PREFACE

To write an introductory textbook feels like trying to juggle too many balls at once – or, to misuse 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 problematic

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

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

When I set out to revise and update this book, the original manuscript was five years old. It would be wrong to claim that the subject of anthropology has changed dramatically during this period. The task nevertheless turned out to be both larger and more difficult than I had expected. The least difficult part was actually to update the text with references and discussions of important recent work, including a much-needed account of the history of anthropology (Chapter 2 in this edition) and introductions to new research fields, ranging from football to the Internet. The greater challenge amounted to arguing the continued relevance of the 'classic' brand of social anthropology that I defend, in the face of increasingly vocal (and fashionable) alternatives that try to make sense of the unity and diversity of humanity. Both humanistic disciplines (sometimes lumped together as 'cultural studies') and approaches from natural science (evolutionary psychology, or second-generation sociobiology, being the most powerful one) offer answers to some of the questions typically raised in social anthropology – concerning, for example, the nature of society, the predicaments of ethnic complexity and so on. In this situation, neither antagonistic competition nor the merging of disciplines into a 'super-discipline' of sociocultural science would be a good option; instead, I advocate openness, mutual respect and constructive dialogue. This new edition therefore states, more clearly than the first edition, what it is that the methods, the theory and the body of existing research that make up social anthropology have to offer in studies of the contemporary world. Hopefully, therefore, the reader will eventually be convinced that accounts of culture and society must have an ethnographic component, and that knowledge of traditional, 'remote' societies greatly enhances the understanding of modern phenomena such as tourism, ethnic violence or migration.

Since the first edition of this book was completed, a number of general overviews of the discipline have appeared, perhaps as a result of a *fin-de-millénaire* anxiety to take stock and look ahead. The most idiosyncratic one may well be Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing's *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts* (2000), which consists of sixty essays (from 'Agent and Agency' to 'Writing'). Some of the terms I would regard as 'key concepts', such as ethnicity, religion and technology, are not included; while on the other hand, the book contains wonderful reviews of topics like 'The

Unhomely', 'Moments of Being' and 'Individuality'. Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer's *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (1996) and David Levinson and Melvin Ember's massive *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* (1996) both cover the entire discipline alphabetically, with interesting variations – the former being British, the latter American – while Robert Layton's *An Introduction to Theory in Anthropology* (1997) and Alan Barnard's *History and Theory in Anthropology* (2000) offer different accounts of the twentieth-century development of the subject. Priorities are bound to differ. This book distinguishes itself in that its main structure is thematic; discussions of theories are bound up with the substantial fields – kinship, economics, gender relations, politics – that anthropologists study. It is also fuelled by a conviction that the craft of social anthropology has a bright future indeed – not in spite of, but because of changes that have taken place, both in the intellectual world and in the world that we study.

My thanks are due to friends and colleagues at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo, who have coped with me for many years now; and to a social form of more recent origin, but of overwhelming importance in my life, namely my beloved Kari and our children, Ole Johan and Amanda.

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Oslo
Spring 2001

1 INTRODUCTION: 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 rainforests 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 African cities.

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, an essential part of the exploration consists in understanding how their economy is connected with other aspects of their society. If this dimension is absent, Tiv economy becomes incomprehensible to anthropologists. If we do not know that the Tiv traditionally could not buy and sell land, and that they have customarily not used money as a means of payment, it will plainly be impossible to understand how they themselves interpret 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: