

THE CONCEPT OF THE 'FIELD' IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY  
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE USE OF AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA  
IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Karl-Heinz Kohl

*ABSTRACT.* At the end of the nineteenth century, British social anthropologists borrowed the term 'field' from modern physics to underline the scientific claim of their own empirical research. By gathering their ethnographic data through direct observation, they used recently developed audiovisual documentary techniques such as dry gelatine plate photography, wax cylinder phonographs and film cameras, which soon became standard expedition equipment. But when the time of the big ethnographic expeditions had come to an end and Malinowski proclaimed the ideal of the single fieldworker who should cut himself off completely from members of his culture and live alone in the company of the 'natives', all these bulky and hard to handle technical devices turned out to be impediments to realising the principles of participant observation. Moreover, they were of almost no use in studying the complex social structures of the societies on which the members of the British School focused their research. They therefore avoided bringing heavy motion picture cameras into their area of research, leaving the field to the emerging film industry, which created the new genre of semi-documentary ethnographic films. Anthropologists continued to take photographs to illustrate their monographs, but did not analyse and interpret them as autonomous subjects of scientific inquiry. Only the sound recording devices proved to be useful instruments of research by helping to store and preserve oral traditions in the vernacular that would otherwise have been lost forever.

I.

In the history of anthropology, the first three decades of the twentieth century are usually described as a period of scientific revolution (Jarvie 1964). Between 1898/1899, the year of the famous Cambridge Torres Straits Expedition, and 1926, the year in which the 'Functional School' established itself firmly in British social anthropology,<sup>1</sup> a process took place that transformed anthropology from a conjectural history of mankind into an empirical social science. Having ruled the discipline for more than half a century, evolutionism had to give way to new theoretical orientations. In Great Britain, it was replaced by Malinowski's version of functionalism, while in the USA, the students of Franz Boas, the German-born founding father of American cultural anthropology,

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<sup>1</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, two years after he was appointed Reader in Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics in 1924, published the article "Anthropology" for the thirteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which in his own view was the manifesto of the 'Functional School of Anthropology [...] bestowed by myself, in a way on myself, and to a large extent out of my own sense of irresponsibility' (1932:xxix–xxx; cf. Stocking 1995a:291).

proclaimed the principles of cultural relativism. In Germany itself, where evolutionism had never been as strong as in the Anglo-Saxon countries, Fritz Graebner's and Bernhard Ankermann's mechanical diffusionist approach was attacked by Richard Thurnwald who developed a concept of anthropology very similar to British functionalism (Melk-Koch 1989), and by Leo Frobenius (1921), whose *Kulturmorphologie* had much in common with the theories Ruth Benedict created some years later in her influential book, "Patterns of culture" (1934). At the same time, British social and American cultural anthropology began to become domains in their own right by emancipating themselves from biological anthropology. Although Boas, Malinowski and Thurnwald shared a strong orientation towards the natural sciences, the aim of the new disciplines they founded was not to study the physical diversity of mankind because in their view anthropology was anything but a 'science of races' into which the discipline had begun to transform itself at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> By proving with the help of craniometric measurements that the cranial shape and size of the descendants of American immigrants had changed because of improvement in their living conditions, Boas defeated the racial anthropologists of his time with their own weapons. He showed that these and other physical features were not stable, but strongly influenced by the social environment (Boas 1912). The general paradigmatic change marked in Anglo-Saxon anthropology by the names of Boas and Malinowski may have grown out of a 'critique of the assumptions of nineteenth century evolutionary anthropology', as George Stocking stated (1995b:5), but the basis of this critique itself represented a fundamental shift in methodology: data-gathering in the ethnographic 'field' in which the use of audiovisual media played a pivotal role.

A distinguishing mark of nineteenth-century evolutionist anthropology was the separation between the armchair theorist and the ethnographic amateur. The seminal works of Lewis Henry Morgan, Edward B. Tylor<sup>3</sup> or James G. Frazer had as their empir-

<sup>2</sup> A good example of this scientific turn is the late work of Edward B. Tylor, in which he tried to relate the intelligence of the different 'races of mankind' to their average cranial volumes, which had been measured on their skeletons by physical anthropologists (Kohl 1997:55). In German anthropology too, the influence of Adolf Bastian's theory of 'Elementar- und Völkergedanken', which was based on the idea of the psychic unity of mankind, began to fade and to give way to 'racial studies' (see Zimmermann 2001), a trend that continued in the first decades of the twentieth century. As Robert Proctor states: 'By the 1920s, race had become the single most important concept in German anthropology, which was well on the way to redenomination as *Rassenkunde* or "racial science"' (1988:148; italics in the original).

<sup>3</sup> As a young man, Lewis Henry Morgan had spent several weeks among the Iroquois of his home state New York, but the main informant for his first monograph (1851) on the league of the Iroquois was Ely Parker, a born Seneca who had been educated in a Christian Mission school and should later become a personal adjutant to general Ulysses S. Grant. At the end of the Civil War, he served as a brevet brigade general, without any doubt the highest military rank a Native American had reached until then (Trautmann 1987:43–46). Edward B. Tylor, too, had travelled to Mexico in 1855 because of health reasons. His parents thought that the country's warm climate could help him to recover from tuberculosis. In Mexico, Tyler met the archaeologist Henry Christie whom he accompanied on his

ical basis the travel accounts, reports and unpublished writings of explorers, missionaries, administrators and other colonial residents to whom they also sent questionnaires if there were any gaps of information to be filled (Stocking 1983). Out of this vast amount of data they built their theories of the stages of human progress from 'savagery through barbarism to civilization' (Morgan 1877). In doing so, they did not care about the different geographical and cultural contexts from which their ethnographic data came.

Strictly speaking, the members of this influential school were not academic anthropologists, since the first lectureships and professorships for the new discipline were created only at the end of the nineteenth century. Most of them shared a background in the humanities, had studied classics, like Frazer<sup>4</sup> and Johann Jakob Bachofen, or law, like Morgan, John Ferguson McLennan and Henry Maine. Others had never been to a university at all, like John Lubbock, a banker and politician, the former British general Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers or Edward B. Tylor, who had worked in his father's factory before beginning his academic career (Kohl 1997). Many members of the following generation of anthropologists, however, were trained natural scientists. Boas had written his doctoral dissertation at Kiel University in geology on the colour of seawater. Alfred C. Haddon had taken classes in anatomy, geology and biology and was appointed to the chair of zoology at the Royal College of Science in Dublin in 1881 (Stocking 1995a:99). Baldwin Spencer was also a biologist, William H.R. Rivers a trained physiologist and experimental psychologist (Stocking 1995a:108), Charles Seligman a medical pathologist, and Malinowski had read physics at Krakow University, where he received his doctoral degree for his dissertation on Ernst Mach's 'principle of the economy of thought' (Malinowski 1993). Although not hostile to evolutionism, most of them were sceptical about its speculative approach and recognised its methodological shortcomings.

A first step to a new and more empirically oriented method in anthropology was the Cambridge Expedition to the Torres Straits just mentioned, organised by Alfred C. Haddon in 1898. The expedition aimed at a complete documentation of the physical character as well as the 'manners and customs' of the Melanesian population living on the islands between the south coast of New Guinea and the north coast of Australia. For this purpose, Haddon had hired a team of seven younger scientists trained in linguistics, psychology, musicology and anthropology, including Rivers and Seligman. Other members were the physicians William MacDougall and Charles Myers, the linguist Sydney Ray and the archaeologist Anthony Wilkins, who was employed as the expedition's photographer (Herle and Rouse 1998:1). This pioneering venture in ethnographic field research marked a 'turning point' in the history of British anthropology (Stocking 1995a:111). The separation between armchair anthropologists and ethnographic practi-

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research trips and who awakened his interest not only in the history, but also in the contemporary living conditions of the country's indigenous population (Kohl 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Actually, James G. Frazer was the first professor of social anthropology in England. Appointed to the chair at the University of Liverpool in 1908, he was not required either to teach or to examine. Nevertheless, he left the university five months after his appointment (Stocking 1995a:159).

tioners had finally come to an end. The following decade saw many similar endeavours to collect empirical data through direct observation. Rivers made two journeys to the Toda in South India and to Melanesia from 1901 to 1902, while Seligman did research among the Vedda on Ceylon from 1906 to 1908, and afterwards spent almost three years in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan for an ethnographic survey. In the same period, Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, who had studied with Rivers in Cambridge, started his famous ethnographic research on the Andaman islanders.

In contrast to the Cambridge Expedition, however, these inquiries were not made by teams of scientists, but by individuals working alone. Rivers especially had recognised that survey studies like Haddon's were of only limited value and should be completed by what he called 'intensive work', that is, a stay 'of a year or more among a community of perhaps four or five hundred people', in which the researcher 'is not content with generalised information, but studies every feature of life and custom in concrete detail and in the vernacular language' (Kuper 1973:20). It is true that Bronislaw Malinowski, who had received River's support for his first ethnographic research project in southern New Guinea, was not the first anthropologist to follow this procedure, but it was Malinowski who claimed to have transformed it into a systematic methodological device. Malinowski formulated the principles of his new method, which he later called 'participant observation' in the introduction to "Argonauts of the Western Pacific", published in 1922, his first monograph on the Melanesian Trobriand islanders. In this work, which was later to become a 'user's manual' for ethnographic fieldwork, Malinowski pleads for a holistic approach. Instead of picking out the sensational and the singular, the ethnographer should feel obliged to give 'a complete survey of the phenomena' (Malinowski 1922:11). In his view it would be wrong to study only religion, technology, social organisation or other 'artificial fields of inquiry':

The field ethnographer has soberly and seriously to cover the full extent of the phenomena in each aspect of tribal culture studied, making no difference between what is common place, or drab, or ordinary, and what strikes him as astonishing and out-of-the-way. At the same time, the whole area of tribal culture in all its aspects has to be gone over in research (Malinowski 1922:11; emphasis in the original).

To fulfil his task of studying tribal society as a 'coherent whole', the ethnographer has to camp right in the village, take part in the village life and follow all the residents' activities from dawn to dusk. Indeed, he must 'thrust his nose into everything', till the natives regard him 'as part and parcel of their lives, a necessary evil and nuisance, mitigated by donations of tobacco' (Malinowski 1922:8). Malinowski confesses that such a stay is often unpleasant and boring. Yet exactly because of this, he declares 'cutting oneself off from the company of other white men' (Malinowski 1922:6) to be a necessary precondition for this kind of research. Even if the ethnographer is distressed and suffering from feelings of loneliness, he should 'seek out the natives' society' because there is no other way for him to become 'really familiar' with them (Malinowski 1922:7).

Malinowski's students took his formulations of the principles of ethnographic fieldwork as a kind of prophetic message. Till today, and not only in the Anglo-Saxon world, fieldwork is the hallmark of anthropology, a kind of initiation rite all the adepts of the discipline have to go through.

## II.

It is hard to tell when the notions 'field' and 'fieldwork' were definitely introduced into the vocabulary of sociocultural anthropology. In any case, Malinowski was not the first to use them. We can find them already twenty-five years earlier in a letter of A.C. Haddon's. Preparing his expedition to the Torres Straits, he wrote to a colleague that he intended to take with him 'one or two young men to train as field anthropologists'. (Stocking 1995a:107). According to George Stocking (1995a:114–115), it was Haddon, too, who later called what he and his companions had done on the chain of islands as 'field work'. Where does the term come from?

As is well known, the concept of field was very popular in the natural sciences in the second half of the nineteenth century. James Clerk Maxwell had revolutionised contemporary physics through his electromagnetic field theory, which he had developed between 1861 and 1864 and which had a strong impact on Albert Einstein's thinking. An older use of the word goes back to the so-called 'field naturalists' in biology, and Haddon may have had this activity in mind when he used the term for his and his colleagues' researches (Stocking 1995a:114). It is likely that the organisers of the Cambridge expedition transferred the concept of field into anthropology to underline the scientific character of their planned inquiries. For them, the Torres Straits islands seemed to be a kind of open-air laboratory. Therefore, they were not only equipped with the usual anthropometric measuring instruments, but had also prepared a series of psychological and physiological tests. Haddon himself later received the nickname 'The Head Hunter' because of the vast number of skulls he had collected during the expedition (Petermann 2004:492). The aim of gathering information equivalent in precision to the data of the natural sciences was reinforced by the new audio-visual devices the expedition members took with them: a cinematograph with many hundred meters of film, several high-quality cameras and two wax-cylinder phonographs (Edwards 1998:107).

The use of photography has a long history in anthropological research. Only five years after Daguerre's invention, the French anatomist Étienne Serres showed in his lectures Daguerreotypes of 'savage people' taken during the sojourn of a family of Brazilian Botocudes in Paris. To the French Academy of Sciences, he proposed the project of a "Musée Photographique des Races Humaines" for which he recommended organising photographic expeditions to all the different 'races' of the world. Serres was convinced 'that photography would provide the needed objective data base for making comparative anthropology a true science' (Ruby 2000:48). Such a goal, however, could

hardly be realised because of the technical complexity of early photography. In the following decades most anthropological photographs were made in Europe in the same way as Serres had done, that is, when indigenous people were brought to the metropolitan centres to present them in panopticons, zoological gardens and other arenas of popular amusements (Zimmerman 2001:18–20). Only after Richard Leach Maddox had improved photographic technology in 1878 and the wet collodion plate was replaced by the dry gelatine plate could photographs be taken without carrying all the equipment to the field which had been necessary to fix the wet plates. Although the first negative film was introduced as early as 1886, anthropologists continued to use the dry plates, which were not as simple to handle as the smaller portable cameras, but produced photographs of a higher quality. The scientific accuracy that the older technique promised to achieve counted more than the many practical advantages of the new one.

In the age of positivism, scientists believed that photography could provide an objective image of reality. Therefore, still cameras had become the usual equipment of all contemporary expeditions. Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen, who did intensive ethnographic studies among the Australian Aranda, had had the opportunity on several occasions to participate in ceremonies. In their books, they illustrated their written account of these events with some photographs. But these photographs seem stilted, strange and artificial, mediating almost nothing of the exaggerated atmosphere in which those 'extremely crude and savage' rituals (Walter Baldwin Spencer: *Across Australia*. 1912; quoted by Rony 1996:64) took place. Obviously, the participants of the ceremonies had been asked to repeat the central scenes of their performances so that pictures could be taken by the huge camera fixed on a tripod.

In 1895, however, a new visual medium was created that allowed human actions in motion to be documented. In the very year of the brothers Lumière's epoch-making invention, French physical anthropologist and anatomist Félix-Louis Regnault used one of the first motion-picture cameras to film the walking, jumping, grain-pounding and cooking of West-African men and women at a Paris ethnographic exhibition (Rony 1996:48–54). Regnault was enthusiastic about the possibilities of this new technological device, which would enable anthropologists not only to study 'all the series of movements that man executes for squatting, climbing trees, seizing and handling objects', but also to record festivities, battles and religious ceremonies (Rony 1996:48). The naturalist-scientists of the Cambridge Expedition shared his conviction of the qualities of the film as a perfect tool to provide 'exact and permanent documents' superior even to ordinary human apperception because it allowed rapid movements the unaided eye could not see to be captured (Rony 1996:47). Haddon and his companions were the first anthropologists who used motion picture cameras in the 'field'. This is an astonishing fact not only because the new medium had been invented only three years prior to the beginning of their ethnographic enterprise, but also with regard to the huge sum of money they had to pay for the film equipment. For all the technical devices, camp furniture and other items, Haddon had to spend a total of £ 1,275, which he had raised from

donations. Therefore, six of the seven expedition members had to pay their travelling costs themselves (Stocking 1995a:109).

The motion picture camera was not the only technical innovation the expedition brought to the Melanesian islands. The invention of the phonograph by Thomas Edison is dated twelve years earlier than the invention of film by the brothers Lumière. Haddon and Rivers seem to have been among the first ethnographers to use wax cylinders for recording spoken languages as well as songs and music.<sup>5</sup> For the ambitious goal of the expedition to produce complete documentation of the islanders' way of life, the phonograph was an important supplementary apparatus. The American anthropologist Jesse H. Fewkes, who had worked in Zuñi and was the first ethnographer to have used the phonograph in field research, had warmly recommended that Haddon collect native stories 'on those magic cylinders of wax where they are indelibly fixed forever' (Perks 2011:316). Since the members of the expedition spent only short periods among the different ethnic groups of the Torres Straits, none of them learned to master their vernacular languages. Henceforth, the collected texts were never translated into English. After their return to England, more than hundred wax cylinders were stored in the archives of Cambridge University. Today, they form the oldest collection in the ethnographic sound archive of the British Library (Clayton 1996:69).

### III.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the wax cylinder phonograph, the dry plate photograph and even the expensive motion picture camera became part of the standard equipment of ethnographic expeditions. Baldwin Spencer shot his first motion pictures in central Australia in 1901. In a letter, his friend Alfred Haddon had recommended him to use the new medium as 'an indispensable piece of anthropological apparatus' (MacDougall 1978:416). In the same year, the Bureau of American Ethnology entrusted the filmmaker P.O. Philipps with the task of making 'absolutely trustworthy records of aboriginal activities for the use of future students' (Ruby 2000:8). Especially German ethnologists as Leo Frobenius, who organised several expeditions to Africa from 1904, Theodor Koch-Grünberg, working in Brazil in 1911, Paul Wirz, later well-known because of his monograph on the Marind-Anim in New Guinea, and the members of the Hamburg South Sea Expedition from 1908 to 1910 (Petermann 1984:23, Fischer 1981) seem to have been fascinated by the new medium.<sup>6</sup> Its possibilities, however, were rather limited. Since the heavy camera had to be fixed on a tripod or even on a pedestal and could not be swivelled round, its lens could only point in one direction at a time.

<sup>5</sup> In Germany, the Leipzig anthropologist Karl Weule and the music-ethnologist Erich Moritz von Hornbostel were pioneers in using this new documentary technique. See Piotrowski (2015).

<sup>6</sup> For the use of photographs in German anthropological publications, see Theye (2003).

Instead of following up the actions of those who were filmed, the people themselves had to enter and leave the camera's field of vision. In a sequence shot by Haddon in the Torres Straits, one can see how several dancing men pass the camera 'one by one in a line, only to disappear briefly offscreen before entering the camera's field of vision again from the other side' (Rony 1996:67). Thirty years later, when Boas decided to go back to the Kwakiutl of the American Northwest Coast to film their dances, games and ceremonies with a more developed 16 mm motion picture camera, he still had to ask them to do in full daylight what was usually performed at night (Ruby 2000:58). Far from reproducing reality in a more objective way and capturing the full-flavoured life of the 'natives', the use of the new medium distorted reality by creating artificial situations. The 'natives' worked and danced only for the benefit of the researcher and his camera.

Therefore, it is no surprise that Malinowski did not mention the motion picture camera in his formulation of the principles of ethnographic fieldwork of 1922. Other technological recording tools he does not refer to either, although he himself had taken a still camera and a phonograph with him to the Trobriand Islands.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, Malinowski knew about the difficulties and the distorting effects of these modern media. Yet, this was not the only reason. Malinowski had borrowed the terms 'field' and 'field work' from Haddon, but he used them in a very ambiguous way. On the one hand, he fully agreed with the *s c i e n t i f i c* connotations of the concept of field. In his view, society constitutes a complete whole, in a sense resembling the electromagnetic field in which each element stands in a permanent and mutual relation to all the others. This idea was to become the basis of the scientific theory of culture he developed later as the founder of the 'Functional School' in anthropology. On the other hand, he seems to have been well aware of the more *p o p u l a r* connotations of the term. Malinowski did not go as far as Seligman, who later said that 'field research in anthropology is what the blood of martyrs is to the church' (Stocking 1995a:115). Instead of complaining about all the pains and anguishes the ethnographer has to suffer in the field, Malinowski stressed the romantic aspects of the term. For a European urban intellectual, disillusioned with progress and suffering the discontents of modernity, as many of his contemporaries did, going to the field 'seemed a shortcut to or shorthand for "getting physical" in fuller ways than modern civilisation will allow', as Marianna Torgovnick (1990:229) has stated. Malinowski was fascinated by the protagonists of Joseph Conrad's novels, such as Herr Kurtz in "Heart of darkness" (1996) or the Dutch trader Kaspar Almayer in "Almayer's folly" (1988), who had left civilisation behind to lead a lonely life among the 'natives'. With its emphasis on the necessity to avoid the company of all other white men and to live completely alone among the natives, participant observation seems to remain in this tradition (Kohl 1987:7–62). Claiming that this kind of fieldwork is the only way to acquire reliable information on the native's way of life and 'his view of his

<sup>7</sup> Malinowski's diaries show that he was a restless photographer, but also that he had an ambivalent attitude to photography as means of documentation. See Wright (1991), Young (1998).

world', Malinowski transformed the scandalised behaviour of some early colonial residents in 'going native' into a scientific method. Actually, he used his camera and his phonograph for documentation purposes, but in his famous introduction to the "Argonauts of the Western Pacific", he neither mentioned them as necessary tools for fieldwork nor analysed the photographs he had taken.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, they did not fit with his self-image of the lone fieldworker who at first experienced a 'sometimes unpleasant, sometimes intensely interesting adventure', but soon 'adopted quite a natural course very much in harmony with his surroundings' (Malinowski 1922:7).

Malinowski exerted an enormous influence on the following generation of social anthropologists such as Raymond Firth, Edward Evans-Pritchard, Meyer Fortes, Isaac Schapera and Siegfried Nadel. They felt attracted by the romantic appeal of his message, abided by the rules he had established and became enthusiastic fieldworkers. As far as I know, none of them took a motion picture camera with him to the field. Most ethnographic films of the 1920s and 1930s were shot by professional filmmakers like Robert Flaherty, Robert Murnau, Martin and Osa Johnson, Matthew W. Stirling, Léon Poirier and Victor von Plessen (Petermann 1984:26–36). Although they filmed 'true natives', they tried to combine ethnographic documentation with an invented, fictional action. The movies were shown in cinemas, and some of them, such as Flaherty's "Nanook of the north", became commercial successes. The visual representations of the so-called natives changed: from scientific documentation to commercial exploitation. The entertainment industry adopted the natives and gave them a new aesthetic. In a film like "Nanook of the north", the romantic motives of a life against and at the same time in harmony with nature become evident. Flaherty did in motion pictures what Malinowski had written down in books: "Argonauts of the Western Pacific" was published in 1922, the very same year in which "Nanook of the north" was released (Rony 1996:117). Ethnographers could not compete with the professional versions of the film genre. Nevertheless, in Germany, and especially in the United States, where the 'field' often lays right outside one's front door, anthropologists continued to make ethnographic documentary films, almost none of which has ever been shown to a public audience. And with one exception, namely the footage shot by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson on child rearing behaviour in Bali (Bateson and Mead 1942, Engelke 2007), professional anthropologists did not develop a reliable method of analysing the scenes they brought back home from the field. In the late 1930s, scientific ethnographic film-making came to an end, only to be revitalised a mere quarter century later (de Brigard 1975).

With regard to British social anthropology, the reasons for the declining interest in film-making are obvious. For the lone anthropologists who followed Malinowski's advice, it was too difficult to take all the necessary equipment to his or her faraway place of research. To produce a film, one usually needs a team of at least two persons. But even

<sup>8</sup> In his last monograph on the Trobriand Islanders, however, he devotes a lengthy footnote to photography. See Malinowski (1935:461).

on the ethnographic expeditions that continued to be made in this period by German and French anthropologists like Leo Frobenius, Adolf E. Jensen or Marcel Griaule, the bulky and costly 35mm film-equipment was hard to use for 'making researchable film footage' (Ruby 2000:57). This changed only in the late 1950s, after new and technologically more sophisticated cameras were available, light, easy to handle and small enough to hold in one hand. This was also the beginning of a new area of ethnographic film, the most important protagonist of which was Jean Rouch, with his 'cinéma-vérité' (Henley 2010).

#### IV.

Malinowski's students, however, were also lukewarm towards still photography. The medium had reached its peak of popularity in nineteenth-century physical anthropology for portraying the different 'races of mankind'. The new generation of social anthropologists tried to distance themselves from this dubious, biased and antihuman scientific tradition. Nor were they interested in documenting material culture and how working tools, pots and other things of daily use were manufactured by indigenous peoples. Their focus of research had shifted to the study of social relations. But how to catch them with the camera?

Living alone in a faraway South Sea island village or joining pastoralists on their long journeys through the savannah, anthropologists learned very fast that the ethnographic field is anything but an open-air laboratory. Anthropologists are not natural scientists: they cannot force their human subjects to do what they want them to do. On the contrary, they are fully dependent on their hosts and have to adapt themselves to their customs and rules of politeness. This did not prevent the early fieldworkers from taking pictures, especially since the first small and manoeuvrable hand-held camera that was available could be carried 'round the neck, without anybody being aware of its presence, and is always ready with the minimum amount of preparation', as the author of the 1929 edition of "Notes and queries on anthropology" wrote.<sup>9</sup> In a general sense, this may be right, but the author of this statement neglects the fact that in the field the anthropologist is usually the focus of everybody's attention. Even for the members of the Cambridge expedition, who came as a team of seven men and enjoyed the status and privileges of colonial masters, taking pictures was not at all easy. Those who were

<sup>9</sup> First published in 1874 by the British Association for the Advancement of Science, "Notes and queries on anthropology" aimed 'to promote accurate anthropological observation on the part of travellers, and to enable those who are not anthropologists themselves to supply the information which is wanted for the scientific study of anthropology at home' (1874:viii; quoted in Edwards [1992:265]). Reedited in 1892, 1899, 1912 and 1929, it was the most important anthropological questionnaire of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

photographed wanted to know what they did and asked for copies of their photographs, which they actually received and which later became part of the local gift exchange.

Haddon and his companions had taken their photographs for anthropometric purposes as well as to salvage ethnographic data about cultures allegedly under threat of disappearing (Herle and Rouse 1998:8) The first generation of social anthropologists, however, went back to the classical tools of their discipline, namely the eye and the ear, the pad and the pencil, because a precise picture of the complex social structures of the societies they studied can be conveyed only by the written word. In their publications, they used photographs only as illustrations, not as autonomous subjects of scientific inquiry. In certain respects, they were proof of the anthropologists having 'been there', and in many monographs one can find the obligatory picture of the author with his or her 'native' companions in the field. In the writing process itself, however, photographs have often become an *aide mémoire*, helping the ethnographer to recall what he had seen and felt in order to reconstruct a past experience (Ruby 2000:5).

Of the new technological devices the natural scientists of the Cambridge Expedition had taken with them to the field, only the phonograph seems to have contributed to improving the methods of ethnographic research. It is true that many of the wax cylinders which they brought back home to England were useless because the recorded words had meaning to nobody who was not fluent in the vernacular. The recorded songs, however, could be analysed by ethno-musicologists, increasing our knowledge of the attitudes of different human cultures to rhythm and music. In the early 1930s, when the bulky Edison phonograph, with its limited recording capacity, was replaced by the first electromagnetic recording machines, sound recording became a perfect tool for field ethnographers, who had learned in their turn that there is no other way to understand the members of an alien culture than by speaking their language. Formerly, it was a very difficult and complicated task to write down oral traditions in the vernacular. The ethnographer had to find an informant who not only knew the traditions by heart, but who was also patient enough to dictate the text in a way that the ethnographer could write it down. By doing this, the ethnographer and his informant created a completely artificial situation. Usually, myth and legends are to be performed not only in front of an audience, but also by the audience itself, because in illiterate societies knowledge of past events is a collective property shared in the memory of the whole community. In this field of research, the possibility of recording the spoken word while it was publicly performed created a revolution. It allowed many new insights into the structures of oral traditions and became at the same time a means for preserving the history of former illiterate societies to their own future offspring.

## V.

To claim that the introduction of new media in anthropological research at the turn of the twentieth century contributed much to the development of the discipline may sound paradoxical after what I have stated. Yet it is true, at least with regard to the indirect influence they exerted. The audiovisual media were attractive to anthropologists because they believed they had acquired the tools to document reality in a completely objective way. Today it is accepted that this was an illusion. When Jay Ruby writes that 'film will never be the objective recorder of reality which the pioneers in this field had hoped' (2000:65), the same may be true for photographic and even phonographic forms of documentation. Nevertheless the assumption that the new recording tools could provide such an 'objective approach' encouraged anthropologists to invent new methods of research and helped liberate the discipline from the Eurocentric biases of nineteenth-century evolutionism. Eventually, Malinowski-style 'open-air anthropology' replaced the conventional 'arm-chair anthropology' of Tylor or Frazer as well as Haddon's 'rocking-chair anthropology'.<sup>10</sup> To the single fieldworker, however, the audiovisual media were only of limited value. The bulky apparatus was too difficult to handle, and the lone ethnographer could not be his own photographer, cameraman and sound recordist at the same time. Moreover, the use of these mechanical devices had a disturbing effect, not only by creating artificial situations, but also by influencing, sometimes even spoiling, the communication between the ethnographer and the people he wanted to study. Therefore, the film camera was abandoned in ethnographic field research, but still used in the out-dated anthropological expeditions. Although ethnographers continued to take pictures, they did not do it in a systematic way, nor were they able to develop methods for analysing them. Only the sound recording devices proved to be useful instruments of research once they were substantially improved. At the beginning of the twentieth century, British anthropologists had gone to the field in 'battle teams' equipped with all the audio-visual weapons modern technology could provide them with. Three decades later they had recognised that all these media could do a lot of harm to a relation of trust between the researcher and his human subject – the necessary

<sup>10</sup> Obviously, Malinowski had Haddon's and Rivers' field methods in mind when he wrote in 1926: 'The anthropologist must relinquish his comfortable position in the long chair of the veranda of the missionary compound, Government station, or planter's bungalow, where, armed with pencil and notebook and at times with a whisky and soda, he has been accustomed to collect statements from informants, write down stories and fill out sheets of paper with savage texts. He must go out into the villages, and see the natives at work in the gardens, on the beach, in the jungle; he must sail with them to distant sandbanks and to foreign tribes, and observe them in fishing, trading, and ceremonial overseas expedition. Information must come to him full-flavored from his own observations of native life, and not be squeezed out of reluctant informants as a trickle of talk. Field work can be done first or secondhand even among the savages, in the middle of pile dwellings, not far from actual cannibalism and head-hunting. Open air anthropology, as opposed to hearsay note-taking, is hard work, but it is also great fun' (Malinowski 1926:147). For the paradigmatic change arising out of the doctrine of 'participant observation' in the history of anthropology, see Stocking (1983).

precondition for what Malinowski (1922:25) defined as 'the final goal' of the discipline, namely 'to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world'. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that there are so few photographs in monographs. Formerly, the photographic portrait of the anthropologist's 'native' informant or companion was proof of his or her having 'been there'. Today, its absence proves the anthropologist's really having 'one of them'. As the Belgian field researcher Luc de Heusch states: 'Sometimes an ethnographer goes so far as to publish pictures of men he has known and liked, but does so with considerable reluctance, as if the emotive power of the picture, being foreign to his purpose, embarrasses him' (Pinney 1992:81).

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