

Preface: The Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth

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The foundation of the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) in 1946, a development originally led by Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown, with the support of Max Gluckman and Meyer Fortes, reflected the ambition of a group of British scholars to develop social anthropology as an autonomous discipline by expanding the number of social anthropology departments in British universities.¹ The Association was both an intellectual project, reflecting a significant degree of consensus within the founding generation about the goals, priorities and scope of the subject, and also a professionalization project, for ASA membership was by invitation and restricted to ‘teachers and research workers in social anthropology’. In this latter respect the ASA contrasted with the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI), the organization that had previously enjoyed a monopoly of promoting anthropology in the British public sphere. RAI has always welcomed ‘anyone with an interest in the subject’ as ordinary members, and its Council also elects ‘serious amateurs’ to its fellowship category alongside people with ‘an academic or professional engagement with the social sciences’.² The intellectual focus on social anthropology also differentiated the ASA from the RAI, which paid equal attention to promoting teaching and research in areas such as biological anthropology and archaeology. Another reason why social anthropologists with university teaching posts deemed a professional association independent of the RAI essential was because they wanted to steer research funding away from researchers working directly for colonial government towards their institutions. The schism was neither profound nor notably acrimonious, since many of the ASA notables continued to play central roles in the RAI as well. Yet it has proved enduring despite the multiplication of forms of collaboration between RAI and ASA and greater interest on the part of some social anthropologists in crossing the boundaries that traditionally separated our disciplinary sub-fields, because the difference in membership base continues to be significant when it comes to speaking in the name of anthropologists as professionals.

Most readers of this book are unlikely to be interested in the parochial question of how the representation and promotion of anthropology is organized in the UK, and if they are, there are plenty of perceptive publications already available to guide them towards a deeper understanding of the historical particularities of British anthropology. As far as Adam Kuper (1996: 176) was concerned, writing the conclusion to the third edition of his classic history of the *Modern*

British School, British social anthropology only constituted a distinct intellectual movement at the international level between 1920 and the start of the 1970s. This is something that Kuper sees as a good thing. On the one hand, British scholars became less insular, opening up to productive new influences from both the United States and Europe, in particular France, while, on the other hand, the core ideas of British-style ethnography-based social anthropology had now diffused to practitioners of anthropology throughout the world. Others, notably Jonathan Spencer, dissent from Kuper's view that there is no longer any means of distinguishing 'British' anthropology from other national anthropological traditions, but Spencer concedes 'in true British spirit' that if British social anthropology has succeeded in maintaining a distinct identity, as a 'relatively small and coherent group of intellectual practitioners', this is not on the basis of continuity in intellectual or empirical focus or theoretical orientation, or, to put it another way, a matter of 'culture', but a matter of institutions, practices and shared rituals (Spencer, 2000: 2–3).

If that is true, then we can at least conclude that the ASA, its annual and decennial conferences, and the publications arising from them, are a central part of the story. But it is a story of continuity through radical transformation. In his introduction to this volume, Richard Fardon charts the evolution of the ASA Monographs Series and the changing intellectual trends that these and other ASA-sponsored volumes reflected, including the trend towards an interdisciplinarity in which anthropologists continue to insist that we have something distinctive and important to bring to debates throughout the humanities, social sciences and even the natural sciences. Yet it is also significant that the ordinary annual meetings of the ASA, as distinct from the decennial conferences, which were always larger and more international in scope, have tended to cease to be intimate conversations between a relatively small group of people in permanent plenary session and become events with multiple simultaneous panels that attract participants from many countries and involve much greater participation by graduate students. These trends are driven by many different factors, including pragmatic issues of funding and fulfilling the ASA's duty to promote the career development of the next generation under increasingly tough conditions, but they do also speak of a certain democratization and opening of doors. The ASA made a third change to its name by adding 'of the UK and' to the earlier addition of 'of the Commonwealth', in recognition of the fact that independent associations had been created in several Commonwealth countries, and ASA is equally welcoming to members from non-Commonwealth countries. But the Association now regularly holds its conferences outside the UK, meeting in Zimbabwe in 1997, Tanzania in 2002, Auckland, in partnership with both its Australian and New Zealand sister associations, in 2008, and New Delhi in 2012. Although the majority of its members are UK-based, ASA is now a much larger and more international organization than it was in the 1950s and 1960s. It is also more inclusive, no longer interested in the kind of sub-disciplinary boundary maintenance that provoked debate about whether any US anthropologists should be admitted to membership, and welcoming to anthropologists who deploy their professional skills in non-academic practitioner roles in the public and private sectors. Yet the expansion within the university system that anthropology has achieved since the 1960s is now threatened with reverse in Britain and the European Union.³ At an historical moment in which efforts to reduce public expenditure have also put the future size and scope of our teaching and research under review in other regions of the world, it seems particularly necessary to launch a publication that demonstrates what cutting-edge work in social anthropology can contribute to understanding the human condition in a changing and more multi-centric world, and which also reflects both the vastly increased range of topics and problems now subject to anthropological enquiry.

The ASA today is still concerned with promoting teaching and research in British universities, and in a climate of constant audit and evaluation that UK-based social anthropologists

managed to turn into an opportunity for some remarkable critical analysis.⁴ But many of the Association's contributions, including its extensive work on ethical issues, are aimed more than ever before at the international development of anthropology,⁵ and this book is another contribution towards this cause. We hope that readers will find little that will offend them as parochially British in a text that has an international authorship, but that they will agree that this volume shows that social anthropology is continuing to move forward towards new horizons and achievements, and for that very reason, still justifies the principles that motivated the founding of our association. We also wish to thank Richard Fardon, Trevor Marchand, Mark Nuttall, Cris Shore, Veronica Strang and Richard Wilson for their wonderful and selfless work as editors, and remember Olivia Harris, who joined the editorial team, but tragically did not live to see the project completed. Lastly, our profound thanks go to all the contributors to this book for donating their royalties to enable the ASA to continue to provide small grants to support the development of the next generation of social anthropologists.

NOTES

1 Other key founding figures included the New Zealander Raymond Firth, who remained an active and dedicated President of the Association from 1973 virtually up until the moment of his death, aged 100, in 2002. A more detailed but short history of the ASA, written by David Mills, is available on the ASA website at <http://www.theasa.org/>. For further discussion of the respective histories of, and relations between, the ASA and the Royal Anthropological Institute, see Mills (2003).

2 See <http://www.therai.org.uk/joining/types-of-affiliation/> for further details.

3 UK resident anthropologists were also the largest single group in the European Association of Social Anthropologists at the end of 2009, with more than double the numbers of any other country apart from Germany. See <http://www.easaonline.org/about/stat.htm> for details.

4 See, for example, Strathern (2000).

5 The ASA has, for example, been an active member of the World Council of Anthropological Associations since Richard Fardon attended its founding meeting in Recife, Brazil, in 2004.

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