

1 The Western Isles 'Community'

The conceptual apparatus of social anthropology has been constructed mainly through the study of non-European tribal and peasant societies. The development of the ethnographic method of British anthropologists took place during fieldwork carried out largely in Africa and Melanesia. With the exception of some important but uncoordinated Community studies like those of Arensberg and Kimball (1940), Frankenberg (1957) and Littlejohn (1963), there have been few attempts to write ethnographies in the British setting. It is no coincidence that these works should be conceptualised as Community studies. The tendency of anthropologists working in European society has been to study rural areas. Consideration of industrial or urban groups is consigned to the realm of sociology. European ethnography seems to be limited to the study of small-scale rural Communities as much like 'primitive' societies as possible. Both the complexities of urban existence and the existence of large resources of historical data apparently overwhelm anthropologists. Boissevain has suggested that they retreat as a result to rural villages, which they study as isolated entities. As far as anthropologists are concerned, Europe has been 'tribalised' (Boissevain, 1975, p. 11).

The notion of Community as an entity is derived from a normative orientation in the work of early sociologists such as Tönnies (1955). He made a distinction between Community and Society. Community is described as the characteristic state of pre-industrial Europe. It is supposedly typified by close-knit, familial, face-to-face relationships. Society, on the other hand, is the outcome of relationships fragmented by advancing industrialisation, with wage labour as the main mode of economic existence. In all concepts of Community there is an implicit criticism of urban, industrial society.

Community studies carried out in Europe have constructed an object based in normative notions and bolstered by assumptions which are taken for granted. They consist of a definable set of texts describing village life in several European nation States, while virtually ignoring the political and economic realities of those states. They tend to assume the existence of contrasts between Community and State, tradition and modernity, rural and urban states of society. In order to isolate the Community as the object of study, they also tend to postulate the existence of mediators or brokers between these contrasted sets (Davis, 1975, pp. 49–50).

Yet the similarities between Community studies should not be taken to

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indicate a homogenous group of texts. Bell and Newby show in their review of the literature that there are distinct differences in ways of thinking about and studying Communities (Bell & Newby, 1971). They have been described using an organic analogy, as if they were in a state of ecological adaptation and internal equilibrium. They have also been studied as microcosms from which generalisations about macro-sociological processes can be made. Closest to the classical formulations of Tönnies are typological or ideal-typical studies, which place a particular Community at some point along an imaginary continuum. The continuum may stretch from rural to urban, from traditional to modern, from simple to multiplex or between any two poles considered crucial by a particular anthropologist. In all cases the Community is conceptualised as an entity in itself, superordinate to either the people 'in' it or the data 'about' it.

Sometimes Community study is regarded as a form of social research, or methodology. In this case it is dependent upon the inductive method. The object of inquiry is not the Community itself but 'the behaviour of persons' living in it (Arensberg & Kimball, 1940, p. xxv). As Bell and Newby point out, it is not defined in space or time, but is simply a sample which tends to be 'found in small localities studied by face-to-face methods' and not in 'large localities studied by survey methods' (Bell & Newby, 1971, p. 60). This reinforces the apparent necessity for European ethnographers to concentrate on remote rural groups.

These confusions result from trying to demarcate Community as a concrete entity or a representative sample. When Stacey attempted an overview of definitions she pointed out that the feeling of belonging to a particular area is often confused by sociologists with arbitrary delimitations like parish boundaries. She suggests that this is due to a normative orientation (Stacey, 1969, p. 135). But even arbitrary or administrative definitions cannot define Community as distinct from tribal society, even though they may provide an anthropologist with the rationalisation for studying a particular locale.

Arensberg and Kimball's ethnography of County Clare in Ireland is the starting point for British Community studies. It describes several Communities and adopts a culturalist stance. The entity of Community in their book is simply an index of generalised Irish cultural tradition (Arensberg & Kimball, 1940, p. xxiii). This cultural tradition is clearly identical with what the authors conceptualise as social structure. Irish society is described as homogenous and virtually insulated from outside influences. The main components of this society are reciprocal rights, stable population and the 'criss-crossing ties of kinship which are the raw material of community life' (ibid, p. 125). Kin ties are frequently described as if they are the framework of Community life. The family is the archetype of the Community, and its moral form is implicitly what is 'good' in that particular conceptualisation of pre-industrial society.

The classic genre of the European ethnographic monograph is therefore structured around a tradition/modernity dichotomy. In its most distinctive

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form this can result in an overvaluation of ideas of Community spirit and the family. Thus Franklin's overview of European rural groups implies that there is some unitary form of social structure which characterises European peasantry. As he describes it, social changes in rural areas are changes in this previously static structure (Franklin, 1971, p. 12). This makes it possible for him to suggest that there is a fundamental antagonism between the industrial system and the typical peasant family enterprise (ibid, p. 14).

What is interesting here is that Franklin's notion, of the family enterprise as the unit of production in rural society, gives his concept of Community an economic as well as a moral base. Such an idea could be compared with the work of Chayanov, who based his definition of the peasantry on the idea of the non-exploitative communal relationships existing within family production and consumption units (Chayanov, 1966, p. 125). But Chayanov was writing in the context of Russian post-revolutionary society. He did not visualise the peasantry as a static ahistorical group. It was clear that the post-revolutionary peasantry was the product of recent Russian history, particularly the emancipation of serfs in 1861. The Populist Russian interpretation at the time was that the peasant way of life had been preserved throughout the transition to socialism. But Chayanov appeared to see the peasantry as a specific economic force moving along a path of increased technology, more intensive agriculture and cooperative organisation (Harrison, 1977, p. 324).

Chayanov's work therefore runs counter to the conventional interpretations of European rural life. It is more usual to stress the supposed decay or demoralisation of a synchronic social structure which has been based on family values and Community spirit. It is rare for a European ethnographer to challenge these assumptions in the way that Davis does in his comparative anthropology of Mediterranean societies. He states that 'Mediterranean social order does not . . . refer to an aboriginal society . . . Nor was it ever a complete social order . . . It is rather, those institutions, customs and practices which result from the conversations and commerce of thousands of years . . .' (Davis, 1977, p. 13).

It is more common for a Community to be studied as isolated from history, as if the entire purpose of the study were accurate description. Emmett's study of a North Wales village shows this tendency (Emmett, 1964). The task she set herself was to form a descriptive analysis of three apparent paradoxes of village life. These were that class distinction did not exist, that poaching was not a response to economic need, and that a high rate of illegitimacy was contrasted with strong chapel disapproval (ibid, pp. xiv–xv). In the construction of her concept of Community she cites the importance of economic factors. These contribute to the stability of family farming enterprises over time, and the extension of kinship ties. Social change in this village is described as merely a residue of the industrial revolution (ibid, p. 131), as if purely material or physical changes, in themselves, promote social change. Thus she writes that 'As transport facilities improve and "village economies" break down, a tendency may be found in

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many places for people to transfer their allegiance from the village to a wider unit' (ibid, p. 129).

Opposed to this ahistorical technique in European ethnography is the dynamic description of decay. This type of text tends to describe the process of disintegration by comparison with an original state. Notable in this genre is Brody's book on the West of Ireland, *Inishkillane* (Brody, 1974). Brody acknowledges historical change, and contends that the unchanging Irish society described by Arensberg and Kimball is a myth, derived from their functionalist orientation (ibid, pp. 5–6). He writes that 'Arensberg and Kimball have a great deal of data, information and insight about Irish traditional life. They do not seem to have a very developed historical sense: it has largely escaped them that the tradition they discuss was scarcely a hundred years old at the time of their work' (ibid, p. 5). But Brody makes some assumptions of his own about the country people and the 'small communities' in which they live. Indeed he refers to the 'contrast between past coherence and present demoralization' (ibid, p. 17), despite avoiding the error of directly opposing tradition and modernity. It might be suggested that what he described as 'past coherence' amounts to the same Irish myth which he suggests is used by Arensberg and Kimball. Yet it could also be argued that the apparent coherence of the past is a necessary conceptualisation for the people of the West of Ireland. That this is possible will be seen later with respect to the Hebrides (p. 110). The myth of past coherence is an important backdrop to the way in which many Hebrideans conceptualise what they see as present discontinuous change.

Brody admits that the term 'demoralization' is a loosely formulated descriptive category rather than a sociological concept (ibid, p. 16). But this is a less critical theoretical component than the status of the community of *Inishkillane*, which is an unreal entity, constructed within the text, rather than the description of a real place existing in the West of Ireland. Brody states that 'strictly speaking, *Inishkillane* does not exist', but adds that 'Unfortunately many hundreds of parishes very much like it do' (ibid, p. xii). *Inishkillane* is like an ideal type and Brody's description of it takes on the character of an artistic rather than scientific account.

Writing about a Community in its historical setting is one problem. Another is to describe the relationship between a given Community and the wider society of which it is a part. As noted above, Communities are often studied as samples, as microcosms of a nation State, its customs and social relationships. A further strategy is to examine the political integration of a Community into the State via the medium of crucial personae, usually referred to as brokers or middlemen. These descriptions oppose the structure of the Community to the structure of the State, enabling the occupational, ideological, political and communicatory links between the two to be studied. But such an opposition is artificial. The occupants of a rural village do not live in one Community structure and view the State as an externally-opposed structure. They live in and experience both simultaneously (Rosenfeld, 1972, p. 50). As Davis points out, the relationship

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between Community and nation should not be examined through the study of mediators between two disparate spheres. What is needed is an anthropological consideration of the operations of government and administration, as much as those of villages and peasantry (Davis, 1975, p. 49).

Within Community studies as a whole, the governmental machinery of the nation State is seldom given much consideration. In her study of North Wales, Emmett shows that the members of the Community are aware of, and extremely sensitive to, British society in the form in which it is experienced in the village, 'English landlords own two-thirds of the land in the parish; the quarries which are in neighbouring parishes are owned by English men or companies . . . the English take the place of the upper, upper-middle or ruling class, nationalism being the way through which class antagonisms are expressed' (Emmett, 1964, pp. 4–5). The Community/State relationship thus appears in an overt political form, as class antagonism between Welsh and English. Similarly, Pitt-Rivers' study of a *pueblo* in Southern Spain implicitly considers the members of this Community as a rural proletariat (Pitt-Rivers, 1954). Yet he describes the peasant's self-conception as a reflection of *pueblo* values, rather than of those of external political groups. The peasant's 'social construction of reality' is visualised as based in the isolated rural Community, even though the actual running of the *pueblo* is the business of outside officials. As Pitt-Rivers describes this Community it is insulated from the external influences which determine many of its rhythms and decisions. It is a portrait of a puppet without strings.

Very few studies show an appreciation of the local significance of national changes. Perhaps the Banbury ethnographies are the sole examples of attempts to examine local politics with respect to national political parties, rather than just in terms of face-to-face power struggles between individuals (Stacey, 1960; Stacey *et al.*, 1975).

All these problems arise because these studies try to conceptualise the reality of a Community from concrete data only. It is not accepted that the data is not *about* a Community, or *derived from* a Community. On the contrary, Community is the logical result of using inductive methods. These considerations have important consequences for a study of the Western Isles. It would not be difficult to describe any one village in the area as a Community. The villages are spatially isolated from each other and each has its own specific characteristics, which are commented on by inhabitants and outsiders alike. Each island in the group likewise has a particular geographical and cultural distinctiveness. Lewis in the north is an area of flat peat moorland, and the people hold strict Protestant beliefs. Barra in the south is a Roman Catholic island, with sandy soil. The inhabitants of Scalpay are known for their fishing skills and prosperity.

The entire string of islands known as the Outer Hebrides or Western Isles is separated from the Inner Hebrides and mainland of Scotland by the Minch. This often hostile channel of stormy sea is thirty miles wide in places, and winter gales frequently isolate the Western Isles from each

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other and the mainland. There are ample grounds for considering the island group as a Community and examining it in the mode of traditional European Community studies. But as has already been stated, this type of ethnography ignores history and the influence of State apparatuses. If we are going to be able to describe and understand the changing culture of the Western Isles this study must be seen as part of a wider sphere. The islands must be regarded as situated within the historical context of the development and operation of Western capitalism.

Most of the material on which this book is based refers to the island of Lewis. Lewis is the northern part of one island in the Hebrides which is divided into two distinct regions – Lewis and Harris – by a band of rocky, mountainous terrain which still forms an effective barrier to communication. Historically, Lewis and Harris were the territories of distinct clans, and until recently they were administered by the separate local authorities of Ross and Cromarty and Inverness-shire respectively. The islands of North and South Uist, Benbecula and Barra, which lie to the south of Harris, were also once divided into different clan territories (Figure 1). These are the main islands in the group, but there are many more – rocky or fertile, inhabited or uninhabited. Of the many hundreds which can be counted, only thirty are now reported to be populated. One of the most isolated is St Kilda, forty miles to the west of Harris. The present population of this island is reported to be sixty-five. Yet the indigenous St Kildans were evacuated in 1929, at their own request. The new settlers on the island are military personnel, working on a missile-tracking station. As will be seen later, the story of the depopulation and resettlement of St Kilda provides a case study for the rest of the Western Isles. It shows how integration into world economy and a nation State combine to render an environment ‘unviable’. It also gives insight into the range of priorities manipulated by central government (Steel, 1975). St Kilda is an image in the rear-view mirror of the Hebrideans which they would surely rather forget.

Although the islands have a varied history of government, they are now a single administrative unit. Since 1974 the Western Isles has been the only political unit in the United Kingdom which is simultaneously a parliamentary constituency and a local authority. Lewis is the largest, and politically and economically the most powerful island. This is partly because Stornoway, the only town in the Hebrides, is situated on Lewis. The town is effectively the administrative centre of the area. It is also the obvious location for new economic enterprises, because of the infrastructure support which it can provide. Thus Lewis possesses powerful psychological advantages.

Because Lewis has been more closely integrated into the economic life of the mainland it could be suggested that it has been subject to more change than the other islands. Certainly Stornoway has most of the amenities one would associate with any small town in the United Kingdom. Compared with the other islands of the Outer Hebrides, Lewis has proved to

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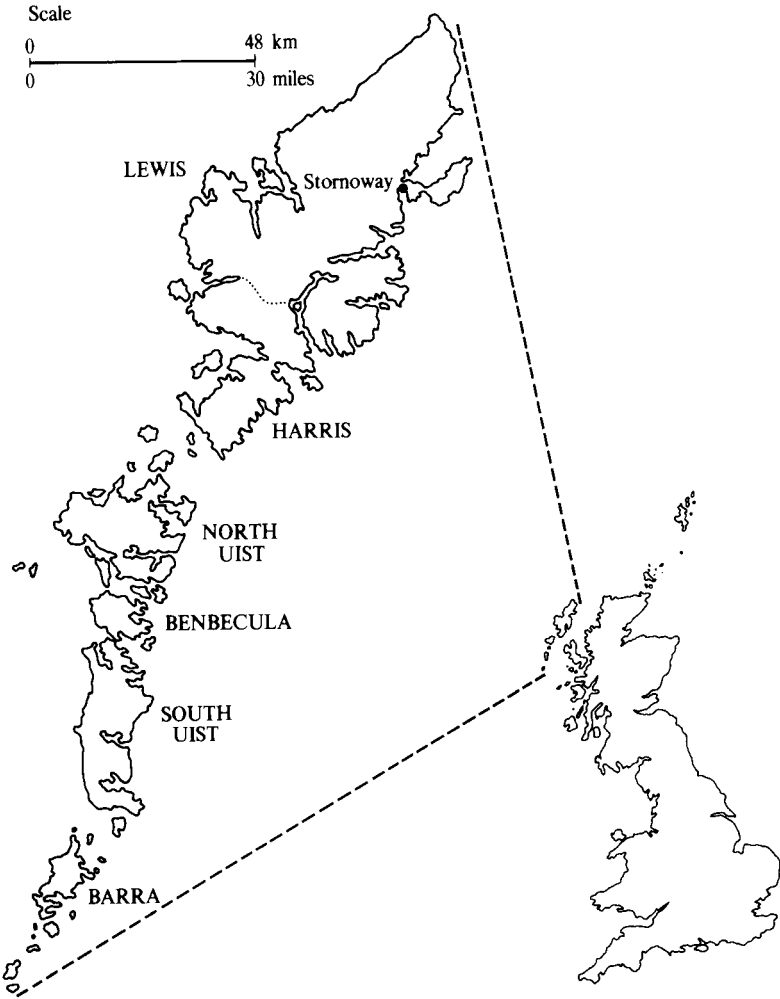


Figure 1. Map of the Western Isles.

have a greater capacity for economic flexibility and adaptation. It is therefore a convenient focus for a study of the changes taking place in the area as a whole. But most statements made about the rural areas of Lewis are applicable in a general sense to the other islands. Any significant distinctions, such as those of religious persuasion, will be indicated. But few of these differences have any noticeable effect upon the overall state of the Western Isles. The political and economic situation in which the inhabitants find themselves renders them uniformly powerless.

Geographically, the Western Isles are founded on Archaean gneiss, or

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granite, some of the oldest base rock in Europe. Throughout the islands bare domes and barren ridges of granite dominate the landscape (Plate 1). The rock is heavily scored and worn down by the glacial action of two ice ages, which have also carried away the volcanic deposits which might have provided the basis of a good soil, leaving only a thin scraping of boulder clay. On all the islands there are some peat deposits. Lewis is spread with a blanket of peat, 230 square miles in extent (Plate 2). This varies in depth up to sixteen feet, although it averages five. Peat is the only mineral resource of any consequence, and has been described as ‘the Lewis ore’ (Hardy, 1919, p. 22). Its main use is as fuel, and continual peat-cutting for this purpose has led to the exposure of potentially arable soil. But extensive rehabilitation of the subsoil has not taken place. This might seem surprising when one compares the Western Isles with areas like the Black Fens of Cambridgeshire where the peat has been reclaimed to form fertile soil. The primary reason is that moorland peat differs considerably from fenland peat. It has accumulated in a wet climate where little evaporation is possible, and from decomposed moss and heather rather than grass and sedge reeds. Moreover, as the islands are based on granite, the peat formed is prone to acidity, which checks the bacterial action necessary for the development of a good soil. Added to this the rainwater which saturates the peat not only fails to neutralise acidity, but also has a leaching effect on any small amounts of alkali present (Astbury, 1958, p. 18).

Despite these difficulties, most of the land which is occupied or cultivated by the inhabitants of the Western Isles has been reclaimed from peat.



Plate 1. Granite boulders scatter the landscape of the island of Scalpay, Harris.

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The exception is the *machair* around the coast, where shell-sand has been blown to form a strip of fertile land. This varies from one furlong to two miles wide and is naturally arable. The west coast of the Hebrides from Barra to Harris is relatively well provided with *machair*. Broad beaches exposed to Atlantic winds provide fine shell-sand which is blown inland. The more rocky and indented west coast of Lewis has a narrower band of *machair*. The eastern coasts of all the islands have even less naturally arable land, but are better provided with small, sheltered bays for fishing-boats. The exception is the Point peninsula to the east of Stornoway. This is formed by a belt of sandstone and has deeper, more fertile soil.

Elsewhere, centuries of peat-digging have exposed the boulder clay, and this forms the basis of a reasonable soil when worked with shell-sand and seaweed. This skinned ground, or *gearraidh*, can form good arable soil, but for the most part it is used for rough grazing. Throughout the islands reclamation and cultivation have tended to take place using the traditional *feannagan*, or lazy-beds. These are small, rectangular, ridge-like formations, about ten feet long by four feet wide, which combine the functions of drainage and fertilisation. They are made by spreading shell-sand upon the required area, digging a drainage ditch around it, laying some seaweed over the sand, and then piling the peat or soil on top. This was and is an efficient method of hand-tilling and draining the small, uneven pockets of ground between granite rocks and boulders. There are still very few places in the Hebrides where land is smooth enough for large-scale ploughing or machine-assisted cultivation (Plate 3). The major exceptions are certain areas, prin-



Plate 2. The barren landscape of a Lewis moorland, the geometric lines show the positions of peat cuttings.

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Plate 3. A dusting of snow shows up the strip pattern of cultivation of crofts in Tolsta. These crofts have a large proportion of good arable land by Lewis standards.

cipally in Lewis, where peat has been ploughed by the Forestry Commission and coniferous trees have been planted.

These forestry developments are of some significance for the landscape of the Western Isles. The most notable feature of the islands from the visitor's point of view is the almost total lack of trees. In winter this contributes to the bleakness of the environment. The Lewis moorlands in particular stretch endlessly in uniform browns under a heavy and lowering grey sky. In summer, when the moors and hills are gay with heather and wild flowers, the lack of trees to break up the horizon gives an impression of space and freedom.

The other dominant feature is the sea. There are few places in the Hebrides where one is not aware of its presence. The Atlantic breaks incessantly on the western shores, and long sea lochs everywhere penetrate deeply in to the land. Throughout the islands large and small freshwater lochs are spread over moorland and between hillsides, reflecting the ceaseless changes of sky and clouds.

Few settlements besides Stornoway are of any considerable size. Most houses have only a single storey, with perhaps a gable room set into the roof. They are scattered along the narrow roads, and villages are usually separated from each other by tracts of moorland. The houses seem inconsequential compared to the landscape of which they are a part. For the most part the land appears unenclosed. There are few hedges. In some places the land around the villages is divided by low stone walls, but the