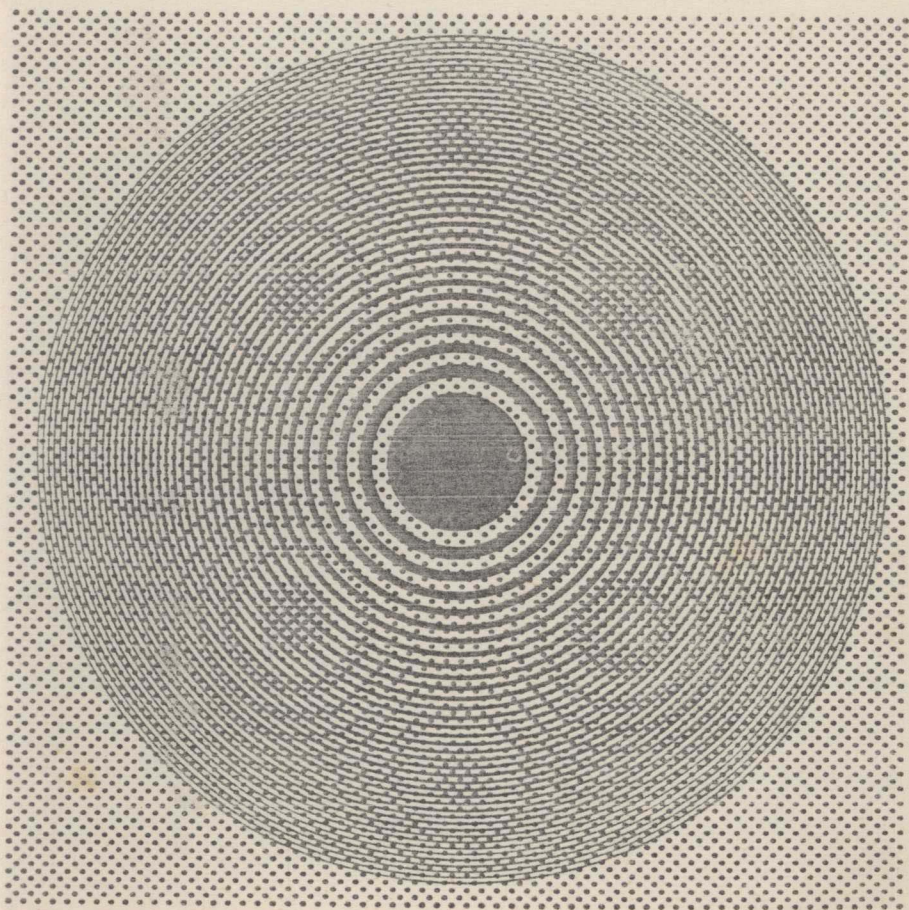


OTHER CULTURES

Aims, Methods and Achievements in Social Anthropology

OTHER CULTURES

John Beattie



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Other Cultures

A detailed and sympathetic understanding of the contemporary social and cultural institutions of other peoples has never been more needed than it is today. The comparatively new science of social anthropology claims to contribute modestly but significantly to this understanding. Although the subject has grown up mostly in the study of relatively small-scale communities lacking advanced technologies and written histories, its findings can contribute also to the understanding of more complex cultures, and its methods are being increasingly applied in the investigation of modern communities. In the first part of this book John Beattie considers what kind of study social anthropology is, what sorts of things it is interested in, the types of questions which social anthropologists ask, and the ways in which they go about obtaining the answers. In the second part he discusses the more important fields in which social anthropologists have advanced our knowledge of other cultures. These fields include kinship and marriage, the maintaining of social order, economic relations, and magical and religious institutions. The important theme of social change is also discussed. In the final chapter the uses that have been and can be made of social anthropology are discussed.

'It is beautifully written and exceptionally lucid. It is the first work of its kind to be published in England for more than a decade and it easily outclasses all its competitors.'

— EDMUND LEACH, *New Statesman*

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in Social Anthropology

by

JOHN BEATTIE

*Lecturer in Social Anthropology
University of Oxford*

ROUTLEDGE & KEGAN PAUL LTD

Broadway House, 68-74 Carter Lane, E.C.4

TO HONOR

Preface

IN THIS BOOK I consider some of the contributions which the quite young science of social anthropology can make and has made to the understanding of other people's cultures. I assume that this understanding, like all advances in our knowledge of the world around us, is intrinsically worth while. But I believe, also, that it is more important today than it has ever been before in human history for people to have some understanding of cultures other than their own. I try to show that social anthropology, as one among the social sciences, has its own special contribution to make to this understanding.

Social anthropology does not offer any practical recipes for dealing with the major and pressing problems of human relations that face us today, nor can it tell us how we should live with one another in our shrinking world. But by adding a little more to our knowledge of human society and culture, and so to our knowledge of ourselves, it may help us to understand some of these problems better. Social anthropologists have no special qualifications to discuss power relations between modern states, or to investigate the vast complexities of Western-type governmental, economic or industrial organizations. Still less are they equipped to assess the significance of the innumerable scientific, literary and artistic achievements of several millennia of civilization. But they have a contribution to make, even if it is a very much more limited one.

Fundamentally, it is that they have added significantly to our understanding of the basic social and cultural institutions which, everywhere, bind human beings into living communities. This contribution has been mostly, and most distinctively, made in the context of the small-scale, pre-industrial, often not yet (or not fully) literate societies which still occupy a large part of the globe. But even in more technologically developed countries most people are members of relatively small communities, as well as being more or less closely involved in the vast social and cultural milieu of the modern world. This is so especially, though not only, in rural areas. Social anthropologists increasingly study such 'modern' communities in Europe, America, India and elsewhere.

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Their central though not their only concern has been with the investigation of the different kinds of social institutions which characterize the societies they study, whether these be 'civilized' or 'primitive'. Certain kinds of social relationships are institutionalized in all human societies. Thus in every culture there are accepted patterns of behaviour between parents and children, husbands and wives, persons in authority and those subject to it, the people who produce goods and the people who consume them, and so on. But the form and the content of the relationships thus broadly characterized may differ vastly from one culture to another. Grave misunderstandings have arisen and continue to arise because people have attempted to understand the institutions of other, unfamiliar societies in terms of the familiar and unquestioned categories of their own cultures. The greater the differences between the societies concerned, and the less complete the contact already established between them, the greater is the danger of serious misunderstanding. An important contribution of social anthropology has been to demonstrate that the social and cultural institutions of societies remote from our own must be understood, if they are to be understood at all, through the ideas and values current in those societies, and not simply in our own terms. And this kind of comprehension is only possible when the investigator moves, usually literally as well as metaphorically, out of his own culture into the unfamiliar one which he wishes to understand, and 'learns' the new culture as he would learn a new language. (Often, indeed, the field anthropologist's first task is to master an unfamiliar tongue.)

Because social anthropologists are chiefly interested in social and cultural institutions, the central chapters in this book are concerned with the institutions of kinship and marriage, with the maintenance of social order, with economic relations, and with magical and religious institutions. For these between them cover the most important dimensions of the social and cultural lives of the members of most small-scale societies. In these chapters I attempt to summarize at least some of the knowledge that social anthropologists have now acquired about other peoples' ways of thinking about and dealing with these matters. But first of all I discuss, in Part I, some of the questions which social anthropologists have been and are mostly concerned to ask about the societies and cultures they study. That is, I consider the present state of theory in social anthropology. This is necessary partly because the human situations with which social anthropologists deal are often new and unfamiliar, so that new and unfamiliar questions sometimes have to be asked about them. Social anthropologists themselves have by no means always been agreed as

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to just what are the most useful questions to ask. Thus it is necessary to consider some of the hypotheses about human society and culture which they have worked with, and to try to determine which of them are best adapted to achieve the end sought, that is, the fullest possible understanding of the institutions being studied. So in the first six chapters I ask: what is social anthropology, what kinds of things does it study, and how do social anthropologists go about their work?

This book is not and is not intended to be an original contribution to the subject on the theoretical or on any other level. In several years of teaching social anthropology I have found that many people who are approaching it for the first time find it difficult to fit the diffuse concerns of individual social anthropologists into any common framework. Social anthropology appears to them to be (as no doubt to some extent it is) a hodge-podge of distinct and somewhat tenuously connected interests. So my chief aim is to say, as far as I can in simple and non-technical language, what I think the subject is about. The book contains no diagrams and—I hope—the minimum of jargon. It does not pretend to be comprehensive; many important topics receive only the barest mention or are omitted altogether. It is inevitably selective, and since any selection must be made in the light of certain practical and theoretical interests it is bound also to be in some sense personal. The theoretical standpoint which I have adopted emerges, I think, with sufficient clarity from the first part of the book. I do not think that it differs in any very major respects from that currently held by most of my colleagues in social anthropology in Great Britain, though in some contexts I have attempted to make explicit what is sometimes implicit, and no doubt there are some significant differences in emphasis. I should add, too, that as I did fieldwork as a social anthropologist in East Africa, and so am better informed in African and especially East African ethnography than I am in that of other parts of the world, what may appear to be a disproportionate number of my ethnographic examples (though by no means all of them) are taken from that continent.

In the hope that it may be of some use to readers who wish to learn more about any of the topics discussed, I have appended to each chapter a short list of books for further reading. Here again I have had to be selective. I have listed only a few of the works with which I myself happen to be most familiar and which I have found particularly useful. In many cases a book not mentioned in these lists might equally well, or better, be substituted for one that is. The lists are suggestions only, not prescriptions.

My main theoretical obligations are plain from the book itself, but by far the greatest of them are to my teacher, Professor Evans-

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Pritchard. He has read this book in manuscript, and I am grateful to him for much helpful criticism and advice. I owe a similar debt to my friend Dr John Middleton. My wife, Honor Beattie, and Miss Alison Smith have commented helpfully on the text. I should like, also, to record indebtedness to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California, where a Fellowship held in 1959-60 provided me with an opportunity to consider a little more fully than before some of the questions discussed in this book.

J. B.

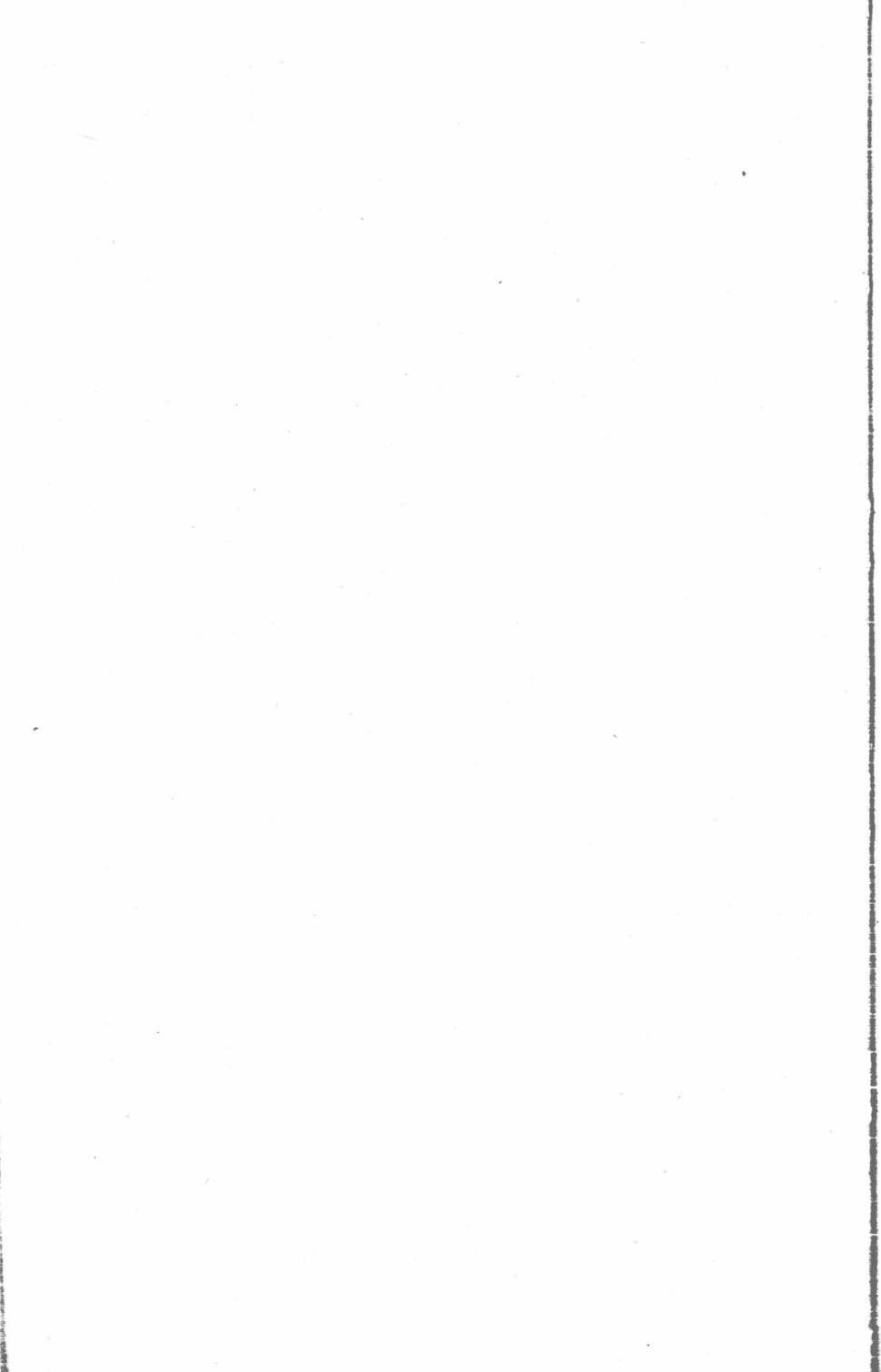
Oxford

PART ONE

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PART ONE



1

Introduction and Background

IT IS ONLY QUITE RECENTLY in human history that it has come to be fairly widely—though by no means universally—accepted that all human beings are fundamentally alike; that they share the same basic interests, and so have certain common obligations to one another simply as people. This belief is either explicit or implicit in most of the great world religions, but it is by no means acceptable today to many people even in 'advanced' societies, and it would make no sense at all in many of the less developed cultures. Among some of the indigenous tribes of Australia, a stranger who cannot prove that he is kin to the group, far from being welcomed hospitably as a fellow human, is regarded as a dangerous outsider and may be speared without compunction. Members of the Lugbara tribe of north-western Uganda used to think that all foreigners are witches, dangerous and scarcely human creatures who walk about upside-down and kill people by magic. The ancient Greeks believed that all non-Hellenic peoples were barbarians, uncivilized savages whom it would be quite inappropriate to treat as real people. And many of the citizens of highly advanced modern states today think of people of other races, nations or cultures in ways which are not very different from these, especially if their skin is differently pigmented, or if they hold other religious or political faiths.

At earlier periods in human history, and in the conditions of those small-scale, pre-industrial societies which have survived up to the present day in relative isolation from Western influence, the existence of these universally derogatory stereotypes did not matter very much. Even between neighbouring peoples communications were generally restricted, and between those separated by continents or oceans there was virtually no contact at all. So actual social situations in which ideas about foreigners could be translated into behaviour towards them did not arise very often. Today things are obviously very different. Not only has the world's population 'exploded' in the last

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century or so, but also communications have developed and are still developing at a fantastic pace. There are now few important centres of human population between which messages cannot be conveyed in a few minutes, people and goods in a few hours. Where once foreigners were a rarity they are now so usual as to be taken as a matter of course, and in any large city a man may encounter people from all five continents in the course of a casual stroll. The platitude that all men are members of a single community is valid today in a real and urgent sense, even though this community is evidently neither harmonious nor well-ordered. What is crucial is that in our time the aims, attitudes and activities of millions of people of other cultures and in other countries than our own (whichever our own may be) are practically important for every one of us as never before.

This is an excellent reason for knowing as much as we can about these other peoples and their cultures, for situations can be dealt with more effectively and fairly when they are understood than when they are not, or worse still, when they are misunderstood. And part of the current interest in that branch of human knowledge which for want of a better term is called social anthropology is due to the fact that it does seem to make some contribution to this kind of understanding. For the past half-century or so social anthropologists have been investigating at first hand the social lives and cultural backgrounds of other peoples, especially though by no means only those peoples who still lack, or lacked until very recently, written literatures and histories and advanced technologies. If such peoples are to be studied at all, they must be studied in the living context of their own societies. For their social and cultural institutions are not, like those of Western civilizations, enshrined in mountains of documents, which would enable us to study them at a distance, as an American scholar can study Russia, say, without ever visiting that country.

Such peoples, whose social systems are usually small in scale and whose technologies are simple, have often been referred to as 'primitive'. Though this term is still commonly used, it is not really very appropriate, for in the temporal sense no existing society can be said to be more primitive than any other. Nor, as we shall see later, can we suppose that present-day 'primitive' societies represent, in Sir James Frazer's words, 'the rudimentary phases, the infancy and childhood, of human society', so that, if they were left alone, African bushmen or Australian aborigines would eventually grow up into fully-fledged Europeans or something like them. It is more plausible to speak of such societies as 'simple', and in many valid senses of the term, technologically and economically for example, their organization obviously is simpler than that of modern industrial societies. Of