

The Best of Anthropology Today

Edited by
Jonathan Benthall



The Best of *Anthropology Today*

Anthropology Today has been, and remains, extremely influential in anthropological studies. Between 1974 and 2000 its articles placed it in the thick of a turbulent period for anthropology. Reacting to current research interests and launching what were often heated debates, the journal set the agenda for disciplinary change and new research.

Once described by the American Anthropological Association as creating 'a strong voice for anthropology in the public arena', the Founder Editor, Jonathan Benthall, introduces here a personal selection of articles and letters with his own candid retrospect, arguing that the discipline's greatest strength and potential lies in testing and refining the ideas of other disciplines. A vast array of topics are covered both by well-established anthropologists and young scholars, including:

- feminine power
- indigenes' rights
- fieldwork as intervention
- anthropology in the mass media
- war and civil strife.

Among the many highlights are a remarkable exchange from the mid-1970s between a young graduate student, Glynn Flood, who was undertaking fieldwork in Ethiopia, and an expert on development in Africa, A.F. Robertson. Shortly after its publication, Flood was murdered by Ethiopian soldiers. The exchange brings out clearly a number of issues which are still vigorously debated today.

Articles from *Anthropology Today* are already widely used for teaching purposes. The editorial policy of encouraging sharp, concise writing will make this collection essential for teachers and students as well as for all those with an interest in anthropology.

Jonathan Benthall was Director of the Royal Anthropological Institute (1974–2000) and Founder Editor of *Anthropology Today* which succeeded *RAINews* (1974–84). In 1993 he was awarded the Anthropology in Media Award by the American Anthropological Association.

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Edited by

Jonathan Benthall

with a preface by

Marshall Sahlins



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Preface

■ MARSHALL SAHLINS

Anthropology Today is not yesterday. Its pages are not given over to arcane studies of kinship, witchcraft or ceremony of the kind that used to fill the academic anthropological journals. Of course, there is still some place for that. But it isn't *Anthropology Today*. What Jonathan Benthall assembles here – thus continuing his invaluable services to the Royal Anthropological Institute – reflects the discipline's awakening to what's going on in the world, especially to the many bad things going on, and the responsibilities anthropologists have assumed to witness them. Maybe even to ameliorate them.

Well over a hundred years ago, E.B. Tylor, the great founding ancestor of anthropology in Britain, said it was a 'reformer's science'. We also learned from Tylor and the other ancients that if there is culture anywhere, there is culture everywhere. The current implication is something more than it is time to 'bring anthropology home', to study *us* and our problems, although that is part of it, and there are many instructive examples in these pages. Globalization has given a new, literal meaning to the anthropologists' received sense of the ubiquity of culture. Now we are all culturally connected, and increasingly so. The old Maori proverb, 'the troubles of other lands are their own', has hardly been true since we became their problem. If there is one argument of this book, it is that anthropology is the discipline best endowed to know and to relate the struggles between cultural diversity and cultural hegemony that are affecting us all, peoples everywhere. We are best endowed to know the afflictions of modernity because of a century spent in perfecting the practices of ethnography. And we are best endowed to relate them because, as a number of articles in this book will testify, we have learned to reflect on these ethnographic practices, to situate ourselves and our knowledges in relation to the peoples with whom we interact. True that this self-reflexivity is sometimes paralysing. But it usually saves us from the hubris of development economists, international-relations realists and end-of-civilization pundits who, in dealing with other peoples, too often assume the

missionary position of knowing what's best for them: that they ought to think and be happy just like us!

If there is one fault in the book, it is Jonathan Benthall's modesty in describing anthropology as a small and rather obscure discipline whose future may well be in doubt. Of course the current follies of bottom-line accounting by the captains of university and higher political authorities would hurt anthropology along with a lot of other academic fields whose true worth is not measurable in such terms. But if we are talking of value to learning over the long haul, we should neither discount anthropology's utility nor fear for its destiny. This collection proves that.



Figure (a) Anthropology yesterday: a dancer in *makishi* costume photographed by Max Gluckman, c.1940, probably in the grounds of a Zambian museum. The *makishi* rites were associated with male circumcision among the Wiko tribes.

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A number of the articles were originally based on papers given at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association.

Introduction

■ JONATHAN BENTHALL

THIS IS AN ANTHOLOGY OF *Anthropology Today*, more precisely of *RAINews* – which preceded it from 1974 to 1984 – and *Anthropology Today* from 1985 to 2000. I was invited by the publishers to hold a mirror up to an intellectually turbulent quarter-century in anthropology's history. I have written before that editors should see themselves as like earthworms aerating the soil, rather than as divine gardeners. This is a view from the humus.

This Introduction sets out some general themes. The emphasis is on anthropology in Britain; but this bias is balanced in the selection of articles, the majority of which are by American or other non-British authors. Each of the nine sections is preceded by some editorial linking material.

Anthropology as queen of the social sciences, or the misfit?

By 2050, will anthropology still survive as a university discipline, or will it have been asset-stripped into sociology, political science and development economics? When I was appointed Director of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1974, after employment at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, I naïvely assumed it to be a vessel for a unified 'science of the study of man', as its legal constitution proclaims. Now, only a few heroic individuals still cling to this ideal, which was never as potent anyway in Europe as in the USA. But this Introduction is not another death notice for anthropology.

Much excellent scholarship has been devoted to the history of anthropology, yet if one considers the objects of study which counted as anthropological during the first half of the last century – including the cranial measurements of living populations, hominid fossils, folk tales, comparative religion, patterns of sexual behaviour, kinship charts, tribal artefacts, and archaeological sites not accepted as

representing literate civilizations – it looks like a residual category, a receptacle for topics that did not fit into the major disciplines. This was also true of the material objects allocated to the ethnography department of the British Museum, which came to include such diverse things as Central American archaeological finds, almost everything brought to the Museum from Africa, and eastern European folk costumes.

Hence, in part, anthropology's fascination, especially for practitioners and students who by temperament prefer to embrace rather than shun marginality. The archetypal anthropologist is everywhere an 'odd man out', and this can lead to a particularly generous sense of humanity. At the individual level, it is widely recognized – as a result of centuries of Western religious and philosophical thought – that self-realization in an individual life derives from engagement with other persons, or face-to-face reciprocity. One can go further and suggest that the same is true of engagement at the level of other human collectivities and appreciation of their values.

Having no formal training as an anthropologist but given the job of running the Institute, I was in a good position to appreciate the advantages as well as the drawbacks of marginality. The editor's own marginality enabled the bi-monthly *Anthropology Today* to be more successful than most other anthropology journals in holding up a mirror to the discipline, candidly exposing its flaws as well as displaying its strengths.

Anthropology with and without the magic touch

During the second half of the twentieth century, social and cultural anthropology – hereafter to be called 'cultural anthropology' for the sake of simplicity, though a bygone generation of social anthropologists no doubt turns in its graves at the conflation – acquired an impressive momentum and influence. (Physical – now more commonly known as biological – anthropology has largely pursued its own course, adopting a straightforward natural science model and barely troubled by agonizing dilemmas of method and intent, so that the links with cultural anthropology have weakened over the period.) During my twenty-six years as Director of the RAI, I ingested an appreciation of the mystique of cultural anthropology. In retrospect, this had been built up by its forebears such as Frazer, Boas, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Lévi-Strauss, with a strategic flair only surpassed by that of the founders of psychoanalysis.

I always tried to stress those qualities that made anthropology different: to sum up its exciting combination of intellectual distinction with a whiff of subversiveness: its challenge to the ethnocentric and the parochial. I never knew Evans-Pritchard or Gluckman (to go back no further in the history of the discipline), but this is what Lévi-Strauss, Raymond Firth, Audrey Richards, Edmund Leach, Meyer Fortes, Mary Douglas, Rodney Needham, John Blacking and Julian Pitt-Rivers all seem to have in common, whatever their divergences. That aura of being attached to established tradition but somehow apart from it was more fascinating to me than

the alternative, 'shaggy' or 1960s image of the anthropologist who simply tries to dramatize a rejection of Western values. And the RAI – being Victorian and Royal and customarily labelled as either 'august' or 'dusty' or both, but at the same time host to some of the most radical thinking available – seemed to encapsulate this ambivalence. So did the theatrically acrimonious rivalry between Mary Douglas and the late Edmund Leach, two careers with a strongly gendered parallelism, woven around the basic notion of categorical anomaly or 'matter out of place'.¹ The colonial origins of leading figures such as Max Gluckman, Isaac Schapera, Meyer Fortes (South Africa) and Raymond Firth (New Zealand), and the distinctiveness of some major non-Western figures such as M.N. Srinivas and Stanley Tambiah, also seemed to help to keep the anthropological sensibility de-centred.

The spirit still flourishes in some brilliant up-and-coming anthropologists, but heavy institutional pressures now bear down to blur anthropology's singularity. There are the university bureaucrats intent on quantifying academic standards; there are school-leavers hoping to pay back their student loans through planning more lucrative career paths; there are larger disciplines which can plausibly allege, in the competition for resources, that anthropology is a relic of imperial times. In the recent past, British anthropology gained an unearned advantage in this competition, resulting from the decline in the 1970s of the academic reputation of British sociology; and in that intellectual vacuum a whole sub-discipline, the cultural anthropology of Britain, has been developed by a few anthropologists under the inspiration of Anthony Cohen. The extreme position is articulately held by Nigel Rapport, who holds that this should be the core of the discipline since 'all of human life is there', that is in Britain.² If a genuinely comparative and broadly based sociology should re-emerge in future, it is likely to do so by appropriating this tradition for itself, which would in turn weaken cultural anthropology.

As regards Rapport's position, I support the view held by the majority of anthropologists, which is that though the discipline has much to offer as an oblique perspective on the forms of life that we find most familiar, it depends indispensably on a constant stream of new information and ideas from overseas fieldwork. If that were to be lost, it would become incorporated in amorphous departments of 'social research', ceasing to attract adventurous minds ready to be challenged by difficult languages and sometimes arduous living conditions. Self-sufficiency or extraversion? There is much to ponder in the metaphor of the anteater and the jaguar, which we owe to the Sherente Indians of central Brazil (see Pot-pourri five).

I got to learn about cultural anthropology from the early 1960s through reading Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* – excerpts from which appeared in the influential monthly *Encounter*, Evans-Pritchard's BBC radio talks, Leach's Reith Lectures, Douglas's *Purity and Danger*. Then there were the popular American books by Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Ashley Montagu. (Much of this ground has been covered in MacClancy and McDonaugh's collection *Popularizing Anthropology*.)³ Anthropology went through a period of being fashionable. In Britain, the weeklies *New Society* and *The Listener* gave it regular space. It seems that intellectual 'sex appeal' is correlated with media attention and with the ability of academics to

exploit a public demand for novelty which the media stoke up.

During the 1980s and 1990s, British cultural anthropology became less successful in satisfying this demand. The last British anthropologist who was also a major public intellectual was Ernest Gellner – and he was better known as a social philosopher. Gellner was to die in 1995 while still in his prime, and Mary Douglas has devoted her years of retirement to important but specialized research on the Hebrew Bible. Leach died in 1989 after some years of illness. In the USA Clifford Geertz, Marshall Sahlins, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and a few others still have a comparable presence in public debates.

In a few countries, such as France and India, leading anthropologists often write articles for the daily press. But in Britain, the museum curator Nigel Barley, a witty iconoclast, is one of the few anthropologists with regular access to the media. Some are known as regional specialists, such as I.M. Lewis on Somalia, or Akbar Ahmed (now moved to the USA) on Pakistan and the Islamic world, while others such as Jean La Fontaine on child sexual abuse, or Alex de Waal on humanitarian aid, have carved a niche in policy-related research. The baton of public intellectual has passed to biological pundits such as Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker and Lewis Wolpert, while others in disciplines related to anthropology such as (in America) Chomsky and Edward Said have engaged in a passionate political rhetoric, given prestige by their respective academic achievements but not always directly related to them.

By contrast, Britain has excelled in producing 'anthropologists' anthropologists'. Students now enter a discipline dominated by these indoor cult figures rather than by public intellectuals, with the result that it has become rather involuted. This tendency has been aggravated by the sporadic popularity – though not nearly as much in Britain as in the USA – of literary reflexivity, extreme cultural particularism or extravagant political posturing.

Anthropologists' anthropologists have always been vital to the discipline. Their current doyen is Dame Marilyn Strathern, whose deliberately unfocused literary style is much admired and imitated and who (as was Edmund Leach) happens to be an outstanding academic leader as well as a scholar (see *Pot-pourri* seven). From the recesses of that style have nonetheless emerged some remarkably original insights into issues of public policy: in particular, into the social and ethical implications of the New Reproductive Technologies, and into the need to scrutinize the claims to Intellectual Property Rights. There is a trickle-down into public debate. Anthropologists can be good at locating objects of study which are not, from the standpoint of common sense, obvious or important – and turning them into gold. But the alchemy of intellectual innovation is not often combined with the ability to communicate.

If we may discern a dialectic between the anthropologist as public intellectual and the 'anthropologist's anthropologist', *RAINews/AT* has tried to make up for the dearth of public intellectuals by reaching out to the wider context. At the beginning of the 1980s, I editorialized in *RAINews* (no. 36, February 1980) that 'with the same aims as a good salad, to be slim and crisp, *RAINews* seems fit to survive "the decade of scarcity"'. I could not have been more wrong about the aesthetics of scarcity in the 1980s – a decade which in British middle-class circles would have

been more aptly symbolized by lobster Newburg and *crêpe Suzette* than a crisp salad. Perhaps my prediction was merely two or three decades too early. But I added that 'most things worth saying in the 1980s can be said in a short article with references'. Contributors were asked to 'emulate the style of Maine or Lucy Mair rather than those of Frazer or Lévi-Strauss'. Social anthropology's influence had not been strong enough. 'Some of the weaknesses are institutional: *RAINews* ought to be able to help anthropological institutions become stronger, both in Britain and worldwide'. Also – and here I turned out to be more right than I knew – anthropology needed to do more to correct the bias in the other social sciences towards analysing the Third World in purely secular terms.

Ethnographic film

In reaching out to the public, the exception throughout the period under review has been ethnographic film, because of the patronage of television; this was almost unique to Britain and has now come to an end. *RAINews* pioneered the serious critique of anthropological films and television programmes, before the foundation of two specialist journals of visual anthropology. The halcyon days began in the early 1970s with the launch of Granada Television's series *Disappearing World*, which was joined later by the BBC's *Face Values*, *Other People's Lives*, *Worlds Apart* and *Under the Sun*, and by Central Television's *Strangers Abroad*. Some of the Granada films, in particular, achieved surprisingly high viewing figures at peak times such as 9 p.m., which would be unthinkable today. A survey of first-year British undergraduates carried out by *Anthropology Today* in 1990 (6.1, February) revealed clearly that more students were making the decision to read anthropology after seeing films or television programmes than as a result of reading books or journals. The RAI Film Committee, a harmonious consortium of academics and film-makers, provided some leadership during this period in promoting high standards and making ethnographic films more widely available, especially through its biennial film prizes and film festivals.

The halcyon days came to an end in the early to mid-1990s with the beginnings of deregulation of British television. We tried to put moral pressure on the broadcasters to carry on what we regarded as a proud tradition, but in vain. With hindsight, it is now clear that anthropology had benefited from the presence in powerful positions of a few individuals, notably Sir Denis Forman of Granada Television. They – looking back to the great days of early British documentary film and being aware of similar movements in France and America – were temporarily able to override market forces and introduce what must have seemed to their middle managers some strangely esoteric material. It is also true that the formula of ethnographic films on television became rather tired, and the genre is now out of fashion. The last ambitious series was the well-meaning but disappointing series *Millennium* hosted by David Maybury-Lewis and sponsored by the Body Shop.⁴ The crowning insult is that the label 'anthropology' is now sometimes used by television programmers to indicate fly-on-the-wall and run-of-the-mill journalistic programmes

with a titillating element. For instance, a documentary about a professional gigolo in Sydney will be described as belonging to an 'anthropology strand'. Genuine ethnographic film has retreated to the relatively closed world of anthropological film festivals and conferences. Some commentators consider that the British dependence on television, during what I have called the halcyon days, was a false trail.

Ethnographic film and 'visual anthropology' have been the subject of a number of books, and in this anthology I have limited its coverage to a review by Pat Caplan of a masterpiece of ethnographic film, Tone Bringa's *We Are All Neighbours*, and a sour-ish comment by Marcus Banks published in 1999 on the treachery of British television. Its ambitions have in general declined still further since he wrote his article.

Pure and applied anthropology

Ever since the publication of Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, it has been difficult to keep a straight face when any claims to intellectual purity are advanced, for we have learnt to recognize the symptoms of punitive boundary maintenance. Yet the term 'applied' anthropology has more or less stuck, as if there were really a pure form analogous to pure mathematics. It is not surprising, then, that working, for instance, as an adviser to government or private companies is still commonly seen as second best by professional peers, and that anthropologists who work outside the universities are sometimes made to feel they do not 'belong' – though they may be better paid.

One of the innovations during my directorship of the RAI which I hope will have a lasting impact is the foundation of a new annual award in 1998 to stand alongside its traditional academic awards: the Lucy Mair Medal for Applied Anthropology, which recognizes excellence in using anthropology 'for the relief of poverty or distress, or for the active recognition of human dignity'. The high intellectual standard of the medallists so far has been such as to refute any suggestion that applied anthropology is only for the less gifted.

There was an element of personal tribute to the late Lucy Mair when I persuaded the Council to name the medal after her, for she was made Honorary Secretary of the RAI at the same time as I was appointed Director. Cannily suspicious of the more buccaneering and speculative careers in anthropology, she introduced me to a more 'nuts and bolts' version of the discipline than that which had first excited me. Though far from being a philistine herself, she told me once 'You come from an arts background, and you think man cannot live by bread alone. I say that first of all he needs bread' – a proposition that seemed to me, and still seems, indisputable.

An early exchange in the long, still ongoing debate about applied anthropology and economic development is reprinted in this collection. Glynn Flood was an LSE doctoral student who argued in 1975 that the Ethiopian government's agricultural schemes were ignoring the interests of a nomadic group, the Afar or Danakil, to the extent that they created a 'man-made famine'. A.F. Robertson, a prominent Africanist, replied that Flood's position was meritorious but one-sided, and he offered



Figure 0.1 Scarlett Epstein, the development anthropologist, doing fieldwork in Mysore, India, 1970s.

a qualified defence of the development scheme. Flood was murdered in the same year by Ethiopian soldiers in the course of their suppression of Afar dissidents. The topical background to this episode – which is bound to be glossed as a cautionary tale for fieldworkers, even if the facts are more equivocal – is that Ethiopia was still much in the news, following the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie the previous year and gruesome television coverage of famine in other parts of Ethiopia.

RAINews – *RAI News* – started as a tentative affair (partly for in-house reasons explained in an article in MacClancy and McDonaugh's *Popularizing Anthropology*),⁵ but the breakthrough came when I attended the World Anthropology Seminar 1977 organized in Houston by Sol Tax and others, under the patronage of Margaret Mead – my first introduction to the messianic strand in anthropology, for Sol Tax believed that 'anthropology can save us'. *RAINews* published as its lead article in February 1978 (no. 24) a piece by Dorothy Willner, an American anthropologist, entitled 'Anthropology and public policy', together with an editorial by myself on Development Anthropology, and another article by one of the few British social anthropologists then working as a freelance development consultant, which argued that anthropologists were taking refuge in over-fnicky ethics rather than getting their hands dirty. The editorial noted the promise of medical anthropology because the ethical difficulties presented were relatively minor (shortly afterwards, the RAI was to initiate the very successful biennial Wellcome Medal for Anthropology as Applied to Medical Problems, and medical anthropology has expanded rapidly, especially in the

USA). But it went on to argue that anthropology must get more involved with public policy issues: 'Professional self-interest and altruism appear to coincide. If this is not recognized, social anthropology will become an intellectual mandarinatone like Oriental Studies.' I was told by Lucy Mair that this was a 'cheap shot', but in retrospect this was the point at which *RAINews* began to find its feet.

Whereas the debate about anthropology and Third World development has intensified since then, making a convincing contribution to the British economic revival has been rather less easy. When I attempted to stimulate British anthropologists' participation in Industry Year in 1986, I found little in their work to impress hard-nosed industrial journalists, and when one of the latter asked me whether perhaps the best anthropologists did not go into studying industry, I had to admit that this was probably the case. This is a pity because early American industrial sociology was much influenced by the work of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, and in the 1950s and 1960s some outstanding fieldwork in the industrial workplace was done in Britain, for instance Sheila Cunnison's *Wages and Work Allocation: A Study of Social Relations in a Garment Factory*.⁶

Anthropology and journalism

RAINews was the first anthropology journal, or equal first with the short-lived American *Studies in Visual Communication*,⁷ to use illustrations as an integral part of the design. More generally, the major innovation of *RAINews* was to introduce quasi-journalistic values into the organ of an academic institution. For instance, in the second issue, an article 'Lying and Deceit' by Mary Douglas (p. 288) was accompanied by a reduced reproduction of a 1973 issue of the *New York Daily News*, showing the recently disgraced Vice-President Spiro Agnew raising his finger defiantly, with the caption '"DAMNED LIES," SAYS AGNEW'. In 1982 we published a lead article by an Argentine anthropologist, Julie Taylor, highly critical of British conduct of the Falklands/Malvinas war (p. 341).

This policy was enhanced when the decision was made to abandon the rather esoteric acronym *RAINews* and the modest printed format, in favour of the new title, explicitly underlining the topicality of the intended subject-matter, and an upgrade of the typography and presentation. Some anthropologists felt it was almost treachery to follow the fashions set by the media. Should not anthropology give special attention to regions and issues which are *neglected* by the media? Some of the most influential 'anthropologists' anthropology' over the last thirty years has been done in Melanesia, for instance, which has been prominently represented in the RAI's flagship journal *Man* (now *JRAI incorporating Man*) but much less in *RAINews/AT*.

There is a problem here. All narrative material from the South – especially of disaster and misery and conflict, but also of the glamorously exotic – may be conceived of as exports to the North, subject to unpredictable shifts of consumer fashion, to political manipulation, and to control of the channels of communication

by Northern intermediaries. Anthropology certainly has a responsibility to resist the propagandistic function of the mass media – as powerfully attacked by Chomsky. But if it confines itself to discussing groups and movements that few Western readers have heard of, its audience remains very restricted.

Changes in our micro-climate

During the period we are dealing with, anthropology underwent a number of intellectual transitions, some of which will be seen reflected in this anthology. However, the practical problems of funding also affected its development in Britain. Anthropology has fared no worse than other comparable academic subjects since 1980, when government began to seek to control the universities more closely and to strap down salaries. But anthropology had a privileged position which it lost. An anonymous editorial in the December 1981 issue of *RAINews* foreshadowed major concerns in the discipline ever since.

Early warning in the 1970s was given to social scientists by the now forgotten Senator William Proxmire in the USA, who specialized in drawing the Senate's attention to some of the apparently outlandish social science projects on which taxpayers' monies were being spent. (His first Golden Fleece Award was given in 1975 to the National Science Foundation for spending \$84,000 on a study to find out why people fall in love.) Until 1981, the UK's Social Science Research Council had a social anthropology committee which exercised control over its own budget, even if this was small by comparison with the 'big' social sciences such as economics. This committee was abolished in favour of a system of policy-driven committees, and the Council's name was later changed to the Economic and Social Research Council.

Until 1981 British social anthropology was like a family which squabbled internally but closed its ranks against outsiders. In proportion to academic employment prospects, it was over-producing PhDs in large numbers. The loss of its own funding committee was a turning point. The third decennial conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists at Cambridge in 1983 seemed paralysed by the challenge of the new adverse funding climate, and was criticized at the time for sacrificing intellectual content to a preoccupation with careers and employment. But soon anthropologists were forced to turn outside: towards interdisciplinarity, towards more imaginative planning of conferences and workshops, towards new developments in teaching techniques, towards new employment opportunities, towards defending their position more formally as a collectivity. When one thinks of the outstanding 'anthropologists' anthropologists' in Britain, as I have called them, the cult figures, they have nearly all been associated with a few departments of anthropology whose prestige and access to non-state sources of income has kept them relatively insulated from these financial pressures.

Defence of the anthropological patch has been quite successful, but it has resulted in a threat to anthropology's uniqueness. As Editor of *Anthropology Today*,

I tried to maintain a sense of that aura surrounding the discipline which had earlier so impressed me, looking for it particularly in new and unknown authors, and I hope that in the following pages you will find some of it intact up to the present.

Anthropology as a service discipline

Theoretically, anthropology ought perhaps to be queen of the social sciences. In practice, given the peculiar marginality of its traditional subject-matter, it will probably continue to fascinate a few thousand people all over the world and leave the vast majority indifferent. Only in the USA does it have a large professional association to promote it, the American Anthropological Association, and the impression of wealth and power given by its annual meetings in luxury hotels is somewhat illusory. Even in the USA it is a marginal discipline in proportion to the whole of academia, except at the undergraduate level.⁸

It will be argued later in this book that, effective as it may be in colonizing new subject-areas, if anthropology abandons its traditional subject-matter – ‘indigenous’ peoples, roughly defined – it stands at great risk of being absorbed into political science and development economics. Nonetheless, some influential figures regard the traditional subject-matter as an anachronistic embarrassment. I might have thought this a plausible point of view twenty years ago, but now I am convinced of the opposite.

Chris Hann, writing specifically last May of what he calls ‘transitology’ – the study of the post-Cold War world, post-socialism, the expansion of the European Union, and so forth – says that ‘if economics, political science and sociology form the Premier League . . . anthropology is well down in Division One’ (*TLS*, 4 May 2001). For John Gledhill and several other senior members of the profession, the remedy is to seek greater ‘institutional clout’ through getting across ‘the big message about the potential of anthropology’, abandoning elitism and getting the subject into schools (*AT*, Dec. 2000). For others, the way forward is getting more anthropologists to appear on television as experts.

My own bitter experience in trying to do all this has persuaded me that it would be best to turn on its head the idea of anthropology as a master discipline. It is better thought of as a service discipline, remaining small but exercising its intellectual power, and its unique access to the marginal and culturally unassimilated, to influence and sometimes infiltrate other, more mainstream disciplines, offering consultation and cooperation. This point of view is not original but indebted to conclusions reached by two of the most sophisticated British exponents of anthropology in an interdisciplinary context, Mary Douglas (see p. 290) and Ronnie Frankenberg, who in 1992 argued at a conference that ‘rather than trying to compete with other, larger disciplines . . . anthropologists should select promising lines of research, and move towards consultation and complementarity with other disciplines.’ (Frankenberg added that ‘it is essential that there should be no compromise on the needs for work in traditional ethnographic sites outside Europe, or for adequate time-depth in designing research programmes so that processes of transition can be tracked’.)⁹

Anthropology has been wonderfully fertile in generating new ideas – compared to its big sister, geography, which has produced practically none – but it has also borrowed voraciously from other disciplines. (Kluckhohn, the American anthropologist, called it an intellectual poaching licence.) It has also influenced other disciplines extensively, and helped in the formation of new disciplines such as women's studies and Black studies which have then overtaken it on the Left. Might we not see it as a kind of ideas processor, which takes theories from other disciplines – biology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, linguistics, cybernetics, literary criticism . . . and subjects them to the fiery ordeal of fieldwork, returning them in a new shape for consumption? In other words, it is an academic *rotisserie* or kiln, depending on which metaphor you prefer.

Let other disciplines aspire to pontificate and dominate institutions. Anthropologists may reflect, with the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, that sometimes in service there can be perfect freedom.

However, I do not expect this point of view to be popular. Clannishness, sectarianism, or what has sometimes been called pseudo-ethnicity, are as rife within the academic world as in all other walks of life. Marshall Sahlins, the American anthropologist, has satirized these tendencies in his pamphlet *Waiting for Foucault*.¹⁰ The 'my Father knew Evans-Pritchard' notion survives, assuming anthropology to be a kind of lineage by apprenticeship – in which students are linked to ancestors through their teachers and teachers' teachers, as in the Church's apostolic succession or the Islamic chain of authorities known as *isnâd*. It is not a scientific notion, valuable as apprenticeship may be in passing on the 'craft' elements in anthropology such as fieldwork techniques.

And I see no reason why anthropology should not adhere to its self-definition as a social science – provided that the term 'science' is defined broadly, both to include the study of meaning and values, which are so central to anthropology, and to do full justice to anthropology's great trump card – which is that it is the only social science which continuously subjects all its own preconceptions to radical interrogation.

The invention of gender

A huge gap separates the anthropology of the early 1970s from today, and that is the invention of gender – a term which until then, when applied to anything other than grammar, tended to have jocular overtones. Even such an excellent introductory text as David Pocock's *Understanding Social Anthropology*, published in 1975, seems heavily dated today in ignoring gender (a problem which MacClancy has tried to deal with in his introduction to Athlone Press's new 1998 edition).¹¹

It would be wrong to suggest that *RAINews* and *AT* made a major contribution to the development of feminist anthropology. Marilyn Strathern and Ruth Finnegan, two women editors of the senior journal of the RAI, *Man* – despite its benighted title, which was not neutralized into *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* until 1995 – made a much more positive contribution. However, having worked at the determinedly progressive Institute of Contemporary Arts in



Figure 0.2 'Spaces in contrast: the strong and the weak': a display in the exhibition 'Les Femmes', Ethnographic Museum, Neuchâtel, 1992.

the early 1970s and organized a mixed media programme there called 'The Body as a Medium of Expression', which explored the use made of non-verbal communication by social minorities, I was sympathetic to feminism in general.

In 1974, I saw feminism as a matter of sexual politics, and as far less significant than ethnic politics. Now I can appreciate the centrality of gender to anthropology, which has been specially well put by Michael Peletz:

[I]ndeterminacies, paradoxes, and contradictions in representations of gender, are, at least potentially, the most profoundly subversive challenges to all ideologies of social order . . . Such is the case partly because gender differences are among the earliest, least conscious, and most fundamental differences internalised in all societies . . . [C]hallenges to these ideologies necessarily constitute deeply unsettling threats to the most basic categories through which we experience, understand, and represent our selves, intimate (and not so intimate) others, and the universe as a whole.¹²

Without trying to do justice to the intricate mutual relationship of anthropology with the rise of feminism over this period, I would claim that this was linked to a broader sensitization to issues of representation, which may be summed up as the critique of exoticism. Elderly anthropologists, however distinguished, who were left

behind by feminism were left behind on the issue of exoticism as well.

The insight in common is that glamorization and subjugation are two sides of the same coin. In an early issue of *RAINews* (no. 14, May/June 1976) Rosemary Firth explained how Edwin Ardener sought to solve the puzzle that women have great saliency in the symbolism and literature of the West, but this is not matched by their position in the structure of social life. Today this no longer seems a puzzle. Women are glamorized or idealized or valued as objects of desire or as close to 'nature', and at the same time often called on to lead more demanding lives than men and not to complain about it. In fact, women are less expendable than men insofar as the reproduction of society is concerned.

Similarly, the way in which 'we' in metropolitan countries picture colonized or formerly colonized peoples betrays an anxiety about our expendability and a fear of unsettling forces such as poverty and mass migration. As John Knight observes in the article about Colin Turnbull reprinted in this collection: 'When Turnbull wrote *The Mountain People* [in 1972], it was generally assumed that the sentimentalization of traditional societies and their depreciation were contradictory processes. We now see them more as reciprocal inversions.' This is an insight that is obliquely indebted to the feminist movement in anthropology.

Fieldwork as intervention

One of the last rolling themes introduced in *Anthropology Today* under my editorship, assisted by Sean Kingston and Alma Gottlieb, was that of the relations between ethnographic fieldworkers and their hosts, especially what we characterized as 'gift relationships'.¹³ Earlier issues had explored such topics as whether anthropologists should pay their informants, and the tradition of using local assistants who, in the colonial context, were sometimes given inadequate credit and confined to the status of 'native informants'.

The articles selected here cover the issue of fieldwork as intervention in a wide context. As this anthology goes to press, it seems that the future of grassroots ethnographic fieldwork will be an increasing problem for the discipline, because of a new factor resulting from '11 September 2001': the certainty that covert intelligence services, led by the USA but assisted by its military allies, will teem all over the world more than ever before, especially in Muslim or partially Muslim countries. Suspicion that an ethnographer may be a spy is by no means new (one need only read Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*). American anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson worked for their government during the Second World War – and to general approval. But since the controversial Vietnam War, and the ill-fated 'US Army Project Camelot' intended to assist governments in quelling subversion, the professional bodies of anthropology have strongly deprecated such use of anthropological expertise. Will a significant number of anthropologists disregard their professional norms and lend their services to governments in the 'war against terrorism'? Even if they decide not to, will host

communities believe in their truthfulness when spies are increasingly disguising themselves as journalists, aid workers and sometimes anthropologists? In case anyone might think I am fabricating this threat, while I was preparing this Introduction for publication I heard Jeremy Paxman, the well-known British broadcaster, in conversation with Nigel Barley on BBC Radio Four's *Start the Week*, ask with his familiar leer: 'What then is the difference between anthropology and espionage, exactly?'¹⁴

The achievement of most successful ethnographers has been to get past the public lineaments of society, which may or may not be masked, and describe either the neutral parts – society's own back, as it were, which it cannot see itself, except in a mirror – or, with even more difficulty and sensitivity, the areas of highly charged emotional intimacy. To do so necessitates a relationship of trust. The trust which enabled a television team to film *We Are All Neighbours* in Bosnia during the Yugoslav civil war (see p. 179) is just one of countless examples that could be chosen. But now the twenty-first century has taken a new turn. The last quarter of the twentieth century will be looked back on as, in some respects, an age of innocence for the discipline that is committed to reaching the parts the other social sciences don't reach.

Pot-pourri

Rather than reprint those of my own editorials which tried to steer interest towards promising topics, from child-focused ethnography to undocumented immigration, I have made a selection of short pieces by my own hand which attempted a lighter touch. These have been grouped under the heading Pot-pourri – 'a collection of unrelated or disparate items' – and scattered throughout the book.

Editorial note

Misprints and trivial errors have been corrected in this anthology without indication. No attempt has been made to standardize the system of bibliographic references, since it has been the editorial policy to allow authors flexibility in this regard, while generally following the bibliographic guidelines recommended for the Institute's other journal, the quarterly *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*.

Some time in the 1980s, the use of he/him to mean he or she/him or her went out of favour in academic writing. The older usage has not been corrected.

Notes

- 1 See Richard Fardon's *Mary Douglas: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Routledge, 1999) and the introduction to Volume 2, *Culture and Human Nature*, of *The Essential Edmund Leach* (ed. Stephen Hugh-Jones and James Laidlaw, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).
- 2 See "'Best of British'? The new anthropology of Britain' by Nigel Rapport, *AT*, 16.2, April 2000, 20–2. For dissenting views, see the correspondence columns in the June and August issues.
- 3 Routledge, 1996.
- 4 For critical reviews which dwelt on *Millennium's* glamorization of the primitive see John Knight, 'Making a tribal difference in the modern world', *AT*, 9.1, February 1993, 22–4, and Jonathan Benthall, 'Charisma in cashmere', *New Statesman and Society*, 8 January 1993, 33–4.
- 5 'Enlarging the context of anthropology: the case of *Anthropology Today*', pp. 135–41 in Jeremy MacClancy and Chris McDonaugh (eds) *Popularizing Anthropology*, London: Routledge, 1996.
- 6 Tavistock Publications, 1966.
- 7 Founded in 1974 as *Studies in Anthropology of Visual Communication* by Sol Worth, then co-edited by Jay Ruby and Larry Gross from 1977 to 1986 (title changed to *Studies in Visual Communication* in 1980).
- 8 As shown in James Peacock's Presidential Address to the American Anthropological Association, Washington, DC, 1995. At his own university (North Carolina, Chapel Hill) the proportion of anthropology to the whole university was on every count less than 1 per cent, except that students taught were more than 15 per cent.
- 9 Conference report, 'Child-focused research', *AT* 8.2, April 1992, p. 24.
- 10 Prickly Pear Press, 2000 (3rd edition).
- 11 David Pocock, *Understanding Social Anthropology*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975; new edition with Introduction by Jeremy MacClancy, London: Athlone Press, 1998.
- 12 Peletz, Michael (1995) 'Neither reasonable nor responsible: contrasting representations of masculinity in a Malay society', in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 112–13.
- 13 *AT* 13.6, December 1997, p. 27.
- 14 8 October 2001.

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PART ONE

Feminine Power

■ JONATHAN BENTHALL

ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY tends to date rapidly, so I have chosen to represent the 'invention of gender' by four articles with strong ethnographic content, all emphasizing feminine power in one form or another. I hope the juxtaposition will encourage readers to develop their own readings of the data.

The first three articles give evidence of the symbolic power of the feminine in various all-male Euro-American institutions: ships of the Royal Navy, the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington (VMI, thinly disguised by a pseudonym) and an American all-male prison. Of these institutions, the first two have since opened up to women, in 1990 and 1997 respectively. But prisons, in the USA as nearly everywhere, remain firmly segregated by gender.

Silvia Rodgers had an unusual vantage-point for her doctoral study of the launching of British naval ships. She first became interested in the tradition when she was invited to perform a launching ceremony herself – as the wife of the then Minister for Transport, Bill Rodgers. A specially intriguing observation in her article is the embarrassment of the Church of England about the naming ritual, analogous to a Christian baptism but unsupported by any orthodox theology, since a ship is only metaphorically a female entity and has no actual soul ascribed to her. Proof of this embarrassment is that, though a high-ranking lady launches the ship, it is the humble local vicar who provides the blessing, never a bishop or a naval chaplain.

At the time when Rodgers wrote her article, in 1984, women were not allowed to go to sea in the Navy, or even to spend a night on board. From September 1990, this changed and they are now eligible for service in all ships except submarines, mine-clearance diving and commando units. An interview study by the University of Plymouth, published in 2000, suggests that over the last ten years:

women at sea have become progressively more integrated into mixed manned ships and there is now far greater acceptance of women at sea.

The majority of those interviewed felt either that the operational effectiveness of a ship is not adversely affected, or, that it is actually improved by having women in a ship's company.¹

As far I know, no ethnographic research has been carried out.

John M. Coggeshall's '“Ladies” behind bars’ is a highly original contribution to the ethnography of prisons – a small but select body of literature pioneered by Erving Goffman. As Coggeshall has written elsewhere, ‘prisons . . . provide evidence for the overwhelming strength of culture to modify and supersede oppressive environmental conditions’.² In this article he shows how inmates in southern Illinois prisons reconstitute a dual-gender society in a single-gender environment, with a variety of gendered roles: ‘daddies’, ‘kids’, ‘girls’, ‘ladies’, ‘queens’, ‘gumps’ and ‘punks’, while female guards and staff are reclassified as ‘dykes’ or inauthentic women.

We may note his entrée: he taught university level courses in two medium-security prisons, which enabled him to conduct participant observation with guards and staff. A resident inmate, instructed ad hoc in ethnographic data collection, then assisted him by conducting further interviews. Coggeshall concludes that ‘gender roles and attitudes in prison do not contradict American male values, they merely exaggerate the domination and exploitation already present’. In the absence of follow-up or comparative studies, one can merely recall that ‘American culture’ is neither as homogeneous nor as static as a cursory reading of Coggeshall’s article might suggest. One also wonders whether a study of the Royal Navy pre-1990, conducted by less elevated a personage than a launcher of naval ships, might have revealed a similar re-partition of gendered roles, if in a covert or sublimated form, since at that time open homosexuality was illegal in the British armed services.

Abigail E. Adams gained her access to VMI while teaching at a nearby women’s college, and it was a senior officer at the Institute as well as her own students who prompted her to study this copybook rite of passage. As in the naval and penal examples, feminine power seems to pervade all-male institutions.³

Adams contributes a brief update on developments at VMI since 1993, when the article was published. I have noted myself that the Ratline is still a source of controversy and emotion, for at the beginning of the 2000–1 academic year two cadets were dismissed and one suspended for disciplinary offences relating to it. The authorities also had to clamp down on illegal ‘group protests’ of an undisclosed nature (VMI website, 26 September 2001).

The fourth article deals with feminine power in a different way. Conventional feminism often seeks to reduce the differences between men and women, and abhors the segregation that is typically found in African and Islamic societies. **Danièle Kintz** did fieldwork in West Africa, where local forms of Islam are strong, and she shows how the Fulani or Peul take pleasure in dramatizing rather than playing down the difference of gender. Kintz does not accept that Fulani women are economically exploited. More subtly, she shows that whereas the men tend to present stereotyped, serious and rigid models of their society, it is the women who have a more sophisticated, nuanced and humorous view – that social sensitivity to which the anthropologist aspires. We may guess that Kintz’s rosy picture of gender segregation may

be partly due to her having enjoyed convivial relations with some of the more well-to-do Fulani women.

Kintz's position is that the 'gender' dimension to anthropology, indispensable because of its earlier neglect, does not always take enough account of the opportunities which gender offers for gamesmanship. In another article,⁴ she describes the recurrent practice, among elderly Fulani men, of nostalgic lament for the past: 'The world is going to the dogs!' – the unseemly behaviour of women being one of their complaints. The participation of women in development projects becomes much in demand, often by means of more-or-less fictive voluntary associations, in order to satisfy the requirement of external aid agencies for a 'gendered approach'. Meanwhile the women retort, 'Do you hear what lies they [the men] are telling?'

All four articles represent the contribution of anthropology over the last quarter-century to a more subtle understanding of gender than that to be found in old-fashioned 'women's studies'.

Notes

- 1 Wreford, Commander Katrine (Royal Naval Reserve), 'The integration of women at sea', *Broadsheet 2000* (Ministry of Defence, London).
- 2 Coggeshall, John M. (1996) 'Prisons' in *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, ed. D. Levinson and M. Ember, New York: Holt, pp. 1032–3.
- 3 I must admit that when accepting this article by Adams, I thought of my own experience in an all-male English secondary boarding school in the 1950s, when the institution of 'fagging' – abolished not long afterwards – facilitated personal relationships between seniors and new boys. New boys were required to run errands, make beds, toast bread, and perform other chores. 'Fagmasters' were expected to take a brotherly interest in their designated fags. (Consistently with the observations of Coggeshall on all-male prisons, at this school a particularly good-looking new boy tended to be labelled a 'tart' by some of his age-group regardless of his personal behaviour.)
- 4 Kintz, Danièle (1999) 'Le monde est gâté, un exemple peul de chronophilie'. In *Les Temps du Sahel: En hommage à Edmond Bernus*, Paris: Institut de Recherche pour le Développement.

Silvia Rodgers

- **FEMININE POWER AT SEA,**
RAINews 64, October 1984, pp. 2–4

THE CEREMONY THAT ACCOMPANIES the launch of a Royal Navy ship is classified as a state occasion, performed more frequently than other state occasions and to an audience of thousands. But until now it has never been the subject of research, either historical or anthropological.

If the ceremony of launching looks at first sight like the transition rite that accompanies the ship as she passes from land to water, it soon becomes clear that the critical transition is from the status of an inanimate thing to that of an animate and social being. From being a numbered thing at her launch, the ship receives her name and all that comes with the name. This includes everything that gives her an individual and social identity, her luck, her life essence and her femininity.

My research into the ceremony sheds light not only on the nature and development of the ceremony itself but also on the religious beliefs of sailors, on the symbolic classification of a ship by sailors, on the extensive and reincarnating power of the ship's name, and on the relationship between women and ships and mariners. It is the last aspect on which I want to concentrate here.

Most of us know that sailors refer to a ship by the feminine pronoun. But the extent of the metaphor of the ship as a living, feminine and anthropomorphic being, is not, I think, appreciated. Furthermore, it is this metaphor that shows up the quintessential and extraordinary nature of the launching ceremony. I say 'extraordinary' because this ceremony is unique in our society and any of its auxiliary societies in that it symbolically brings to life an artefact. It looks more like a case of animism than of personification. Its status in the Royal Navy as a state occasion makes all this even more remarkable, particularly as it is accompanied by a service of the established Church.

There are of course other new things that are inaugurated by secular or sacred means. But in none of these instances does the artefact acquire the properties of a living thing, let alone a feminine person. There is the proclivity to personify virtues and institutions in the feminine, but these are not conceptualized as living and human