

## EDMUND LEACH AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL LIFE

Stanley J. Tambiah discusses the life of Edmund Leach (1910–89), one of Britain’s foremost social and cultural anthropologists, and a man of extraordinary versatility, originality, and intellectual breadth. His substantial contributions to anthropology deal with topics including kinship and social organization, hill tribes and valley peoples, land tenure and peasant economy, aesthetics, British structural-functional methodology, the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, biblical narratives and the myths of classical Greece. Leach was not wedded to any settled orthodoxy: what makes his work exciting is his experimentation with new ideas and his expansions of the horizons of the discipline. His distinctive view of the comparative method allows him to transcend the stale dichotomy between “them primitives” and “us moderns,” finding instead a dialectic between “us” and “them” which opens up the possibility for illuminating common human propensities and capacities.

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STANLEY J. TAMBIAH



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## Preface

What was the nature of my relationship to Edmund Leach, and what circumstances led me to compose an intellectual biography of him?

I first met Leach in 1956 at the University of Peradeniya in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). He had come for a second brief visit to Pul Eliya village, where he had done his fieldwork in 1954, presumably to gain some additional information for the monograph he was writing. I had recently returned to Sri Lanka in 1955 to resume my academic post at the University, after completing my Ph.D. program at Cornell University (1952–54) in what was then a joint department of sociology, anthropology, and social psychology. The chairman of my doctoral committee was the sociologist Robin Williams Jr., who had introduced me to the writings of Max Weber, Durkheim, Talcott Parsons (and many other sociologists dead and living). I had some training in survey techniques and quantitative analysis, and on the anthropological side I had read many ethnographic texts on South and Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup>

At that brief, but as it turned out fateful, meeting at Peradeniya, Leach asked me what research I was doing. I informed him about an economic survey which Dr. N.K. Sarkar (economist and statistician) and I had conducted in a district called Pata Dumbara in the Central Province, and I gave him a draft of an essay on the relation between kinship, residence, and land tenure which was based on qualitative anthropological case studies of selected households collected during pilot studies and the survey itself. Leach returned to Cambridge and wrote to me that he liked the essay, and he undertook the task of editing it, and himself presented it for publication in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Among my other instructors at Cornell I would especially mention Bryce Ryan (who had introduced me to sociology and anthropology, and to fieldwork, at the University of Ceylon during my undergraduate days, and was later on the Cornell faculty), Morris Opler, Lauriston Sharp, Peter Blau, and Ed Suchman.

<sup>2</sup> S.J. Tambiah, "The Structure of Kinship and Its Relationship to Land Possession and Residence in Pata Dumbara, Central Ceylon," *JRAI*, vol. 88, no. 1, 1958, pp. 21–44.

But this celebratory mood was deflated by another act of Leach's. The Pata Dumbara quantitative survey data were published by N.K. Sarkar and myself in 1957 under the title *The Disintegrating Village: Report of a Socio-Economic Survey*.<sup>3</sup> To my surprise, Leach published in 1958 a forceful critique of this survey in a Sri Lankan journal.<sup>4</sup> While complimenting both authors as being by instinct first-class anthropologists, he characterized the survey as an example of quantitative method, a statistical investigation predicated on taking individuals as units of population which misses out a wide range of sociological phenomena which are intrinsically inaccessible to statistical investigation of any kind, especially systems of relationship between persons. A social field does not consist of units of population but of persons in relation to one another.<sup>5</sup> He did however concede that the truths an anthropologist who works in a small geographical area (such as Pul Eliya) discovers are particular truths and that if scholars hoped to achieve conclusions which have general validity, the sociologist and the anthropologist ought to act as a team.<sup>6</sup>

I found Leach's comments and his explication of the anthropological perspective for the most part cogent and persuasive, and I wrote him a letter which must have conveyed my distress; back came his unexpected reply that I should write a rebuttal without pulling any punches, a piece of advice unlikely to be followed by a young academic.<sup>7</sup>

In any event, the critique reinforced and activated the decision I had arrived at that the anthropological method of field study was necessary to get deeply into the understanding of networks of kinship, caste, and patronage relationships, and while still employing questionnaires for eliciting certain kinds of information, I would engage in fieldwork as the anthropologist understood it. By 1958, in collaboration with Gananath Obeyesekere and a few students, I had begun an anthropological study of a somewhat remote village in the Laggala district (Central Province). On the basis of this fieldwork I had composed by 1959–60 a long essay

<sup>3</sup> N.K. Sarkar and S.J. Tambiah. *The Disintegrating Village: Report of a Socio-Economic Survey*. Ceylon University Press, 1957.

<sup>4</sup> E.R. Leach, "An Anthropologist's Reflections on a Social Survey," *The Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1958, pp. 9–20. This essay was reprinted in D.G. Jongmans and P.C.W. Gutkind (eds.), *Anthropologists in the Field*, Assen: Van Gorcum, 1967, pp. 75–88. In this reprint Leach inserted this footnote: "In 1958, when this was written Dr. Tambiah was in fact a lecturer in *Sociology* in the university of Ceylon, in 1966 he is a lecturer in *Social Anthropology* in the University of Cambridge and a close friend and colleague of the author" (p. 85).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.      <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> It was some years later, when I came to know Leach's writings better, that I realized that throughout his career he expressed a strong antipathy to statistical studies based on survey data.



on polyandry in this region, and had given it to the anthropologist Von Furer-Heimendorf, who after a lapse of some six years (1966) published it in an edited volume.<sup>8</sup>

In the meantime, in 1960, I had departed to Thailand to teach and to do research there as a UNESCO technical assistance expert attached to a research institute jointly founded by UNESCO and the government of Thailand.<sup>9</sup> My principal task was to lead a team engaged in anthropological research in three rural communities in central, northeast, and north Thailand.

In 1962, while in Thailand, I received a letter from Leach inquiring whether I would like to come to Cambridge University for one year on a Smuts Commonwealth Fellowship awarded by the University. When I expressed interest, three persons collaborated to have me elected. They were Leach of King's College; B.H. Farmer of St. John's College, a geographer who had written a major work on peasant colonization in Ceylon,<sup>10</sup> whom I had previously met there; and Sir Ivor Jennings, Master of Trinity Hall, who had previously been Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ceylon when I was an undergraduate there.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time Farmer got me elected as a Commonwealth Fellow of St. John's College,<sup>12</sup> which privilege was accompanied by a fine apartment in the Front Court, and dining rights at the High Table. I had a great time attending lectures and seminars in the Department, and seminars at the Centre for South Asian Studies situated on Laundress Lane and presided over by Farmer.

When my two fellowships concluded in 1964, Meyer Fortes, William Wyse Professor of Anthropology, offered me an assistant lectureship

<sup>8</sup> S.J. Tambiah, "Polyandry in Ceylon," in Christoph Von Furer-Haimendorf (ed.), *Caste and Kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon*, Asia Publishing House, 1966. Leach, who had earlier in 1955 published a short essay entitled "Polyandry, Inheritance and the Definition of Marriage with Particular Reference to Sinhalese customary law," *Man*, vol. 55, 1955, pp. 182–86, expressed to me his appreciation of my essay based on detailed ethnographic data.

<sup>9</sup> The Bangkok Institute of Child Research located at the Prasarnmitr Teachers College, now Sri Nakarinvit University.

<sup>10</sup> B.H. Farmer, *Pioneer Peasant Colonisation in Ceylon: A Study in Asian Agrarian Problems*, London: Oxford University Press, 1957. I had myself engaged in a study of peasant colonization in the Gal Oya Development Project in 1956, and at the request of Farmer and Leach written a paper entitled "Agricultural Extension and Obstacles to Improved Agriculture in Gal Oya Peasant Colonisation Scheme" which was presented by Leach on my behalf at the Second International Conference of Economic, History, Aix-en-Provence, 1962.

<sup>11</sup> Jennings was at the time of my election also chair of the Smuts Fellowship Committee.

<sup>12</sup> It was at St. John's that I met Jack Goody, a Fellow of the College, and a distinguished anthropologist, whose friendship I have valued over the years.

in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology.<sup>13</sup> Soon I was fortunate to become a founding Fellow of Clare Hall, a new postgraduate institution established by Clare College. Leach was elected Provost of King's College in 1966; three years later he sponsored my election as a Fellow of King's, and I served there for a few years as Tutor for Graduate Students and Director of Studies in Social Anthropology.<sup>14</sup> In 1973, after spending ten years in Cambridge, I left for the United States to take up a position as tenured full Professor at the University of Chicago. Three years later I was invited by Harvard University, and I have now been there for some twenty-five years.

During my stay in Cambridge I became closely associated with Meyer Fortes, Edmund Leach, Jack Goody, Audrey Richards, and Ray Abrahams, and I acquired there a detailed knowledge of theoretical and ethnographic contributions to the study of kinship, politics, and social organization. I became familiar with a range of studies subsumed under the gross label British structural-functionalism, for example the work of Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, Audrey Richards, Max Gluckman, and Victor Turner. But my most important colleague, friend, and mentor at Cambridge was Edmund Leach; his earlier writings on Burma and Ceylon, his developing interests in structuralism, structural linguistics, semiotics, and classification, and his adaptation of the contributions of Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, positively stimulated me. My first monograph on Thailand<sup>15</sup> and many of my essays in *Culture, Thought, and Social Action*<sup>16</sup> bear witness to Leach's influence, though at the same time I was discovering on my own the possibilities of Austinian linguistic philosophy for a performative theory of ritual.

I attended most of Leach's lectures, and when I began to teach in 1964 he lent me some of his lecture notes which aided me in preparing my own lectures. I was welcomed by Celia and Edmund Leach at their house in Storey's Way, and later at the Provost's Lodge at King's. Toward the end of my stay in Cambridge, I began in 1971 a new phase of fieldwork in Thailand, complemented by library study, on the relation between

<sup>13</sup> Professor Fortes and his wife Doris were unfailingly kind to me throughout my years at Cambridge.

<sup>14</sup> At that time Geoffrey Lloyd, the classicist, served as Senior Tutor.

<sup>15</sup> *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970. The fieldwork on which this book is based was done in Thailand before I came to Cambridge in 1963.

<sup>16</sup> Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985. This is a collection of essays, most of them previously published in journals, plus an introduction and a concluding essay.

Theravada Buddhism, kingship, and polity – both historically and in contemporary times.<sup>17</sup>

After I left England for the United States in 1973, I saw Edmund and Celia whenever I returned to Cambridge on brief visits while he was still Provost. In 1976 both Edmund and I were invited by Sidney Mintz for a term to help start the Anthropology Department at Johns Hopkins. We saw each other frequently. I hosted him at the University of Chicago when he came to receive an honorary degree. He visited Harvard on three occasions to give lectures.<sup>18</sup> And I visited Edmund and Celia at Barrington a few times after his retirement.

Let me now conclude by stating the circumstances leading to the writing of this biography. Soon after Edmund Leach died on January 6, 1989, various obituaries appeared in British newspapers, and in the Royal Anthropological Institute's publication *Man* and *Anthropology Today*. Sometime later, the British Academy invited me to write a *Memoir* about Leach, which I gather is treated as a definitive biographical sketch.

I considered this invitation as an honour. As I began to prepare notes for composing the *Memoir*, I realized that although I had read a great number of Leach's writings, as they appeared in print over the years, I had no coherent overview of his work as a corpus. I had not previously attempted to track systematically the trajectory of his major writings, noting their range, their continuities, transitions, and transformations, their innovative experimentations and their new directions. So I began to reread much of his work, and as my notes and commentaries became longer and longer I became aware that in fact I was writing a book-length biography. By 1997, I had composed a rough draft which I sent to Cambridge University Press; on the basis of two readers' reports there was a provisional acceptance for publication; and from this version I distilled the memoir for the British Academy.<sup>19</sup>

The composition of the biography did not stop there. After 1997, I began to read the Leach Papers deposited in the Modern Archive Centre at King's College. By the end of the summer of 2000, I had completed the

<sup>17</sup> On the basis of this work, I completed and published while at the University of Chicago *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976. Edmund Leach wrote a magnanimous lead essay and review of this book in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 14 January 1977, entitled "The Dharma of Kingship."

<sup>18</sup> On one visit in 1979 Celia and Edmund were guests at my home in Cambridge, MA for a few days.

<sup>19</sup> See Stanley J. Tambiah, "Edmund Ronald Leach 1910–1989," *1997 Lectures and Memoirs. Proceedings of the British Academy*, 97, 1998, pp. 293–344.

draft of a substantial biography that included valuable new information contained in the Archive and also a discussion of some of Leach's writings that I had previously set aside.

I have in this Preface described some features of my long relationship with Leach. But the biographical text itself plainly gives evidence of my authorial role. My interactions with Leach, and my own understanding and interpretation of what he wrote and said are an integral part of the text. Leach speaks, writes, and narrates – but these representations are filtered, selected, arranged, and mediated by my own activity as narrator, commentator, and friend. Throughout much of the text, I am in dialogue with Leach, who cannot speak back now.

## *Acknowledgments*

There are many persons and institutions who provided invaluable assistance in the preparation of the biography. As a former Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, I was able to live in the college as a guest during my several visits there. I appreciated very much the generous help given by the Staff of the Modern Archive Centre at King's, especially in regard to making available to me the Leach papers for the purpose of taking of notes from them, and for photocopying some of them.

Special thanks are due to Louisa Brown, Edmund Leach's daughter and executor of his papers, who with generous patience provided me with important information about the Leach family not contained in the Archive, and also scrupulously corrected factual mistakes I had committed. She gave me more information than I could include in this biography, and I hope that some day she will compose a social history of the extended Leach family. I must also include here a warm thank you to Lady Leach, simply Celia to her friends, for the information she has provided me, and for the warm hospitality she has shown me over many years.

Stephen Hugh-Jones, Leach's devoted disciple and close friend, has published his insightful, moving, and sympathetic sketches of Leach which are quoted by me in this biography. I have known him and Christine since their student days, and I thank them for their help. I had given a copy of my first draft of the biography to Stephen, and he and his colleague James Laidlaw in turn sent me some of the introductory notes to the two volumes of Leach's papers they were editing for publication by Yale University Press.<sup>1</sup> I also thank Geoffrey Benjamin

<sup>1</sup> The volumes have now been published. See Stephen Hugh-Jones and James Laidlaw (eds.), *The Essential Edmund Leach*, vol. 1, *Anthropology and Society*; vol. II, *Culture and Human Nature*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. They are indeed a great effort, and I hope that my independently composed biography will be viewed by readers as complementing and enriching their work.

for making available Leach's correspondence with him while he was in the field in Malaysia.

Susan Brown, who is planning to write a biography of Meyer Fortes, her teacher and friend, gave me an account of her interview with Leach which I have incorporated in my text. I have valued the friendship and hospitality of Susan, and her husband Mick Brown, a famous Cambridge physicist who had time to converse with an anthropologist and to explain to him some features of modern science.

I have many other Cambridge persons to thank. Among them are Geoffrey Lloyd, now Master of Darwin, and Patrick Bateson, Provost of King's, who allowed me to read some of the Minutes of the College Council.

Raymond Firth, whom Leach acknowledged as his mentor, gave me invaluable information, advice, and commentary on an earlier draft. I appreciated his prompt replies to queries. Rosemary Firth's published correspondence with Leach opened a window onto his undergraduate days. I thank Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney for providing sympathetic information and encouragement, and Mariza Peirano for a perceptive and morale-boosting commentary on the final draft. The generosity of Rubie Watson, Director of the Peabody Museum at Harvard made it possible to have copies of photographs made free of charge.

I regret that for reasons of editorial strictures about length I have not been able to include sketches of their pleasant and memorable encounters with Leach given me by some members of the anthropological profession, significantly younger than him, whom he had met in the United States, and whose generosity toward him was reciprocated. Triloki Pandey of the University of California at Santa Cruz invited Leach in 1983 to visit the University and give some lectures. Leach stayed in Pandey's home for ten days. Pandey's friends know him to be an entertaining raconteur and a generous host. When Pandey in turn visited England, Leach, then Provost, went in person to the station to meet him. Among other things, Leach took him on a tour of the college, the highlight of which was the viewing of the incomparable chapel and its treasures. A similar sketch was provided by Lina Fruzzetti and Akos Ostor. When Leach once visited Harvard, Akos, a junior professor, and Lina, entertained him and took him on tours of New England; when they in turn went to Cambridge, he met them at the station, showed them the college and the chapel, and in addition drove them around on a local tour regaling them with the history and mythology of sites visited. A similar testimony has been provided me by H.L. Seneviratne of the University of Virginia at Charlottesville.

*Acknowledgments*

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Leach had been much taken with Seneviratne's manuscript of *The Rituals of the Kandyan State*, and had enthusiastically sponsored its publication by Cambridge University Press. When Seneviratne and his wife visited Cambridge in 1975, Leach again took the time to give them a tour of the college and the chapel, including a viewing of a painting which he had rescued and brought to light. These memories relayed to me by younger scholars who had met him in the United States show a side of him unknown to many in the profession.

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A portrait of Edmund Leach (credit: Louisa Brown)