

SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Social anthropology by E. E. Evans-Pritchard

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E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD

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by

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PREFACE

These six lectures were given on the Third Programme of the B.B.C. in the winter of 1950. Except for a few minor verbal alterations they are printed as they were delivered. I thought it unwise to change, or add to, what was written to be spoken within the limits imposed by the medium of expression and for a particular purpose and audience.

Social anthropology is still little more than a name to most people, and I hoped that broadcast talks on the subject would make its scope and methods better known. I trust that their publication as a book will serve the same purpose. As there are few brief introductory guides to social anthropology I believe that this book may also be of use to students in anthropological departments in British and American universities. I have therefore added a short bibliography.

I have expressed many of the ideas in these lectures before, and sometimes in the same language. I am grateful for permission to use them again to the Delegates of the Clarendon Press and to the Editors of *Man*, *Blackfriars*, and *Africa*.¹

I thank Mr. K. O. L. Burridge for assistance in the preparation of the lectures and my colleagues at the Institute of Social Anthropology at Oxford and Mr. T. B. Radley of the B.B.C. for critical comments on them.

E. E. E-P.

¹ *Social Anthropology*, an Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 4 February 1948, the Clarendon Press, 1948; 'Social Anthropology: Past and Present', the Marett Lecture, delivered in Exeter College Hall, Oxford, on 3 June 1950, *Man*, 1950, No. 198; 'Social Anthropology', *Blackfriars*, 1946; 'Applied Anthropology', a lecture given to the Oxford University Anthropological Society on 29 November 1945, *Africa*, 1946.

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I

THE SCOPE OF THE SUBJECT

I shall endeavour in these lectures to give you a general account of what social anthropology is. I am aware that even among well-read laymen there is a good deal of haziness about the subject. The words seem to arouse vague associations of either apes and skulls or strange rites of savages and curious superstitions. I do not think that I shall have any difficulty in convincing you that these associations are misplaced.

My treatment of the subject must be guided by this awareness. I must assume that some of you are frankly ignorant of what social anthropology is, and that others believe it to be what it is not. Those who have some acquaintance with the subject will, I hope, forgive me if, therefore, I discuss it broadly and in what may appear to them an elementary way.

In this, my first, lecture I shall tell you what is the general scope of the subject. In my second and third lectures I shall trace its theoretical development. In my fourth lecture I shall discuss that part of its research we call fieldwork. In my fifth lecture I shall illustrate the development of both theory and fieldwork by giving you some examples of modern studies. In my final lecture I shall discuss the relation of social anthropology to practical affairs.

I shall throughout restrict my account as far as possible to social anthropology in England, chiefly in order to avoid difficulties in presentation, for were I to give also an account of the development of the subject in continental countries and in America I should be compelled so to

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compress the material that what would be gained in comprehensiveness would not compensate for what would be lost in clarity and continuity. This restriction matters less than it would perhaps do in many other fields of learning because social anthropology has to a large extent developed independently in England. I shall, however, mention foreign writers and tendencies where these have markedly affected the thought of English scholars.

Even within these limits it is not easy to give you a clear and simple account of the aims and methods of social anthropology, because there is often lack of agreement about them among social anthropologists themselves. There is, of course, substantial agreement about many matters, but about others there are divergent opinions, and these, as often happens in a small and new subject, tend to become entangled with personalities, for scholars are perhaps more, rather than less, prone than other people to identify themselves with their opinions.

Personal preferences, when it is necessary to express them, are harmless if openly acknowledged. Ambiguities are more dangerous. Social anthropology has a very limited technical vocabulary, so that it has to use everyday language and this, as we all know, is not very precise. Such words as 'society', 'culture', 'custom', 'religion', 'sanction', 'structure', 'function', 'political', and 'democratic' do not always convey the same meaning either to different people or in different contexts. It would be possible for anthropologists to introduce many new words or to give a restricted and technical meaning to words in common use, but apart from the difficulty of getting their colleagues to agree to these usages, were this done on a large scale anthropological writings would soon become a jargon intelligible only to professional scholars. If we have to choose between steering close to