suggestion into account. The book is bulky enough as it is, and it was necessary to make a number of difficult decisions.

Readers who are not completely new to anthropology may notice that the main theoretical framework of the book is that of European and particularly British (and Scandinavian) anthropology, but the influence of French structuralism and American symbolic anthropology should also be obvious. I have prepared my own translations when quoting work written in languages other than English.

The most controversial thing I have done is probably to give ‘classic’ anthropological research a prominent place in several of the chapters, although recent developments are of course also dealt with. The main reason for this decision is simply that it is a great advantage to know at least the outline of the classic studies in order to understand later trends and debates.

The general movement, both at the theoretical and at the empirical level, is from simple to more and more complex models and sociocultural environments. The book is intended as a companion volume to ethnographic monographs, which remain an absolutely indispensable part of an anthropologist’s early training, notwithstanding the capsule reviews a textbook is capable of providing.

My aim with this book is to teach undergraduates both something about the subject-matter of social anthropology and something about an anthropological way of thinking. It is my conviction that the comparative study of society and culture is a fundamental intellectual activity with a very powerful existential and political potential. Through the study of different societies, we learn something essential not only about the world, but also about ourselves. In Kirsten Hastrup’s words, what anthropologists do amounts to making the familiar exotic and the exotic familiar. Therefore comparisons with ‘Western’ society are an underlying prob-

lematic throughout, even when the topic is Melanesian gift-giving, Malagasy ritual or Nuer politics. In fact, the whole book may perhaps be read as a series of lessons in comparative thinking.

Writing this book was a labour of love but also one of frustration and occasional despair. I am therefore sincerely grateful to Richard Wilson, Tim Ingold and my numerous Scandinavian colleagues and critics of the Norwegian edition of the book, for their encouragement and many suggestions. This printing also benefits from Margaret E. Kenna's useful comments. Although it would be hypocrisy on my part to claim that my undergraduate students at the University of Oslo have taught me a great deal of anthropology, they have taught me most of what I know about the teaching of anthropology. So they too are accomplices in this. But as usual in this kind of society, the responsibility rests with myself alone.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen
Oslo,
Summer 1995

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	vi
1. Social Anthropology: Comparison and Context	1
2. Fieldwork and Interpretation	14
3. The Social Human	30
4. Local Organisation	47
5. Person and Society	63
6. Kinship	82
7. Marriage and Alliance	95
8. Gender and Age	111
9. Caste and Class	129
10. Politics and Power	144
11. Exchange	162
12. Production and Technology	179
13. Religion and Rituals	196
14. Modes of Thought	214
15. The Challenge of Multiple Traditions	233
16. Ethnicity	249
17. Nationalism and Minorities	261
18. The Local and the Global	278
<i>Epilogue: And So What?</i>	296
<i>Bibliography</i>	298
<i>Index</i>	314

1 SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY: COMPARISON AND CONTEXT

Anthropology is philosophy with the people in.
—*Tim Ingold*

This book is an invitation to a journey which, in the author's opinion, is one of the most rewarding a human being can embark on – and it is definitely one of the longest. It will bring the reader from the damp rain-forests of the Amazon to the cold semi-desert of the Arctic; from the skyscrapers of Manhattan to mud huts in the Sahel; from villages in the New Guinea highlands to cities in modern Africa.

It is a long journey in a different sense too. Social and cultural anthropology has the whole of human society as its field of interest, and tries to understand the connections between the various aspects of our existence. When, for example, we study the traditional economic system of the Tiv of central Nigeria, we simultaneously try to find out how their economy is connected with other aspects of their society; otherwise it becomes incomprehensible to anthropologists. If we do not know that the Tiv traditionally cannot buy and sell land, and that they have customarily not used money as a means of payment, it will be plainly impossible to understand how they themselves see their situation and how they responded to the economic changes imposed on their society during colonialism.

Anthropology tries to account for the social and cultural variation in the world, but a crucial part of the anthropological project also consists in conceptualising and understanding similarities between social systems and human relationships. As one of the foremost anthropologists of the twentieth century, Claude Lévi-Strauss, has expressed it: 'Anthropology has humanity as its object of research, but unlike the other human sciences, it tries to grasp its object through its most diverse manifestations' (1983, p. 49). Put in another way: anthropology is about how different people can be, but it also tries to find out in what sense it can be said that all humans have something in common.

Another prominent anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, has expressed a similar view in an essay which essentially deals with the differences between humans and animals:

If we want to discover what man amounts to, we can only find it in what men are: and what men are, above all other things, is various. It is in understanding that variousness – its range, its nature, its basis, and its implications – that we shall come to construct a concept of human nature that, more than a statistical shadow and less than a primitivist dream, has both substance and truth. (Geertz 1973, p. 52)

Although anthropologists have wide-ranging and frequently highly specialised interests, they all share a common concern in trying to understand both connections *within* societies and connections *between* societies. As will become clearer as we proceed on this journey through the subject-matter and theories of social and cultural anthropology, there is a multitude of ways in which to approach these problems. Whether one is interested in understanding why and how the Azande of Central Africa believe in witches, why there is greater social inequality in Brazil than in Sweden, how the inhabitants of Mauritius avoid violent ethnic conflict, or what has happened to the traditional way of life of the Inuits (Eskimos) in recent years, frequently one or several anthropologists have carried out research and written on the issue. Whether one is interested in the study of religion, child-raising, political power, economic life or the relationship between men and women, one may go to the professional anthropological literature for inspiration and knowledge.

The discipline is also concerned with accounting for the interrelationships between different aspects of human existence, and usually anthropologists investigate these interrelationships taking as their point of departure a detailed study of local life in a particular society or a delineated social environment. One may therefore say that anthropology asks large questions, while at the same time it draws many of its insights from small places.

It has been common to regard its traditional focus on small-scale non-industrial societies as a distinguishing feature of anthropology, compared with other subjects dealing with culture and society. However, because of changes in the world and in the discipline itself, this is no longer an accurate description. Practically any social system can be studied anthropologically and contemporary anthropological research displays an enormous range, empirically as well as thematically.

Before moving on to a closer look at the distinguishing features of anthropology, we shall make a brief excursion into its history. Like the other social sciences, modern anthropology is a fairly recent discipline. It emerged in its present shape during the twentieth century, but it has important forerunners in the historiography, geography, travel writing, philosophy and jurisprudence of earlier times.

Theories of Primitive Society

There are many possible ways of writing the history of anthropology. If one looks closely enough, it would be possible to find the roots of the subject in the classic Greek historian Herodotos (c. 484–420 BC) or in the geographer

Strabo (c. 64–32 BC). Both were significant pioneers regarding ethnographic description; they wrote detailed narratives about foreign peoples. The writings of both deal with foreigners whose customs, languages and peculiarities they describe in as detailed a fashion as possible, frequently without passing moral judgement. Herodotos would probably have been sympathetic to the contemporary anthropological view that every society must be understood on its own terms. Both of them related critically to their sources, and held that one could only be certain about an alleged fact if one had observed it oneself. In this sense, they could be described as social scientists *avant la lettre*.

An historical account of the growth of modern anthropology might also begin with the eighteenth-century philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Hume, one of the most famous British empiricists (along with Locke and Berkeley), argued that experience was the only trustworthy source of valid knowledge; he would later become an important source of inspiration for empirical social science, whose pioneers did not trust thought and speculation, but would rather travel into the social world itself in order to obtain first-hand experience through the senses (empirical means, literally, 'based on experience'). Kant, who tried to refute some of Hume's doctrines, argued that people had certain shared innate faculties, which were assumed to be embedded in their mode of thought. In other words, he held that humans were born with certain 'formulas' for thinking; from this idea, it follows that people all over the world would think in roughly the same way. Related notions about universal mental traits have formed an important focus for discussion in modern anthropology.

Most histories of anthropology begin neither with Herodotos nor with Kant, but rather with scholars working in the mid-nineteenth century. Frequently, the foundations of modern anthropology are traced to Henry Maine's *Ancient Law* (1861) and Lewis Henry Morgan's books, including *Ancient Society* (1877). Both of these authors developed theories of 'primitive society' which were to wield influence far into the twentieth century. Maine, who had worked in India, proposed a distinction between status and contract societies, a conceptual pair which is reminiscent of many later distinctions between 'modern' and 'traditional' societies. In status-based or traditional societies, Maine argued, kinship was usually crucial in determining one's position in society; in contract-based societies, on the contrary, it would rather be the individual achievements of persons that provided them with their positions.

Morgan's most important contribution to early anthropology was doubtless his theory of social evolution. He distinguished between three main phases in the evolution of societies: savagery, barbarism and civilisation. In the condition of savagery, humans subsisted through hunting and gathering; during barbarism, agriculture and animal husbandry existed; while humans who had reached the level of civilisation had developed literacy and the state.

Morgan's developmental scheme was only one of many evolutionist theories in the nineteenth century. The most famous, and arguably most complex, is Karl Marx's theory on social development through class struggle (see Chapter 9). Although Marx was clearly a more significant thinker than Morgan, the latter was particularly important in the early development of anthropology because of his interest in non-industrial societies and his use of ethnographic sources.

Evolutionism and Diffusionism

A characteristic of the anthropology of the nineteenth century was the belief in social evolution – the idea that human societies developed in a particular direction – and the related notion that European societies were the end-product of a long developmental chain which began with 'savagery'. This idea was typical of the Victorian age, dominated by an optimistic belief in technological progress and, simultaneously, European colonialism, which was frequently justified with reference to what Kipling wrote of as 'the white man's burden'; the alleged duty of the European to 'civilise the savages'. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, first presented in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), was also a powerful influence on intellectual life in the second half of the nineteenth century. Darwin's supporter Herbert Spencer developed Social Darwinism, which held that human societies evolve roughly in the same way as animal species adapt and develop, through competition between individuals and 'the survival of the fittest'.

Another important anthropological current in the nineteenth century, with its focal point in Germany, was diffusionism, a doctrine about the geographical dissemination of cultural traits. Whereas evolutionists would argue that every society has an intrinsic potential for change, a diffusionist would rather try to show that the development of specific cultural traits is usually caused by influence from the outside. Although there were frequent arguments between the two, diffusionism is not in principle incompatible with evolutionism: it was, and is, possible to favour both. Within anthropology, diffusionism became unfashionable when, around the time of the First World War, people began to study single societies in great detail without trying to explain their historical development. However, a theoretical direction reminiscent of diffusionism is returning in the 1990s, under the label of globalisation theory (see Chapter 18), which is an attempt to understand and account for the ways in which modern mass communications, migration, global capitalism and other 'global' phenomena affect local conditions everywhere in the world.

With British late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century scholars like Edward Tylor, James Frazer and W.H.R. Rivers, we approach modern social anthropology. Tylor wrote on a multitude of topics, and thanks to his definition of culture, dating from 1871, his place in any history of anthropology is secure. This famous definition reads: 'Culture or Civi-

lization, taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Tylor 1968 [1871]). This early definition of culture is still seen as useful by many anthropologists.

Tylor's student Frazer wrote the twelve-volume study *The Golden Bough* (1890), which is a massive book even in a heavily abridged version (Frazer 1974 [1922]). This work is a wide-ranging comparative study of religion and rituals, and contains a wealth of ethnographic details from every corner of the world. Both Tylor and Frazer were evolutionists, and Frazer's main theoretical project consisted in demonstrating how thought had developed from the magical via the religious to the scientific.

Neither Tylor nor Frazer conducted detailed field studies, although Tylor spent several years in Mexico and wrote a book there. A famous anecdote tells of a dinner party where William James, the pragmatist philosopher, asked Frazer whether he had ever become acquainted with any of those savages he wrote so much about. Frazer allegedly replied, in a shocked tone of voice, 'Heaven forbid!' (Evans-Pritchard 1962).

The situation was different with W.H.R. Rivers and his collaborators, who included A.R. Haddon and Charles Seligman. Rather than depending on the frequently unreliable material collected by missionaries and explorers, they carried out field research themselves. Rivers and his colleagues took part in an important expedition to the Torres Strait (between New Guinea and Australia) in 1898, which many regard as the last important precursor of the modern anthropological field study.

The Emergence of Modern Anthropology

Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski are often regarded as the first modern anthropologists. Boas was of German origin, but moved to the US in the 1880s to study American Indians. He did thorough field research himself among Inuits and several Indian peoples, and nearly single-handedly founded American cultural anthropology. Several famous anthropologists, including Alfred Kroeber, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, were students of Boas. His influence was profound in many fields, but his most important single contribution may have been the doctrine of cultural relativism, the idea that every culture must be understood according to its own logic and that it is therefore analytically misleading to try to arrange cultures on an evolutionary ladder. Cultural relativism is still indispensable as a methodological tool, and is treated in greater detail later.

Malinowski was a Pole, but he emigrated to Britain in 1910. His most important work was the meticulous recording of social life in the Trobriand Islands off New Guinea. His fieldwork there lasted for more than two years between 1915 and 1918, and this kind of work, where he had close and enduring contact with the local community, would become an ideal to follow for later generations of anthropologists. Malinowski emphasised

Franz Boas (1859–1941), born in Minden, Westphalia (in present-day Germany), was educated as a geographer in his native Germany but became an anthropologist after participating in Arctic expeditions in 1883–4. Later he moved to the United States and eventually became an American citizen. Boas is the unrivalled paternal figure of American cultural anthropology. He carried out fieldwork among Inuits (Eskimos) as well as North American Indians; his numerous writings span five decades, and he may rightfully be called the founder of modern American anthropology. Indeed, his four main fields of interest – ethnology, linguistics, archaeology and physical anthropology – remain the basis of American anthropology.

Reacting against the grand evolutionary schemes of Tylor and other European anthropologists, Boas took an early stance in favour of what has since come to be known as historical particularism; the view that the evolution of each society (or culture) has to be understood in relation to its own proper dynamics. In this, Boas also differed from British social anthropologists, whose advocacy of detailed fieldwork he nonetheless shared. Unlike Radcliffe-Brown and to a lesser extent Malinowski, he emphasised cultural variation and the uniqueness of each culture in the sense that he tended to reject general explanatory frameworks, although it could also be argued that Boas, like his British colleagues, searched for patterns and cross-cultural uniformities, perhaps particularly at the psychological level. Boas was perhaps the earliest anthropologist to formulate the principles of cultural relativism, and his insistence on the meticulous collection of empirical data was due not only to his scientific views but also to the realisation that cultural change quickly obliterated what he saw as unique cultures, particularly in North America. As far back as *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), Boas argued that anthropology ought to be engaged on behalf of threatened indigenous populations.

the importance of studying the interrelationships of various aspects of society, and therefore held that long field studies were absolutely necessary. Notably, he stressed, it was important to talk the language fluently. Malinowski's monograph *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) became an instant classic through its thorough and systematic ethnographic descriptions and its persuasive demonstrations of the necessity of studying any social or cultural phenomenon in its full context.

One of Malinowski's contemporaries, who was also important in the development of social anthropology, was A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. He was profoundly inspired by the writings of the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim on social integration. Durkheim, who wrote important studies about the division of labour in 'primitive' societies and about religion and totemism (see Chapters 13 and 14), saw society as an organic whole where the constituent parts, which could be conceptualised as individuals or social institutions, fulfilled particular functions; that is to say, their most important role consisted in their contribution to the stability of society. Radcliffe-Brown applied Durkheim's social theory to his own as well as others' ethnographic material from 'primitive' societies. He stressed the importance of studying

societies as they were, rather than engaging in 'conjectural history' as the earlier generation of anthropologists had been inclined to. Indeed, both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown were positively hostile towards cultural history.

Radcliffe-Brown is regarded as the founder of structural-functionalism in anthropology. This is a doctrine about the ways in which the various institutions of a society contribute to its stability. Malinowski was no structural-functionalist, although he described himself as a functionalist. Whereas Radcliffe-Brown and his followers regarded individuals and their actions as 'side-effects' of society, whose deepest meaning consisted in contributing to social integration, Malinowski was instead inclined to argue that society existed to satisfy the needs of the individuals. The contrast between these leading characters in early modern anthropology can be traced up to this very day: some anthropologists tend to regard society as an unintended consequence of the actions of individuals, whereas others tend to regard persons largely as products of their society.

Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) founded 'the British school' of anthropology. He taught at several universities, from Cape Town to Chicago, and played a decisive role in the spread and development of the subject between the wars. Radcliffe-Brown was strongly influenced by Durkheim's social theory, which he applied and developed in his own empirical analyses, notably *The Andaman Islanders* (1922) and *The Social Organization of Australian Tribes* (1931). In these books, as well as in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (1952), he developed structural-functionalism in social anthropology: the doctrine of how societies are integrated, and how social institutions reinforce each other and contribute to the maintenance of society.

Radcliffe-Brown's scientific ideals were taken from natural science, and he hoped to develop 'general laws of society' comparable in precision to those of physics and chemistry. This programme has been abandoned by most anthropologists – as has structural-functionalism in its pure form – but many of the questions raised by contemporary anthropologists, particularly in Europe, were originally posed by Radcliffe-Brown.

Many other important influences on contemporary anthropological thought could be mentioned. Durkheim and his French sociological school have been immensely influential on anthropology. His nephew, Marcel Mauss, wrote, among other things, a very important essay on gifts and social life, *Essai sur le don* (*The Gift*, 1954 [1925]; see Chapter 11). Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, a contemporary of Mauss, wrote books about different modes of thought, starting a long and complex debate concerning whether 'primitives' think in a radically different fashion from 'moderns' (see Chapter 14). Ferdinand de Saussure, a linguist, must also be mentioned in this context. His work on the structure of language inspired one of the

most magnificent anthropological projects of this century, namely Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism (Chapters 7 and 14).

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories have also been influential, particularly in American anthropology. Finally, classic German sociology, from Marx, Ferdinand Tönnies, Max Weber and others, continues to exert a strong influence on contemporary social anthropological thinking. In later chapters, we return to several of the topics introduced by these great social theorists.

Different Traditions of Anthropology

Anthropology is a large and diversified subject, which is practised somewhat differently in different countries, although it retains its distinctive character everywhere. Since the Second World War, the core areas have been Great Britain, the US, France and Australia. British anthropology, which is generally spoken of as *social* anthropology and which also enjoys a strong position in Scandinavia and India, emphasises the study of social processes and is thus close to sociology. The British social anthropologist Edmund Leach (1982) once characterised his subject as a 'comparative micro-sociology'. In the US, we tend instead to speak of *cultural* anthropology, and in general the sociological underpinning characteristic of the British tradition has been less prominent there. Instead, linguistics and prehistory have informed American anthropology in different ways. Several important specialisations, such as cultural ecology, linguistic anthropology and various approaches in psychological and interpretive or hermeneutic anthropology, were developed in the US.

French anthropology in the postwar period has been strongly associated with structuralism (see Chapter 7), notably with the names of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Dumont and the structural Marxist Maurice Godelier. In South America, Italy and the Iberian peninsula, and partly in Belgium and the Netherlands, the French orientation is strong.

These and other regional variations should not be exaggerated. Despite certain historical (and present) differences between the professional traditions of different countries, there is little doubt that the discipline is one – although it has many specialisations and encompasses many divergent strands of thought. In this book, cultural and social anthropology are not generally distinguished between, but it should nonetheless be noted that the point of departure is that of social anthropology. For example, the presentation of basic theoretical concepts (Chapters 3–5) draws extensively on sociological theory. The perspective of this book is also strongly comparative in that each example or case described is compared, explicitly or implicitly, to other phenomena in other societies.

An Outline of the Subject

What, then, is anthropology? Let us begin with the etymology of the concept. It is a compound of two Greek words, 'anthropos' and 'logos',

which can be translated as 'human' and 'reason', respectively. So anthropology means 'reason about humans' or 'knowledge about humans'. Social anthropology would then mean knowledge about humans in societies. Such a definition would, of course, cover the other social sciences as well as anthropology, but it may still be useful as a beginning.

The word 'culture', which is also crucial to the discipline, originates from the Latin 'colere', which means to cultivate. (The word 'colony' has the same origin.) Cultural anthropology thus means 'knowledge about cultivated humans'; that is, knowledge about those aspects of humanity which are not natural, but which are related to that which is acquired.

'Culture' has been described as one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language (Williams 1981, p. 87). In the early 1950s, Clyde Kluckhohn and Alfred Kroeber (1952) presented 161 different definitions of culture. It would not be possible to consider the majority of these definitions here; besides, many of them were – fortunately – quite similar. Let us therefore, as a preliminary conceptualisation of culture, define it as those abilities, notions and forms of behaviour persons have acquired as members of society. A definition of this kind, which is indebted to both Tylor and Geertz (although the latter stresses meaning rather than behaviour), is the most common one among anthropologists.

Culture nevertheless carries with it a basic ambiguity. On the one hand, every human is equally cultural; in this sense, the term refers to a basic *similarity* within humanity. On the other hand, people have acquired different abilities, notions, etc., and are thereby *different* because of culture. Culture refers, in other words, both to basic similarities and to systematic differences between humans.

The relationship between culture and society can be described in the following way. Culture refers to the acquired, cognitive and symbolic aspects of existence, whereas society refers to the social organisation of human life, patterns of interaction and power relationships. The implications of this analytical distinction, which may seem bewildering, will eventually be evident.

A short definition of anthropology may read thus: 'Anthropology is the comparative study of cultural and social life. Its most important method is participant observation, which consists in lengthy fieldwork in a particular social setting.' The discipline thus compares aspects of different societies, and continuously searches for interesting dimensions for comparison. If, say, one chooses to write a monograph about a people in the New Guinea highlands, one will always choose to describe it with at least some concepts (such as kinship, gender and power) that render it comparable with aspects of other societies.

Further, the discipline emphasises the importance of fieldwork, which is a thorough close-up study of a particular social and cultural environment, where the researcher is normally required to spend a year or more.

Clearly, anthropology has many features in common with other social sciences and humanities. Indeed, a difficult question consists in deciding

whether it is a science or one of the humanities. Do we search for general laws, as the natural scientists do, or do we instead try to understand and interpret different societies? E.E. Evans-Pritchard in Britain and Alfred Kroeber in the US, leading anthropologists in their day, both argued around 1950 that anthropology had more in common with history than with the natural sciences. Although their view, considered something of a heresy at the time, has become commonplace since, there are still some anthropologists who feel that the subject should aim at scientific rigour similar to that of the natural sciences.

Some of the implications of this divergence in views will be discussed in later chapters. A few important defining features of anthropology are nevertheless common to all practitioners of the subject: it is comparative and empirical; its most important method is fieldwork; and it has a truly global focus in that it does not single out one region, or one kind of society, as being more important than others. Unlike sociology proper, anthropology does not concentrate its attention on the industrialised world; unlike philosophy, it stresses the importance of empirical research; unlike history, it studies society as it is being enacted; and unlike linguistics, it stresses the social and cultural context of speech when looking at language. To be sure, there are great overlaps with other sciences and disciplines, and there is a lot to be learnt from them, yet anthropology has its distinctive character as an intellectual discipline trying simultaneously to account for actual cultural variation in the world and to develop a theoretical perspective on culture and society.

Before moving on to field method and the process of inquiry in the next chapter, there follows an outline of a few further central characteristics of anthropology.

Ethnocentrism

A society or a culture, it was remarked earlier, must be understood on its own terms. In saying this, we warn against the application of a shared, universal scale to be used in the evaluation of every society. Such a scale, which is often used, could be defined as longevity, gross national product (GNP), democratic rights, literacy rates, etc. Until quite recently, it was common in European society to rank non-Europeans according to the ratio of their population which was admitted into the Christian church. Such a ranking of peoples is utterly irrelevant to anthropology. In order to pass judgement on the quality of life in a foreign society, we must first try to understand that society from the inside; otherwise our judgement has a very limited intellectual interest. What is conceived of as 'the good life' in the society in which we live may not appear attractive at all if it is seen from a different vantage-point. In order to understand people's lives, it is therefore necessary to try to grasp the totality of their experiential world; and in order to succeed in this project, it is inadequate to look at