

of this kind of relationship when he wrote, in the mid-nineteenth century, that even the functioning of our five senses is a product of the whole of history up to this day.

Finally, we should be wary of empirical generalisations regarding the knowledge of this or that people. Knowledge is always socially distributed. Surveys indicate that less than half the adult population of Britain and the USA have any idea of what DNA is, and a survey cited by Peter Worsley (1997, p. 6) suggests that a third of adult Britons believe that the sun goes around the earth. It should also be remarked that it is not primarily the business of the anthropologist to make value judgements about knowledge systems. Good studies of knowledge, ranging from Evans-Pritchard via Latour and Woolgar's study of the social production of scientific knowledge (1979) to Worsley's recent *Knowledges* (1997), primarily try to make sense of the world according to the native's point of view, whether the native is a nuclear physicist or an Australian aborigine. This perspective is not tantamount to 'postmodern relativism'; it is simply the only viable strategy for developing and transmitting an understanding of the various life-worlds human beings create and maintain.

This chapter has discussed a number of simple contrasts frequently invoked by anthropologists (especially in the past), between witchcraft accounts and scientific accounts, between the bricoleur and the engineer, between literacy and orality, between abstract linear time and concrete time, and ultimately between large-scale, 'modern' and small-scale, 'traditional' societies. Such dichotomies, which have never provided a satisfactory empirical description of the world, have been maintained for generations, at least partly because they facilitate the classification of social and cultural phenomena – if not entire societies. In the remaining chapters, this kind of dichotomous modelling is subjected to critical scrutiny, and both its strengths and limitations are made clear.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

E.E. Evans-Pritchard: *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, abridged edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1983 (1937).

Jack Goody: *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977.

Edmund Leach: *Lévi-Strauss*. Glasgow: Fontana 1970.

Peter Worsley: *Knowledges: What Different Peoples Make of the World*. London: Profile 1997.

## 16 THE CHALLENGE OF MULTIPLE TRADITIONS

Now that the Polynesian islands have been clad in concrete and transformed into hangar ships anchored in the Pacific Ocean, when all of Asia is beginning to look like a polluted suburb, when cities of cardboard and sheet metal spread all over Africa, when civilian and military airplanes violate the untouched innocence of American and Melanesian forests even before they take away their virginity – what can the so-called flight from reality entailed by travelling then result in, other than confronting us with the most unfortunate aspects of our own history?

— Claude Lévi-Strauss

In earlier chapters, we looked at different forms of political organisation, world-views and systems of economic production and distribution. It has repeatedly been noted that the ethnographic present, the tense conventionally used when anthropologists talk about different societies, is increasingly becoming a past tense (Davis 1992a). In Australia, 250 languages were spoken in the late eighteenth century. At the end of the twentieth century, there were about 30 left, and few of them seemed likely to survive for another generation in Anglophone Australia. Virtually all inhabitants of the world live in states which define them as citizens (see Chapter 18), and a growing majority of the world's population depends on general purpose money in their daily life. At least nominally, more than half of the world's adult population is literate.

#### URBAN ANTHROPOLOGY: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

One of the most visible aspects of social and cultural change in the period since the Second World War has been urbanisation. While less than 5 per cent of Africa's population lived in cities in 1900, about 50 per cent did in 1990, and the numbers for Asia and Latin America are of a similar order. For the first time in human history, a majority of the world's population is now urban. There are several related causes of urbanisation. Population growth in the countryside and transitions from subsistence agriculture to the production of cash crops lead to a general land shortage and greater vulnerability; simultaneously, new opportunities for waged work arise in and near the cities. Most urban dwellers in non-industrial countries, however,

**Max Gluckman** (1911–75), born in South Africa, studied with Evans-Pritchard, but left for Rhodesia after the Second World War, where he would play an important role in the so-called Rhodes-Livingstone School (later the Manchester School). Gluckman's early research was faithful to his teacher's analyses of segmentary lineages and political integration in acephalous societies, and he analysed politics among the Zulu, the Lozi and other peoples of Southern Africa. Through indicating how conflict and 'rituals of rebellion' could have an integrative effect, he added a dynamic dimension to classical structural-functionalism without leaving its central tenets (*Custom and Conflict in Africa*, 1956; *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa*, 1963). Gluckman was also concerned with traditional law and judicial processes, and has written the influential *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society* (1965). His influence on what was later to be known as the study of ethnicity was also considerable. Although Gluckman himself published little on the topic, he was an important source of inspiration for scholars who developed urban anthropology in southern Africa and network analysis, including John Barnes, J. Clyde Mitchell and A.L. Epstein.

are usually classified as poor, although their lot might not have been better if they had stayed in the countryside.

A series of early studies of urbanisation in Africa has been very influential both theoretically and methodologically. The group of researchers collectively known as the Manchester School undertook an ambitious exploration of urbanisation in Southern Africa under the leadership of Godfrey Wilson and later Max Gluckman from the late 1930s to the 1960s.

The development of the copper industry in North Rhodesia (today's Zambia) led to a great need for labour from the early decades of the twentieth century. The industry was concentrated in a 'belt' in the north-eastern region, known as the Copperbelt, and the miners often had to travel far to get to work. In the mining towns, they lived in barracks not intended for family life. Unlike many West African cities, such as Ibadan or Timbuktu, as well as older, coastal East African cities like Mombasa and Zanzibar Town, the towns in this part of the continent were founded and populated very quickly; they had no 'traditional sector' and no historical predecessors. There was thus a sharp social and cultural discontinuity between the towns and the outlying countryside. The mine-owners assumed that they could send the workers back to their villages in periods when their labour was not needed; this did not come about, however. The labour migration, intended to be seasonal, led to a partial depopulation of the rural areas, and eventually entire families lived more or less permanently in the mining towns. A permanent proletarianisation of a former farmer population had taken place.

In the first anthropological study of urbanisation in the Copperbelt, Godfrey Wilson (1941–2) introduces the term 'de-tribalisation'; in other words, he emphasises the qualitative change in social integration entailed by urbanisation. From being kinship-based subsistence producers, the workers become individual participants in the world economy, he writes, describing this society as:

a community in which impersonal relations are all-important; where business, law and religion make men dependent on millions of other men whom they have never met; a community articulated into races, nations and classes; in which the tribes, no longer almost worlds in themselves, now take their place as small administrative units; a world of writing, of specialized knowledge and of elaborate technical skill. (G. Wilson 1941, p. 13; quoted in Hannerz 1980, p. 124)

Wilson also notes a change in the value-orientation of the proletarianised Africans, remarking that the Africans of Broken Hill are neither a cattle people nor a fishing people, but a 'dressed' people. In town, clothes became an object of investment, a kind of special purpose money, an expression of individualism through conspicuous consumption and an expression of an emulation of a European lifestyle.

While Wilson in this early study concentrated on describing change, J. Clyde Mitchell later focused on the relationship between change and continuity in the small monograph *The Kalela Dance* (1956). The Kalela dance was performed every Sunday afternoon by labour migrants belonging to the Bisa people in the town of Luanshya. They were dressed in modern clothes and the dance did not form part of their traditional cultural repertoire. However, the dance and songs were definitely markers of 'tribal' group identity. Although the kin groups and tribal forms of organisation did not have a significant practical role in the towns, group identity was frequently overcommunicated; that is, it was given special emphasis in contexts of interaction. Moreover, the contrast with other groups became more visible here than it had been in the countryside. In towns, people categorised each other according to their place of origin (a criterion which had only rarely been relevant earlier), and many of the new forms of association made possible by the town – peer groups, clubs, etc. – were based on ethnic membership. Mitchell notes, significantly, that the notion of 'tribe' and group membership continues to be important after urbanisation, but that its significance changes in response to shifts in the overall social organisation. In this way, he – and other members of the group – foreshadows later developments in the study of ethnic symbolism (see Chapter 17). This body of work has nonetheless been criticised for taking too facile a view of social change, seeing the transition from village life to city life as an overly linear process (Ferguson 1990).

Many later studies of urbanisation and change have taken their cue from the studies carried out by the Manchester School. In a study of political organisation among Hausa in the Yoruba city of Ibadan, Abner Cohen

(1969) shows how cultural symbols and traditional principles of social organisation change in meaning, but remain important, when they are moved from a traditional to a modern context. To mention a couple of further examples, David Lan (1985) has shown how traditional spirit mediums and old myths gained a new significance during the civil war in Zimbabwe (in the late 1970s) and provided legitimacy to entirely new political institutions, notably the guerrilla movement; whereas Richard Wilson (1991) has provided a similar kind of analysis of political mobilisation in marginal, Indian-populated highland Guatemala, where he shows that local political entrepreneurs may innovatively draw on both local and foreign symbols and sources of legitimacy in their bid to mobilise the local population in the initially alien modern political sphere.

In situations of change, there are certain aspects of culture and social organisation which alter, and certain aspects which do not. What changes and what does not is an empirical question: there is no general answer to it.

#### CONCEPTUALISING COMPLEXITY

Urban anthropology in Southern Africa raised methodological issues which became increasingly relevant from the late 1950s onwards, as fewer anthropologists now studied relatively isolated villages or local communities. In a city it is practically impossible for a researcher to develop an overview of the entire social universe. Many encounters with informants are brief, and there are many members of society one has no chance of ever meeting. Obviously, it is something quite different to study social relations in Luanshya or, for that matter, New York, than it is to spend a year in a village in Kiriwina. In order to solve some of the methodological problems raised, the Manchester School developed a rigorous methodology to study social networks (see Chapter 6). They also proposed the extended case study as an alternative to the traditional, holistic style of inquiry. A case study would characteristically focus on an important public event, drawing conclusions about the wider social and cultural context on the basis of intensive exploration and interpretation of that event and its wider ramifications. *The Kalela Dance* was a typical case study along such lines.

In urban anthropology and, more generally, anthropology in modern societies, it is impossible to find out everything about everybody, due to the complexity and size of the societies concerned; in a word, their scale. Modern societies are large and highly differentiated.

There are several ways of approaching this problem. One possible solution is the case study. Another, related approach consists of focusing on a strictly delineated topic, such as the downward mobility of parts of the North American middle class in the 1980s (Newman 1988). One may also choose to concentrate on a restricted topic *and* a delineated physical field, as in Marianne Gullestad's monograph on gender and everyday life in a suburb

of Bergen (1984). A third strategy could be to single out a small group in a complex society, for example an ethnic minority (such as Okely 1983). Usually such studies have to give a great deal of attention to the relationship between the group and the outside world, and may thereby shed light on a wider context in roughly the same way as a case study does.

A study combining several of these approaches is David William Cohen's and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo's monograph on Siaya (1989). Siaya is an area in western Kenya, largely populated by Luo speakers, that is a classic labour power reservoir in the capitalist sector of the Kenyan economy. About 475,000 people live in the region; another 134,000 were born there but live elsewhere, usually as waged workers. Many households in Siaya are dependent on economic contributions from family members who work in Nairobi and elsewhere; the latter are, in return, dependent on food supplies from home. Daily life in Siaya is thus inextricably intertwined with the lives of migrants and the workings of large-scale Kenyan society and, at a further remove, the global economy. The example of Siaya thus shows how local life is interconnected with large-scale social and cultural processes.

First, labour migration has led to significant social and cultural changes locally. Second, the national educational system, the increasing scale of society and the new occupational opportunities have created a Luo middle class and new forms of internal social differentiation.

Third, urban Luos have developed their own political organisations in Nairobi (Parkin 1969), and there are indeed parts of Nairobi which may be analytically included in Luoland. Fourth, Kenyan authorities have reserved an area in the highlands, far from the traditional tribal area of the Luo, for their use. This has led to a further dispersal of the population and, doubtless, a stronger social integration into the Kenyan nation-state.

Fifth, the location of Siaya close to the Ugandan border has provided ample opportunities for local entrepreneurs. From the 1940s onwards, many people from Siaya took well-paid seasonal work in Uganda. During the 1970s, this changed. Under the rule of Idi Amin (1970–79), the Ugandan economy fared poorly and labour migration was no longer an option for Kenyans. Still, the flow of values across the border did continue, this time through smuggling. The Ugandan shilling was unstable, and Kenyan currency was highly valuable in Uganda. Tea, coffee, outboard motors, stereo equipment and other commodities were sold across the border in large quantities, and people in Siaya made large profits.

This border trade, much of it illegal, also had consequences for the larger system it was placed in. Among other things, it was said that the smuggling of petrol from Uganda in the late 1970s was an important contributing factor to the downfall of Idi Amin.

Siaya is in many ways typical of the world in the late twentieth century. Geographical and social mobility have increased, as has social differentiation. Ethnic self-consciousness has been strengthened due to the increased

contact with the outside world (see Chapters 17–19) and the pattern of consumption has changed. The boundaries between Siaya and the external world are no longer unambiguous. In a certain sense, Cohen and Odhiambo write, Siaya exists in Nairobi too; while aspects of Kenya, and of the wider world, exist in Siaya.

#### COLONIALISM AND LOCAL RESPONSES

The encounter with global forces of modernity is worldwide, irreversible and ongoing. Some have argued that processes of modernisation leave few opportunities for local communities to choose their own direction of change. Doubtless, contact between 'Stone Age' peoples and industrial society always has some dramatic and frequently painful aspects. Historically, the encounter between traditional and modern societies has often taken place in the context of colonialism, and large-scale massacres of militarily weaker groups form part of this history. On the other hand, it would seriously underestimate the abilities of 'traditional peoples' if they were to be regarded merely as helpless victims of the avalanche of modernity. The encounter may take various forms and may be conceptualised in several ways.

The Trobriand islanders are often mentioned as a 'traditional' people who have succeeded in incorporating elements of modernity, such as general purpose money, without losing aspects of traditional culture and social organisation which they see as important. Back in the 1920s Malinowski wrote in *Argonauts* that it would probably only be a question of a few years before the kula trade and the ritual exchange of yams vanished, as missionaries and traders had already begun to arrive at Kiriwina in his time. Seventy years later, it seems that important parts of Trobriand culture – including the kula trade and yam exchange – have survived, although the changes have been formidable. A famous expression of the Trobriander ability to incorporate new phenomena into pre-existing meaning structures can be seen in the ethnographic film *Trobriand Cricket* (J.W. Leach and Kildea 1974), which shows that Trobrianders use cricket as a ritual way of communicating enmity and competition between matrilineages, and that they have modified the rules to adapt it to local circumstances. Cricket is thereby used to strengthen traditional clan identity. On the other hand, it is clear that Trobriand culture is far from unchanged after its colonial encounter.

A different kind of reaction to modernisation is represented in the so-called cargo cults of Melanesia and Polynesia (Worsley 1968). These millenary political or religious cults first emerged as a result of increased contact with the outside world after the First World War, and some are much more recent. They have a double aim: to re-establish traditional authority and to achieve control of the immense wealth of the foreigners (mostly Americans). In this, such movements represent, at the ideological level, a happy marriage, as it

#### The Challenge of Multiple Traditions

were, between the old and the new. For as Roosens (1989) has remarked, indigenous peoples may wish to retain important aspects of their tradition, but they also tend to want modern commodities. Often, it must be added, neither aim is achieved.

One famous cargo cult is the John Frum movement in the New Hebrides (Worsley 1968, pp. 152–60). At the cultural level, it can be described as a mixture of Christianity, indigenous religion and consumerism. Many of the members of the movement were nominal Christians but were disappointed by the modest returns of Christianity, which chiefly offered prayers and songs with no tangible consequences. Early in the 1940s therefore, Tanna men began organising meetings where they awaited messages from the prophet John Frum. He was expected to liberate them from the colonial domination of the British, re-establish the outlawed traditional customs, introduce a new currency 'with a coconut stamp' and ensure abundance of material goods (cargo). Among the magical paraphernalia used by the members of the cult was the Bible, which was assumed to have magical properties since it always seemed to accompany the cargo which arrived by ship and plane at the island. The movement was banned and a man suspected of being John Frum was arrested. However, it continued to flourish, and it was still active in the late 1990s.

How should such millenarian movements be understood? Are they merely functional techniques for re-establishing mental balance in periods marked by uncertainty and turbulence? Worsley (1968) does not think so. He rather sees the cults as rational attempts to reform and adapt traditional society to new circumstances. It may of course be said that they do not provide the results called for, but on the other hand the reasoning of the John Frum movement is as logical as the Zande witchcraft institution, seen within the context of local knowledge and experience.

The widespread frustration which is a necessary condition for millenarian movements to arise is generally based on a discrepancy between culturally defined aims and available means: people want, for example, prosperity and political self-determination, but have no established methods for achieving these goals. There is a locally perceived gap between cultural lifestyle ideals and social reality, which is clearly a result of colonialism and increased contacts between 'the West' and indigenous peoples. In this context, it is often retorted that many peoples actually had shorter life expectations and suffered greater material hardships before colonialism. On the other hand, the perception of scarcity is greater today, since people are taught – through school, advertising, mass media and direct encounters – to compare their lives with European or North American middle-class ways of life. Although many Melanesians are better off in absolute terms today than they were a hundred years ago, they may be worse off in relative terms. They have been relatively deprived. Poverty becomes a greater problem the moment wealth is perceived as a definite possibility.

## WAYS OF CONCEPTUALISING ENCOUNTERS

In the social sciences, it has been common to regard encounters between rich, Northern and poor, Southern peoples either in terms of modernisation or in terms of imperialism (see also Chapter 13). The former perspective, exemplified in the work of the development economist Walt Rostow (1965), presupposes a unilinear evolutionary view according to which the poor countries would eventually 'catch up with' the 'developed world'. Economic and political contact between North and South would then be beneficial, since it would lead to the 'development' of the Southern countries.

The other main view, which is influenced by Lenin's and Trotsky's analyses of imperialism, instead emphasises the ways in which the rich countries exploit the poor ones and that economic and political contact does not lead to the 'development' of the latter, but instead to their active underdevelopment. Large state debts, low prices put on the goods the poor countries sell (mostly raw materials) and the extraction of profits by multinational companies are symptoms of this situation of structural inequality (see for instance Frank 1979). Thus the de-colonisation of the post-war decades did not lead to the true independence and emancipation of poor countries, since they were tied up with a global capitalist system in which they were bound to lose out. At the level of culture, moreover, writers influenced by the theory of neo-imperialism have argued that formerly colonised peoples become dependent on the models and knowledge systems of the former colonisers.

Anthropological perspectives on these processes differ, as we have seen, from the models of global systems. Although anthropologists may draw insights from the grand theories of development or underdevelopment, their main concern has been to show local variations in the encounters between different systems of knowledge and cultural practices. Detailed ethnographies describing colonial and postcolonial situations have indicated a need for a more nuanced understanding than that provided by the general models of global relationships. Olivia Harris (1995, pp. 108–13), writing on cultural complexity in Latin America and particularly the Andean area, has proposed a typology depicting variations in the ways in which social encounters between knowledge systems can be conceptualised.

First, she describes the model of mixing or creolisation, sometimes described as syncretism, hybridity or, in Latin America, *mestizaje*. This model, which is still used in research (see Chapter 19), shows how new meanings are generated from the mixing of diverse influences. What Harris sees as problematic about this is that it 'presupposes fixed points of origin for the cultures which then mix' rather than regarding the creation of meaning, in her view more accurately, as an ongoing process with no fixed starting-point or end-point.

The second model is the one of colonisation, which in the South American and Andean context implies European dominance, exploitation and violence towards Indians, including the enforced introduction of Christianity and the Spanish language. This model is strongly dualist and somewhat mechanical in its notion of power and, in Harris's view, draws a rather too strict line between European and Indian culture, reifying ('freezing') both in the act.

Third, an alternative to the rigid model of colonisation implies the attribution of 'more agency to the colonised' and a phrasing of 'the relationship in terms of borrowing'. The traditions remain discrete, but Indian elites (Harris refers particularly to Incas and Mayas) borrow knowledge from the Christians.

The fourth model is 'that of juxtaposition or alternation, where two radically different knowledge systems are both accepted without a direct attempt at integration'. Since, for example, Maya and Christian cosmologies entailed fundamentally different conceptualisations of time and of the past, they could not be mixed, but actors could draw situationally on either.

The fifth way of conceptualising the meeting is 'that of imitation, assimilation or direct identification', whereby persons self-consciously reject their own past and adopt a self-identity and knowledge system they perceive as better or more beneficial to themselves. A conversion from Indian to *mestizo* identity in the Andes, Harris notes, 'usually involves wholesale rejection of Indian identity, in favour of and identification with what is seen as white or Hispanic'.

The sixth and final mode discussed by Harris is that of 'innovation and creativity', where 'attention is firmly removed from contrasted knowledge systems and priority is given to autonomy and independent agency'. Unlike the five other models sketched, this kind of conceptualisation does not focus on origins.

If we look at Pacific cargo cults in relation to this typology, it becomes clear that several of the models may generate some understanding of them, and they are not mutually exclusive. In his classic study, Worsley (1968) emphasised the unequal power entailed by colonialism (the second model), the creativity of the Melanesians in coping with the new circumstances and their self-conscious borrowing of cultural traits (such as the Bible) from the Europeans.

## MEDICAL SYSTEMS

Medical anthropology is a growing sub-discipline dealing with cultural knowledge and practices about the body, health and illness. Commonly, medical anthropologists distinguish between three 'bodies', the personal, the social and the political (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), all of which are socially constructed. Although the body, of course, does in an important sense exist biologically, it is imbued with cultural meanings.

Many medical anthropologists have concentrated their attention on the empirical relationship between 'Western medicine' and 'indigenous medical systems'. Although several practitioners tend to polemicise against Western medicine rather than studying it as a cultural system, the most common perspective among medical anthropologists is probably expressed in Harris's fourth model, which indicates the presence of two (or several) mutually exclusive knowledge systems which remain discrete. As mentioned in the last chapter, Mauritians who suffer from some ailment draw pragmatically on the services of medical personnel who relate to radically different, and frequently contradictory, notions about health, illness and treatment. The 'Western' medical system recognises a distinction between body and mind, for example, which is not deemed relevant within the Indian ayurvedic school. In European societies, it is also clear that many inhabitants – immigrants as well as natives – relate to distinct knowledge systems pragmatically when faced with a practical problem such as a disease, without trying to mix them cognitively or in practice.

A different model, which could perhaps be classified as a creolisation model in Harris's scheme, is represented in Robert Welsh's (1983) work among the Ningerum of New Guinea. The Ningerum are described as a 'very traditional people' who nevertheless have accepted 'Western medicine' without much ado and integrated it into their pre-existing system of knowledge. Traditionally, the Ningerum had a wide repertoire of treatments for different ailments; some complaints could be cured by anyone, while others had to be treated by specialists. Since 1963, the Ningerum have had access to a dispensary staffed by nurses drawing on a Western medical system for diagnosis and treatment. The introduction of new knowledge and new skills was easily accepted, and actively appropriated, by the Ningerum, and moreover it did not seem to alter their traditional practices, which coexisted happily with the Western medical system. Two main factors account for this painless appropriation of new knowledge. First, Ningerum nurses were trained to staff the dispensary, so it was not run by outsiders for very long. Second, the new medical practices did not interfere with the indigenous knowledge system, which – contrary to Western medicine – held that the causes of disease were always external to the body (spirits and ghosts, bad food, etc.). Treatment, in their view, would either stop the external agent or strengthen the body. To the extent that the injections and pills offered by the dispensary had positive effects on the disease, they were easily accepted along with the other kinds of treatment the Ningerum had at their disposal.

The lesson from this example may be that 'meaning is use'. To the Ningerum, it made little difference that Western medicine presupposed a cosmology and knowledge system quite distinct from their own, as long as the treatment functioned satisfactorily. On the other hand, it could be argued that the assimilation of the alien knowledge might be more difficult if Ningerum were to become medical doctors. If so, the cosmologies and not merely the practices would be confronted directly.

Medical anthropology, and the anthropology of the body in a wider sense, has a considerable potential for dealing with several classic anthropological problems in novel ways. It can shed important light on cultural dynamics in polyethnic societies, not least among immigrants in rich countries (Lock 1990); as the New Guinean example showed, it can give fresh perspectives on questions of relativism, including those in relation to development issues; and, moreover, medical anthropological research is at the forefront of cross-cultural research on concepts of personhood (see also Chapter 4).

We now turn to considering an encounter between cultural logics in the context of a development project. The following case adds to the complexity of cultural encounters, and additionally shows the importance of understanding culture and society when attempts are made to implement change through 'aid' or development programmes.

#### AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON 'DEVELOPMENT'

Because of the methodological cultural relativism of the subject, it is difficult for anthropologists to see any intellectual value in a concept of 'development' which defines it, for example, as GNP (gross national product) per capita. Analytically, this kind of model is unacceptably evolutionist and reductionist, since it ranks societies on an ethnocentrically defined ladder as well as disregarding local, culturally specific value judgements. Among cattle nomads in East Africa, it may thus not be rational to produce as many animals as possible, slaughter them and make as big a profit as one can. For several of these groups, it is more highly valued to have a large herd than to have much money. Cattle with unusually large horns may have a special ritual value, and cattle are indispensable as bridewealth.

The cultural relativism inherent in anthropological methodology does not necessarily mean that anthropologists by default will be critical of development projects. It does imply, however, that an awareness of social and cultural variation is necessary for such projects to be meaningful. We have to take into account the fact that notions of 'quality of life', 'progress' and 'development' are locally constructed. The role of anthropologists in development projects has therefore tended to consist of providing a local context for the projects; explaining to the other professions involved (engineers, economists and others) what is unique about the locality in question.

A project in Ecuador, supported by the World Bank and led by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Agriculture, attempted to modernise and 'rationalise' the production of guinea-pigs in the rural highlands (Archetti 1992, Eng. trans. 1997). Guinea-pigs had been bred for centuries, and it was held that an improvement of the techniques for production might improve the standard of living of the producers. The programme nevertheless failed at an

early stage, and an anthropologist, Eduardo Archetti, was hired to explore what had gone wrong.

Traditionally, guinea-pigs were kept inside the local people's huts, more specifically in the kitchen. The feeding of the animals was unsystematic, there was widespread inbreeding and it was difficult to avoid the spread of disease. The development agents suggested that cages should be built, so that the guinea-pigs could be separated by gender, fed regularly and mated in such ways that degeneration could be avoided. In the beginning, the breeders were to receive the technical equipment free of charge. Nonetheless, very few villagers accepted the offer. The Ecuadorian Ministry of Agriculture was disappointed.

Archetti quickly discovered that guinea-pigs were not just defined as any kind of food: they were a *special* kind of food, simultaneously pets and edible animals. They had an important symbolic place in the lives of the villagers. Guinea-pigs were not eaten daily, but only at special occasions such as rites of passage, religious feasts and in connection with healing. The guinea-pig had special qualities (and may in this regard be compared to the pangolin among the Lele). It was also seen as an oracle which could divine the weather and interpret social events. For this reason, it was important to have one's guinea-pigs nearby. Animals which were mildly disfigured, for example because they had an extra toe (possibly as a result of inbreeding), were considered unusually wise creatures.

In addition, it is a fact that the new method of production entailed a considerable extra burden for the already overworked Quechua women. To the women, it was thus not rational to change their techniques of production, since the proposed changes ran contrary to established local values.

Are Europeans and North Americans more rational than the Quechua women? Hardly. As Sahlins (1976) has pointed out in a critique of utilitarianism, North Americans consider themselves rational, but they very rarely eat cats, dogs and horses, which would be a sensible thing to do from a nutritional perspective. The point is not, therefore, whether this or that person is 'rational' or not, but rather that there are different, culturally determined ways of defining rationality or common sense.

#### IS ANTHROPOLOGY INHERENTLY CONSERVATIVE?

After having completed his study of humans and guinea-pigs, Archetti did not draw the simple conclusion that 'cultures must be left alone' or that any attempt at tampering with long-established cultural values is either doomed to fail or is an expression of evil cultural imperialism. However, and this is his point, if such attempts are to be successful it is essential that the actors themselves must agree that the proposed changes serve their interests. Those interests, or aims, may of course change, but at this stage, he concludes, it is

necessary to 'try to understand the guinea-pig in its social and symbolic totality' (Archetti 1992, p. 153).

In relation to questions of development and cultural change, anthropology may be regarded as an inherently conservative discipline. The reason is that both social and cultural anthropology have always (1) emphasised the study of interrelationships and sociocultural wholes, and (2) insisted on an attitude of cultural relativism, according to which any society or culture can, when all is said and done, only be understood in its own terms. From such a vantage-point, it seems only natural that changes instigated from the outside are potentially destructive.

This attitude is altering within the anthropological community. For what, really, are the 'own terms' of a society if women and men, young and old, urbanites and farmers in the same community disagree about the direction of change? In the study of guinea-pig breeding, Archetti points out that there is not just one Ecuadorian ideology about guinea-pigs, but several, and that the conflict between the Ministry of Agriculture and the rural women might well be understood as a conflict within Ecuadorian society. As a consequence, it becomes absolutely necessary to admit that societies or cultures are not tightly integrated, unchanging or closed systems. They change and interact with the outside world. Nevertheless, no matter how 'global' the influences from the outside may be, the responses are always local, and we have seen several examples of local ways of handling imposed changes from the outside world (see also Chapter 19).

Change and sociocultural complexity also present peculiar methodological challenges to anthropology. Some of these problems are today part and parcel of many, if not most, anthropological research projects. This added complexity does not mean that earlier work has become obsolete, but rather that it must be supplemented by new perspectives in both theory and methodology.

#### DE-COLONISING THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL MIND

With anthropological studies of minorities, labour migration, urbanisation, development issues and sociocultural processes in the context of nation-states and subcultures in industrial societies, it may seem as though anthropology is on its way home. The discipline began as the study of 'the Other'; it now increasingly includes the study of 'ourselves', or, to put it more accurately: the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are becoming blurred.

Today anthropological research is increasingly becoming available to its 'objects' as they acquire literacy and as an educated middle class capable of reading anthropological studies develops. This forces researchers to take their 'objects of study' seriously in ways which were formerly unnecessary. This development has also led to a growing understanding of the peculiar historical and ideological circumstances which led to the growth of anthro-

pology, perhaps particularly in Europe. There the discipline entered into new domains along with French and British colonial expansion. The anthropologist, in the view of many, was an accomplice of colonialism, and the professional interest developed in the subject – on both sides of the Atlantic – may be seen to reflect domestic concerns at least as much as it reflects the concerns of 'the Other' (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Kuper 1988). Anthropologists also contribute to the making of history: their perspectives and interpretations contribute to defining the world in a particular way. There are therefore quite a few states in the 'Third World' which tend to deny access to anthropological fieldworkers, not only because the anthropological emphasis on cultural variation is at odds with their development strategies, but also because they see it as their own right to write their own contemporary history. By no means every government in 'the developing world' is content with depictions of their country insisting on the existence of headhunters, gift economies, traditional oral religions or unique initiation rituals among their citizens.

In his famous book *Orientalism*, the historian and literary theorist Edward Said (1978) criticised classic European philological and historical scholarship about Asia for propagating an image of 'the Orient' as mystical and tantalising, but profoundly irrational. If the history of the Orient were to be written by Orientals themselves, the result would be quite different – not least because we speak of an area stretching at least from Turkey to Japan. Said argues that the Western researchers have reproduced stereotypes of 'the Oriental' in their production of myths about themselves, about the 'Western world' as the cradle of progress, rationality and science. Tzvetan Todorov (1989) shows, in a similar vein, how French descriptions of 'primitives' have for centuries closely followed domestic discourse about politics and social philosophy, and he intimates that they indeed tell us more about France than about 'the Other'. This kind of criticism is taken very seriously by anthropologists, yet, as Jean-Claude Galey (1992) argues, Orientalism and anthropology may have shared origins, but they have developed quite distinct methods and ways of conceptualising society and culture. Generally speaking, Orientalism may nevertheless be seen as a fundamental mode of misrepresenting others, to which anthropologists are no less prone than other commentators.

As regards India in particular, Ronald Inden (1990), writing from within 'Orientalism', has documented in great detail how conceptualisations of Indian society and culture have owed more to European preoccupations than to Indian society itself. Veena Das (1994), a member of India's Subaltern Studies Group, (which is concerned with the development of post-colonial social science in the country), argues that India cannot be represented as if the country itself were silent. Unlike their predecessors, she says, contemporary social scientists cannot lay claims to absolute truths, but 'can only insert their voices within a plurality of voices in which all kinds of statements – prescriptive, normative, descriptive, indicative – are waging a

virtual battle about the nature of Indian society and the legitimate space for social sciences in this society' (Das 1994, p. 143).

To be fair, it should be added that many 'metropolitan' anthropologists have in recent years begun to study native history from an insider's perspective. In his magnificent *Europe and the People without History*, Eric Wolf (1982) writes the history of the great 'discoveries' from the perspective of the 'discovered' peoples, and in *Islands of History* Sahlins (1985) compares Polynesian oral versions of history with written versions drawn up by foreigners, showing how they are all cultural interpretations of the same events and that the foreign histories are not necessarily more 'correct' than the native ones. Lévi-Strauss has, in line with this mode of reasoning, argued that history writing is the myth of our time because, like oral myths, it is based on an ideological interpretation of a very limited set of facts from the past (Lévi-Strauss 1966 [1962], Chapters 8–9). History writing, he argued in what was originally a polemic against Jean-Paul Sartre, is not a product of the past, but is rather created by the needs perceived by those who write history.

An analogous statement could be made about anthropology: it is not created by 'the Other', but by the interaction between anthropologists and 'the Other'. A consequence of processes of modernisation and de-colonisation in the core areas of anthropology is the fact that our informants not only increasingly demand to be consulted on the content of our studies of them, but some of them also begin writing their own theoretical texts about their culture, history and society (Archetti 1994). This decentralisation (and some would say de-colonialisation) of the discipline, although admittedly still modest, has led to new challenges for anthropologists in bringing us closer to our objects of study and, in some cases, engaging in a theoretical dialogue with them. Another field of study partly turns the problem of Orientalism on its head, looking instead at non-Western images of the West (Carrier 1995). Notwithstanding obvious power discrepancies, these ideas tend to be no less stereotypical and simplistic than Western notions of 'the Rest'.

There exists an enormous anthropological, sociological and philosophical literature about modernity and modern society. Because of fieldwork, and because of its orientation towards non-European societies, anthropology has contributed important insights to the effect that 'modernity' and 'tradition' are not mutually exclusive, contrary to what Max Weber and other early theorists of modernity held. Modern politics, waged work and a modern state may well exist side by side with ancestral cults and lineage organisation, although there are bound to be tensions and contradictions within such complex societies. It has also been shown that people who live in 'modern' societies can retain important 'traditional' characteristics, such as, for example, nepotism and moral particularism, social cohesion at the community level and a wide range of religious beliefs ranging from virgin birth to sorcery. At the same time, there is no doubt that modernisation entails irreversible social and cultural change.

One seemingly paradoxical result of modernisation in many parts of the world is the emergence of 'traditionalist' movements praising the virtue of 'the ancestral culture'. Like cargo cults, such movements may be interpreted as strategies to come to terms with new social and cultural circumstances; adapting to the new without letting go of the old entirely and thereby creating a sense of continuity with the past in a rapidly changing world. In the following two chapters, we look into some such movements and processes in some detail.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- David Lan: *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*. London: James Currey 1985.
- Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, eds: *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1997.
- Eric Wolf: *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1982.
- Peter Worsley: *The Three Worlds*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1984.

## 17 ETHNICITY

People become aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries: when they encounter other cultures, or when they become aware of other ways of doing things, or merely of contradictions to their own culture.

— Anthony P. Cohen

A well-known musician from Finnmark, the Sami-dominated county in northern Norway, was once asked the following question by a journalist: 'Are you mostly a Sami or mostly a musician?' She tried to be accommodating and gave an answer to the question; if she had been an anthropologist, she would probably have regarded the question as absurd. This chapter, which outlines basic dimensions of ethnicity, explains why.

#### THE CONTEMPORARY UBIQUITY OF ETHNICITY

A cursory glance at major anthropological journals and monographs from, say, 1950 to 2000, will quickly reveal a change in the language of the subject. The terminology has generally become more influenced by hermeneutics and literary theory than by natural science during this period. Words such as 'function' and 'social structure' have become less common. Those like 'class', 'infrastructure' and 'contradiction' had a brief spell of popularity in the 1970s, while terms such as 'discourse', 'resistance' and 'symbolic capital' have steadily grown more popular since the early 1980s. Such terminological changes reflect shifts in the dominant perspectives of the subject, but they may also reflect changes in the outside world. The enormous interest in ethnicity which has developed since the late 1960s, the growing interest in nationalism since the early 1980s, and the enormous number of books with 'global' in the title since about 1990, indicate some such changes. For one thing, a term like 'ethnic group', which has largely replaced that of 'tribe', simultaneously expresses that tribal organisation is no longer common and that anthropology no longer works from a rigid boundary between 'us' and 'them'. For ethnic groups (and nations) are omnipresent and exist in the anthropologist's own society as well as elsewhere.

Looking at the political situation in the world at the end of the twentieth century, the immediate impression is that most of the serious armed conflicts today have an important ethnic dimension. From Punjab to Northern Ireland, from Tibet to Bosnia, from Sri Lanka to the former Soviet Union,