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Introduction

This is a book about family farms and farming families. It is focussed upon eastern Finland, where I carried out some fifteen months of fieldwork between 1980 and 1982, but its relevance is not simply restricted to that area. From very early times until quite recently, a large proportion of the world's population has engaged in family farming, and it is probable that a small majority still does so despite the pace and spread of industrialisation. Of course, not all family farming systems are the same. They vary greatly in the details of their property system and inheritance patterns, and in the size and structure of their working units. They also differ in the technology which is available to them and, partly concomitant with this, in the degree and form of their involvement in a wider polity and economy. At the same time there are, not surprisingly, a number of broad similarities between many if not all such farming systems, based as they are upon a combination of land holdings and collaborating groups of kin. Such similarities and differences have been of interest to me in my work in Finland, not least because my previous research was carried out among farming families in the very different setting of East Africa.¹

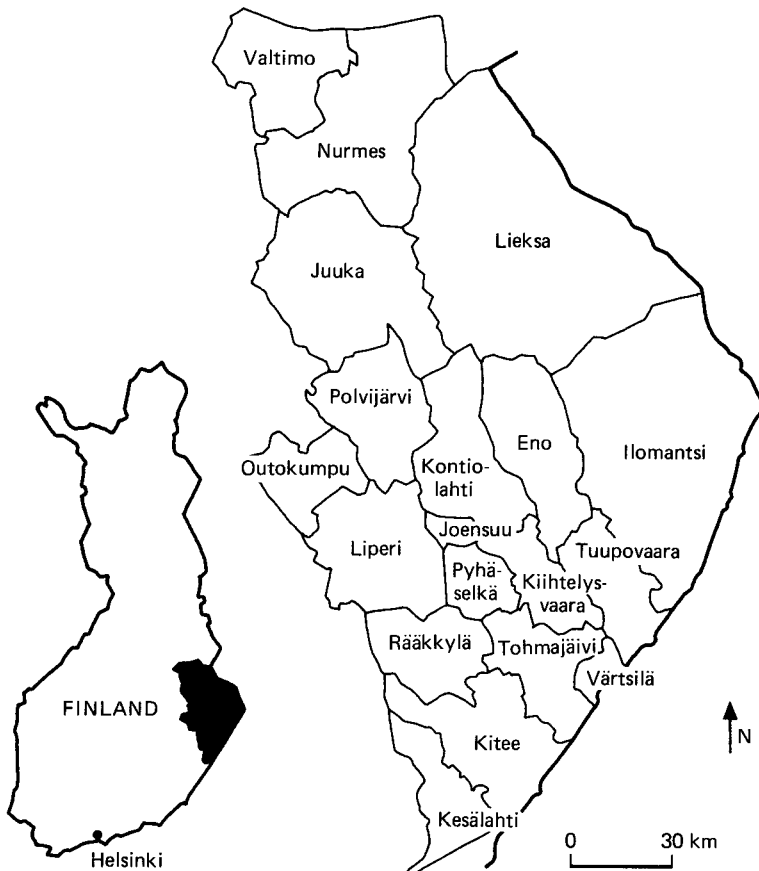
As in much of the developed world, the level of mechanisation in Finnish farming is noticeably high, and this has crucial implications for the size of unit that can manage a viable farm under modern economic conditions in that country. To Tanzanian villagers, Finnish farmers would appear quite radically different from themselves in this and many other fundamental ways. They are relatively prosperous, with fairly ready access to substantial credit. They farm comparatively large areas of land, and perhaps more remarkably, they own the land they farm. Yet, while it would be obviously wrong to underplay these features, or ignore the radical climatic differences

¹ See Abrahams (1967 and 1981).

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involved, there are two main ways in which the contrast they present needs to be qualified. Firstly, Finnish agriculture has been subjected to immense change and disturbance both in recent and in earlier decades. The high levels of mechanisation are quite new, especially in the more remote parts of the country such as North Karelia, where I worked. Many farmers whom I visited in 1980 had tractors and other machinery on their farms, and telephones, electricity and running water in their homes. Most of them also had a car. Yet the situation was rather different even ten years before, and such things were rarities in many parts of the area not long before that. The second point is that the modern developments in question have themselves been responsible for the preservation and indeed the re-creation of a true family farming system. Husband and wife are a key collaborative unit, full-time hired labour is rare, and there are serious problems in combining the life process of a farm with the developmental cycle of its associated family

Fig. 1 Finland and North Karelia



and the life histories of that family's members. Much of this would be more recognisable to many Tanzanian villagers, as too would the unremitting demands for work and attention which land and herds make upon those who are ensnared in dependence on them for their livelihood.

Fieldwork among one's affines

A variety of reasons lay behind my choice of Finland as a place to study these and other issues. Shortly after my first Tanzanian fieldwork, I received and stored away a friendly warning from a remarkable old anthropologist, Lord Raglan, 'not to be a Nyamwezi all your life'. The idea of complementing work in Africa with work in Europe offered an attractive challenge, and Finland had begun to interest me more generally. Like many other Englishmen with Finnish academic interests, I am married to a Finn, and this has been a major stimulus to extend my research experience in that particular direction.

My fieldwork was in fact conducted in the village where my wife's father was born, and I have been sharply conscious of the fact of doing anthropology among my affines. There is, however, also a more figurative and more interesting sense in which Finland has 'affinal' qualities for an English anthropologist. For Finnish and other European areas of society and culture can be thought of as a sort of half-way house between 'us/self' and 'them/other'. Such intermediate affinal zones, according to some of our own anthropological theories, tend to be apt foci of special behaviour in which taboos, joking and avoidance figure prominently, and it is possible that they may present us in some contexts with the worst of both worlds rather than the best.²

Actual affinity in itself created little difficulty for my work, and in many ways it was a help. Finding my first accommodation on a local farm (that of my wife's first cousin) and getting to know local people through informal contacts were much easier than they would have been for a total stranger. Similarly, the fact that my wife and two of our children were eventually able to join me for a substantial period was particularly valuable in these circumstances. Predictably enough, my wife was able to correct or amplify a number of my own impressions in addition to collecting interesting material herself. Her relatives also made a great deal of family 'archival' material available. This mainly took the form of detailed records of

² On boundaries and taboo see Douglas (1966) and Leach (1976). For other discussions of anthropology in home or near-home areas see Cole (1977) and papers by Hastrup, Hann and others in Jackson (1987). For other studies of rural Finland by British and American authors, in some cases with affinal or descent links to the country, see Gould (1988), Ingold (1984 and 1988), Jarvenpa (1988), Lander (1976) and Roberts (1989). For Finnish village studies by Finns see Ahponen (1979), Sarmela (1984), Suolinna and Sinikara (1986), Tommila and Heervä (1980) and papers by Petrisalo and Siiskonen in Ingold (1988).

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inheritance and legal documents concerning the buying and selling of land in the village. Such material was helpful in itself, for the information it contained, and also for the way in which it facilitated access to comparable documents in other families. Not that people were reluctant to provide material of this sort; but my knowledge of its existence and its likely content, and my ability to express a more informed interest in such things, all eased the process of obtaining it. It is of course clear from the experience of others that fieldwork by non-Finns in rural Finland need not turn on such direct connections to a particular community, but it is certainly true that they aided my own penetration into a village whose members are often rather shy of strangers, though by no means hostile to them.

Such help notwithstanding, it is obvious that close connection with, and some dependence on, a particular set of interrelated persons can have limiting effects on the collection and interpretation of fieldwork material. Such people, and others in their personal networks, may hold a particular range of political and religious views, and they may have a particular economic status which could make it difficult to obtain sufficiently broad coverage on various issues. Access to reports on conflicts in which they have been involved could also be unhelpfully restricted.

Dangers of this sort are to some degree a hazard in intensive fieldwork anywhere, and they were certainly present in my Finnish work. However, once I had become more widely known within the village, I was fortunate enough to be able to stay for several months upon a non-related farm, and this provided access to a wider range of information than I might otherwise have gathered. It also gave a welcome opportunity to be a little more myself and a little less my wife's husband, though it would be misleading to lay great stress on the need for this. More generally, the people I got to know reasonably well in the village represented a fair range of experience and viewpoints with regard to many issues in which I was interested. It is true that many, though by no means all, of those I knew were Centre Party (formerly Agrarian League) supporters, but this was true of a majority of farmers in the area in any case.

It has in fact probably been my tendency to concentrate attention upon farming families, rather than involvement with affines and their friends as such, which has led to most biases in my material. I have a broader and more detailed knowledge of the daily lives and problems of such families than about those of some other sections of the community such as timber or electrical workers. It is also fair to say that I have in many contexts learned to see the world of Finnish villages, communes and wider society through the eyes of farmers, and that I have developed a great deal of sympathy towards them in the process. This sort of bias is, of course, a widespread and by no means wholly regrettable part of most fieldwork experience. It will be

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clear from my discussion in the book that I have been much impressed by the creative spirit of Finnish farming, and by the special combination of economy and family which it presents. I was also impressed by the strong work ethic which is evident in many farming families. At the same time, though, I hope to have seen at least a little beyond such special viewpoints, so as to perceive, for example, that the work ethic may mask the sometimes overwhelming influence of structural forces on the farming sector. I have also been aware that agriculture is a live political issue in Finland, and that farmers' attitudes and self-perceptions may constitute part of their political armoury in the struggle for the allocation of national resources.

Some other problems of 'affinal' fieldwork were less obvious than these, and more difficult to cope with. In 1957, when I first applied to do research in eastern Africa, Audrey Richards asked me if I suffered from shyness, and I replied truthfully, though not especially helpfully, that it depended on the circumstances. Shyness turned out not to be a problem in my African research, but it did affect me during work in Finland, and I am not wholly certain why this was the case. A desire not to worry or annoy people to whom I was connected, and fear of making a fool of myself in front of them were clearly part of the problem. But I suspect too that my special links were partly absorbed into a more general awareness of European commonalities coupled with a self-conscious feeling that I was all the time being judged by canons into which I have myself been deeply socialised. And such feelings were, I think, reinforced by a further consideration. A social anthropologist who wants to work in an African country such as Tanzania needs permission to do so from various governmental and academic institutions. By the time he (or she) reaches a village, he is armed with several high-powered letters authorising the invasion of the villagers' lives. He is also likely to possess considerable curiosity value, and may well serve as a point of access for villagers to scarce goods and useful services, such as letter-writing, medicines and transport. This was epitomised for me in a public debate which took place during my first Tanzanian fieldwork. Some people were complaining about the way in which the local government bus was monopolised by chiefs and other officials, when a man from my own village spoke up. 'I don't understand this fuss', he said embarrassingly. 'Our European's Land Rover seems quite enough for us'. If during my African fieldwork I succeeded eventually in becoming accepted in the community and in making genuine friendships with some villagers, I suspect that this was largely achieved from a position of relative strength deriving from the sorts of factors I have outlined.

Fieldwork in Finland, and in many other European countries, is very different. No official research permission is required, though it is useful in other ways to liaise with a university. If you wish to work in a Finnish

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village, there is little more to do than simply invite yourself there and hope that people will co-operate. Connections like my own were naturally valuable in this situation. Overall, however, it is easy to feel that you are intruding into the lives of other people to whom you can offer relatively little in return. This feeling of intrusion is intensified by the tendency for so much social life to take place in private space behind closed, solidly built doors. The contrast here with open-style living in Africa is extremely sharp. Far from worrying about gaining access to the life of others, the problem in a Tanzanian village is often one of defining a bounded area of personal space for oneself.

Diffidence and self-consciousness are not wholly bad qualities in an anthropologist, but the inhibitions they create have a deep-seated subjective force which may hinder research to a greater degree than is objectively warranted. During my Finnish fieldwork, I largely kept away from alcohol and heavy drinkers. This stemmed partly from the farming bias in my work, since drinking and successful farming rarely mix well in that area. I also found it hard enough to cope with the complexities and vagaries of sober North Karelian conversation, let alone its drunken counterpart, and it was not clear that the painful expenditure of time in possibly morose drunken company would be very rewarding. It also seemed likely that such behaviour would embarrass people, including affines, with whom I was living and working, and this too was a strong deterrent. Yet it seems in retrospect quite possible that keeping drunken company, as part of research, would have been less embarrassing to my affines and their friends than I assumed. Research is a well-known activity in Finland, and it is probably more respected in the Finnish countryside than in most sections of society in Britain. There are also other contexts where I know more certainly that I was strongly yet mistakenly inhibited from doing things which I felt might give offence or be intrusive. I rarely tape-recorded interviews and conversations, in spite of advice that some people might actually enjoy being recorded – though I suspect that anxieties about tripping up in my wife's language may have played a part here too. I was also hesitant to take funeral photographs, despite the fact that this was to some degree an irrational interpolation of my own cultural experience. For Finnish funerals are probably the most intensively photographed of their rites of passage.

If self-deception was a fieldwork hazard, so too was a more rational awareness that ignorance gave one plenty to be shy about. A European anthropologist going into Tanzania is a peculiar mixture of sophistication and naïvety. Although coming from a quite different cultural background, he is likely to know a substantial amount about such varied institutions as kinship, age-organisation, chiefship, *ujamaa* and ancestor-worship. And if

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he knows a lot less about some other things, he can at least take comfort from the fact that most other people – apart, of course, from the local population he is studying – are in the same predicament. Moreover, what the local people know is largely unwritten, and the anthropologist becomes a possibly important instrument for the documentation and dissemination of this local knowledge. He is usually working in a relatively unexplored field, and he eventually acquires a wide-ranging if localised and patchy expertise which few others inside or outside the society can match. Theoretical preconceptions may distort his vision – he may discover lineages or dual organisation or class where others might be harder pressed to see them – but he has been taught to beware of this, and the linguistic and cultural otherness of the society is expected to provide a certain amount of shock-therapy for such Procrustean tendencies.

The situation of a visiting English anthropologist in Finland is quite different. Far more is known – though not usually as a matter of course to an Englishman, despite his common European background – and far more has been recorded about Finnish rural society than about Tanzanian villages. There is a large literature in the form of bulky academic monographs by historians and geographers, numerous official and semi-official publications, novels, national and local newspapers, and public records, which amounts to many millions of some of the longest words in Europe. The ‘otherness’ of the Finnish language may help, as I have hoped it would, to sharpen my perceptions of the culture and society, but notwithstanding my reasonable competence in it, it has often seemed to loom more saliently as a barrier between me and the mass of information available on the past and present of Finland, and its regions and villages. I must confess that I have at times cursed the existence, completeness and accessibility of civil censuses and parish records, and I have listened with some envy to colleagues in Britain who have complained about the hundred-year census rule or the refusal of a vicar to make relatively sparse local records available to them. And, of course, there is not simply one form of ‘other’ language to be dealt with. The rich inventiveness of rural dialect has somehow to be handled alongside the often turgid academic prose of larger and usually unindexed *magna opera*, which in turn differs from the more archaic language of early records – some of which may be in Swedish – and from the more irritating and opaque forms of journalese.

The welter of available contemporary and historical material on everything from forestry to politics and from household composition to agricultural co-operatives is not the only point of contrast between Tanzania and Finland in this context. Finland’s status as a relatively recently independent nation which is anxious to stand up to comparison with Sweden and other northern countries has been an important stimulus to cultural develop-

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ments there. Finnish villagers are highly literate, and they take a keen and well-informed interest in their own society and culture and in the world at large. They are regular newspaper readers and, increasingly, television viewers, as equally at home with the world news and the Muppet Show as with programmes on the refuse disposal problems of Helsinki suburbs – and, perhaps more surprisingly, they are positively interested in all of them. Rural depopulation is both an important and a relatively recent phenomenon in Finland; and the process of industrialisation, urbanisation and emigration which have accompanied it mean that many villagers have siblings and children living in Finnish and Swedish towns, and further afield than that, as factory workers, office workers, shop assistants, doctors, teachers, engineers and even the odd diplomat. They often keep in quite close contact with these relatives by letter and by telephone, and in many cases they see them at least every summer when they come back to the village for a holiday. So villagers keep well informed about a wide range of issues, events and places, and talk knowledgeably about them as part of their everyday interests; and an anthropologist or other visitor cannot hope to cope simply on the basis of intensive local knowledge, which is itself quite difficult to acquire. At the same time, many urban dwellers, in a wide range of occupations and professions, know a great deal at first hand about rural life, to which they retain ties both through their relationships with villagers and, quite often, through their ownership of forest or other land which was part of the farm on which they grew up. Here, I may add, Tanzania seems more akin to Britain than to Finland despite the rural origins of many urban Tanzanians. For in Britain the longstanding separation of urban and rural society means that many townsfolk are not well informed about the details of rural society, and the anthropologist and sociologist in the countryside is still something of an explorer. In Tanzania, on the other hand, local ethnic diversity, coupled with the alienation from the countryside which many educated urban dwellers have experienced, may well allow a visiting anthropologist to know far more about a particular rural area than most of the urban population he encounters.

In brief, a foreign anthropologist in Finland has to work hard to try to keep up with even a reasonable proportion of the wide range of interests and information which villagers take for granted. He also has to read as widely as he can to try to ensure that he knows as much as possible of what is worth knowing for his work. If he fails to do this, he runs much greater risks than he would in most African contexts of appearing unacceptably ignorant to many people, including villagers and academics, or at best of spending a long time getting to know what they all know already. There is perhaps some consolation to be taken from the fact that many non-Finnish

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readers will know even less than he does, but this alone scarcely satisfies the wish to make a genuinely valuable contribution to scholarship.

High rates of literacy and the keen interest of Finns in their country and what is said of it have special implications too for confidentiality. Villagers are keen that I should write about them and their community, and many would gladly be named as progressive farmers or committee members. Also, as I earlier implied, official attitudes to confidentiality differ from those which prevail in Britain. Less information is available on some matters, such as suicides, because of the absence of public inquests. On the other hand, civil census material is much more readily available, and I was also granted access to local parish records. This fits both with positive attitudes towards research and with fairly low levels of anxiety about abuse of personal information.

Nevertheless, publication on some topics has its problems. Much more than is the case in many fieldwork areas, I must assume that what I write on Finland may be read by villagers or their relatives, and by others elsewhere in the country. This clearly places a severe constraint on what I write about particular individuals and how I use material which people have passed on to me in confidence. Of course, indiscretions and other issues of research ethics are a problem anywhere, but I have been especially conscious of them in my Finnish work, and by no means only because of my affinal links.³ Nor is the matter simply a local-level one, though it is true that the importance of local communities is probably enhanced in a country with a relatively small population. Finnish agriculture is a political 'hot potato' at the national level, and there are many who believe that farming families milk the state each time they milk their cows. How such families manage their relations with the state and with the formal economic sector is both theoretically significant for my work and also potentially, at least in some cases, a quite 'sensitive' political question.

There is no ideal solution to these problems, and I have adopted an imperfect compromise which I hope resolves more difficulties than it causes. In keeping with the wish of villagers to see their community 'on the map', I have not felt it right or worth while to try to conceal the identity of the village where I worked, and I have used its real name throughout the book. For similar reasons, I have not always wished to disguise the identity of individual villagers, and I have occasionally named some in the text. At the same time, however, I have been conscious of the need to respect their confidence and protect their privacy from too much outside curiosity on some matters. I have therefore preserved their anonymity in some cases,

³ Barnes (1979) provides a wide-ranging discussion of ethical issues in different kinds of social research.

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and I have also referred to some of them simply by their initials in contexts where this seems desirable.

A far country

If Finns know Finland too well for the comfort of a visiting anthropologist, the reverse, as I have hinted, seems more likely to be true of many English readers. There is a substantial range of English writings on the country and its institutions, but most of them are little read, to judge by the variety of garbled images which I have met in conversation.⁴ Of course, most people know about the lakes and forests and Sibelius. Sauna too is well known, though it seems to evoke ideas of mild masochism, sexuality and alcohol rather than a highly efficient and pleasantly sociable form of bathing and relaxation. Politically, many seem to assume that the country is part of the Eastern Bloc, while others are hard pressed to distinguish it from Sweden. Its language is commonly known to be 'strange', and as such may be vaguely grouped with Basque or other 'oddities'. In addition to fine athletes and ski jumpers, it is thought of as the home of Lapps and Father Christmas, and their reindeer.

In fact, Finland is an independent multi-party democracy, with an elected Parliament and President. Elections both to Parliament and for seats on local councils are contested by a wide range of parties through a system of proportional representation. The country has a prosperous Western-style economy which nowadays comprises strongly developed industrial and tertiary sectors, with expanding interests in Britain and elsewhere, in addition to agriculture. Finnish belongs to the Finno-Ugric group of languages, of which the best-known other member is Hungarian. Finnish and Hungarian are, however, only distantly related to each other, and the Karelian dialects and Estonian in the Soviet Union are much closer to Finnish. For historical reasons, the country's closest cultural affinities are with Sweden, and a small proportion of Finns (c. 6 per cent) speak Swedish as their mother language. As I discuss in Chapter 2, there has been a long and often conflict-ridden history of links with Russia, which has culminated in the forging of a special relationship of mutual respect and non-aggression. There are reindeer-herding Lapps in the north, but the vast

⁴ Among the most useful English-language general works on Finland are Hall (1957), Leskinen (1979), Stenius (1963) and Toivola (1960). Allardt (1985) gives an outstanding and succinct account of many of the main features of Finnish society. Mead, who has written authoritatively on a variety of aspects of the country's human geography and culture, has also valuably documented the many images and misrepresentations of the country and its people in English fiction and other literature. See Mead (1958, 1963 and 1982) and also Mead and Smeds (1967). For references to historical works in English, see Chapter 2.