



RHODES UNIVERSITY

**NO LONGER IN THEIR PROPER PLACE: ANTHROPOLOGY
IN SEARCH OF ITS SUBJECT-MATTER**

Inaugural lecture delivered at

RHODES UNIVERSITY

on 10 JUNE 1998

by

**PROFESSOR C. J. de WET
MA(STELL), PhD(RHODES), DIP SOC ANTH (OXON)**

GRAHAMSTOWN

RHODES UNIVERSITY

First published in 1998
by Rhodes University
Grahamstown
South Africa

© Prof. C. J. de Wet

NO LONGER IN THEIR PROPER PLACE: ANTHROPOLOGY IN SEARCH OF ITS
SUBJECT-MATTER

ISBN: 0-86810-346-2

No part of this book may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording, or
otherwise, without the prior permission of
the publisher.

**NO LONGER IN THEIR PROPER PLACE:
ANTHROPOLOGY IN SEARCH OF ITS SUBJECT-MATTER**

Inaugural lecture delivered at

RHODES UNIVERSITY

on 10 JUNE 1998

by

PROFESSOR C. J. de WET

GRAHAMSTOWN

RHODES UNIVERSITY

1998

Most people would readily concede that rites of passage is anthropological territory par excellence. I will resist the temptation to talk about rites of passage, other than to say that, while passage is supposed to be a time of pain, necessary to pass on to new and better things, it is also a time of privilege. I would like to express my thanks to God, as well as to all those people who have made this privilege possible for me, each in their own particular way: my parents, my teachers, the communities that offer me hospitality and information during the course of my research, Rhodes University and in particular my colleagues in Anthropology, and my family. I would like to mention one person specifically: my (if I may be allowed to coin a new anthropological category) immediate predecessor to be: Michael Whisson. Michael, many things, but I would here like to thank you for the characteristic which has meant most of all to me in our association: your uncompromising, and at times, uncomfortable, intellectual integrity. You put me through a rite of passage every time you comment on anything that I have written! The government's Quality Assurance Programme seems worried about quantifiable outcomes, while the University's administration seems worried about quantifiable incomes; but without the cornerstone of integrity, the labour is in vain, because there will not really be a university in the first place. Thank you, Michael.

Lecturers sometimes have the nasty habit of setting the students exam questions which they cannot answer themselves, and I have never felt comfortable about asking students that seemingly simplest of questions: So, just what is anthropology? What distinguishes it from other social sciences? Let me now see if I can pass the exam!

One of the best known introductory texts in anthropology goes by the title of 'Other Cultures' (Beattie 1964). For many people, that is what encapsulates anthropology – going off to study far away, potentially exotic, but essentially non-Western peoples. Some Dutch universities even have a course entitled 'The sociology of Non-Western peoples'. But the idea of a content like 'the non-Western Other' does not actually help us to pin down the discipline, for several reasons. Increasingly, disciplines other than anthropology are concerning themselves with non-Western study areas, while an 'Anthropology of Home' has flourished in the last few decades, with British anthropologists researching communities in the British Isles. And what kind of 'other people' are anthropologists who would not regard themselves as Western, to study? Twenty years ago, other than 'white' anthropology students were very thin on the ground at Rhodes; today there are some years when they are in the majority. It doesn't make too much sense to teach Southern African belief systems as if they were 'other' any more. So, as well as Southern Africa, at Rhodes we teach courses on Amazonia, the Middle East, New Guinea, and the Mediterranean, as well as looking at Western Europe. In any event, simple subject matter, or content, is not enough to delineate a discipline satisfactorily.

Some people would see the way anthropology does its research as its distinguishing characteristic. The anthropologist goes (or is supposed to go) and lives in the community he/she is studying for an extended period of time, trying to live as much as they do as is possible. What we call 'participant observation' – even though the degree to which anthropologists do participate, or are allowed to participate, varies (have you ever tried eating the leather tough inside lining of a sheep's stomach which still has traces of grass in it?). There are also tensions in reconciling the different intellectual and emotional demands made by participation on the one hand and observation on the other. This kind of extended anthropologist-in-residence, participant/ observer approach is more feasible in some settings than others. It is a lot easier in rural than urban settings, for example, where the group you wish to study is not necessarily co-residential in any sense, like bureaucrats or stockbrokers.

Other disciplines are also using qualitative research methods. Although they do not necessarily move in for a year or two, there is nothing in principle to stop them doing so, as psychologists, sociologists, or whatever. Anthropologists, like other social scientists, are increasingly being pressured by market conditions into doing 'quick and dirty' research, using Rapid or Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques, which argue that you can get qualitative information quickly, by the researched community participating in the research process through workshops, through constructing physical representations of social patterns in the settlement, etc. – rather than slowly, by the anthropologist's participation in the community's social process. I would argue that these quick in/quick out methods have limitations. They rely heavily on verbal information generated in situations not of the community's own making, (i.e. potentially artificial situations), and are unable to contextualise that verbal information through observing people doing things in their own way in their own time, and through the casual conversation that time in the area makes possible. Nevertheless, there is no in-principle difference between research methods across the social sciences, and merely to say (even though it may be true) that 'anthropology does it better' is not enough to delineate a discipline.

Some would characterise anthropology as being about shared experience. Thus, Hastrup argues that 'The stuff of anthropology is made up of real social lives. It is created in a process of shared social experience . . . While we cannot, obviously, experience the world from the perspective of others, we can still share their social experience . . . Sharing it implies that we are part of the plot, and it is this position that provides us [i.e. anthropologists] with a unique key to an understanding of worlds' (Hastrup 1993:63-66). However, I would imagine that this is a claim that would also be made, for example, by psychotherapists who spend extended time with their patients.

So, if anthropology is not – or not uniquely – about sitting in the steaming tropics, documenting exotica and sharing quality time and experiences with the locals, then what is anthropology about?

Much of intellectual inquiry seeks to generalise from the particular, and contextualises its search for the universal in particular ways, in particular theoretical frameworks. I would like to suggest that what characterises the anthropological framework is the way it has tried to link together three concepts: those of culture, community and place. The way we have done this relates to our focus on small-scale (predominantly) non-Western cultures, to our in-residence, participatory methodology, and to our concern with shared experience.

Let's look and see how anthropology has approached these three concepts. Culture has been defined in many ways in anthropology, but at a basic level refers to that which is learned – the ideas, values, behaviour patterns, skills, etc. that you learn in the course of your life. One does this in a social context, a community, a group of people that broadly share the same basic ideas, values, patterns, etc. To share those things people need to interact on a fairly frequent basis, so as to have been socialised in the same way. And for that, they need to live in the same area, or place. While this simple little scheme contains some basic truths – one learns one's values, ideas, etc. in social contexts, and from people in particular places – it also requires us to make several assumptions to sustain it.

The key assumption seems to relate to the way in which it uses the concept of place – that cultures and the communities that carry them are spatially isolatable, separate from other cultures and communities, and are identified with, located in, and circumscribed by, a particular area (Hastrup and Olwig 1997:1). That also makes it sound as if there are separate cultures as such, rather than that culture, the capacity to learn things in a social context, is a human characteristic. Now that clearly is an imaginary construct. It says: 'let's look at a culture as if it could be circumscribed by, contained within, an isolatable physical area of land.' Other social sciences have also subscribed to this construct, even if not in as spatially 'desert islandish' and small-scale a way as anthropology often has. So we have had books from sociologists and political scientists on e.g. 'American Political Culture' or 'Kinship in Britain' – where the area isolated for the purposes of investigation and analysis has moved from the proverbial village in the jungle to the nation-state as a bounded unit. This approach is an integral part of the still remarkably alive theoretical approach of functionalism in the social sciences.

What did this theoretical construct of a spatially isolatable culture help anthropologists to do? It gave us the analytical perspective of holism, allowing us to see the different aspects of the studied community's culture in relation to each other, as functionally interrelated, as forming a system (which is a concept we still seem to struggle to think without in the social sciences). It gave rise to a rather nice paradox – while the idea of the integrated system that we imposed upon the non-Western culture being studied, was a Western construct, it provided us with a means to try and escape evaluating those cultures from a Western viewpoint (Hastrup and Olwig 1997:3). It also led us to take their views, i.e. the insider's views, seriously, as we had to understand this unique, integrated whole in its own terms (Hastrup and Olwig 1997:1). By delineating a fixed territory and a fixed community of people, rather than a nation state, it allowed us to do the micro-detail kind of research which

is a hallmark of anthropology, because it allows us to contextualise the words and actions of the people we study. That holistic approach also provided us with a point of departure for the comparison of cultures (Hastrup and Olwig 1997:3). If, as anthropologists argued, all the (artificially delineated) social institutions like kinship, politics, economics, religion, etc. were all functionally integrated and adapted to each other, then how would e.g. polygyny (a man having more than one wife) impact on, or relate to, the rest of that society, compared to polyandry (a woman having more than one husband)? Truth is stranger than fiction, it seems, unless it is science fiction! Or how would the political system influence the rest of society if there was a centralised, as opposed to an uncentralised, political system?

This approach – the construct of isolatability – did of course have problems. There is no such thing as an isolated society, even before the advent of Western-style colonialism. There have been other colonialisms and, of course, trade, probably almost since the beginning of humanity, when various waves of our ancestors walked out of Africa. Ferguson talks of the paradox of anthropology, that while anthropologists have often tried to study 'other cultures' as if western colonialism did not exist, they would not have been there in the first place had it not been for that very colonialism (Ferguson 1990:238). One of our great founding fathers of anthropology, Malinowski, worked among the Trobriand Islanders of Melanesia, near New Guinea. An important part of their culture revolved around the non-commercial exchange of ceremonial necklaces and armbands, with the necklaces going clockwise around the participating islands and the armbands going anti-clockwise. It is central to the system that it is seen as a closed, non-commercial system. Yet, it appears that there is what Malinowski describes as 'leakage' in the system, and that the ceremonial objects can be purchased from elsewhere for pigs, canoes, or axe-blades! (Malinowski, 1922:505-507).

Isolation, plus the other imaginary construct of societies being functionally integrated wholes, led to social theorists tending to ask questions about how society maintained itself as an integrated whole, and to emphasize coherence and continuity, consensus and stability, the 'normal', rather than to consider conflict and change, the exceptional or the abnormal (Hastrup and Olwig 1997:6). Many functionalist accounts would go through the various social institutions, like the kinship, political, economic, religious systems – and then have a chapter on change added on at the end, as if it were the exception, rather than a fundamental aspect of human life.

Anthropologists using subsequent theoretical approaches, such as conflict theory, transactionalism, structuralism and neo-marxism, have also tended to utilise the idea of an isolatable social unit. But how could one maintain this apparent fiction in a post World War II situation, with decolonisation, international development and widespread urbanisation?

In some ways, anthropology's fieldwork agenda has dictated its theoretical agenda (Ahmed and Store 1995:25). If we are to obtain the kind of micro-level data necessary to show the complexity of a social situation, especially one with which we are not culturally familiar, we need to be able to delineate a manageable area in which to work, both in terms of size and numbers – usually a settlement – and stay there for a longish period of time. So, we need a place. So the field becomes the place to which we go to do our research and from which we return (Hastrup and Olwig 1997:4), a place where the studied group will be when we go there, the place where they 'properly' belong in the sense of a permanent base. Even anthropologists who have looked at the impact of the migrant labour system, which by definition involves people leaving their areas of origin, have looked at the impact of this involvement in a wider set of relationships, in terms of its impact on the home area, the place where the studied people 'properly' belong.

So, largely for practical reasons, we have tended to reify the concept of place, attributing to it a kind of reality, existence that it does not really have, sometimes forgetting that it is a social construct, that it is only a place because there are people in it in the first place. And following from that, we have given it an almost automatic weighting in terms of our set of three concepts, predicating culture and community upon place.

What happens if events and theoretical misgivings lead us to rethink the relationship between our three concepts? Events of the last few decades would seem to have done just that, challenging particularly the way we see place. I would like to mention two developments that have been influential in this regard:

- 1) what may loosely be called 'globalisation'.
- 2) the involuntary displacement of many people.

1) Globalisation is one of those 'one size fits all' kind of concepts, and different disciplines use it in different ways. Following Giddens (quoted in Cheater 1995:125), I take globalisation to mean 'The intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away, and vice-versa'. As Sørensen suggests, this has involved an 'apparent increase in the flow of people, goods, information and ideas within and across borders' (Sørensen 1997:146).

Note that this is not a new development, but rather an intensification – as I suggested earlier, one could argue that globalisation started when our ancestors walked out of Africa. More roads are being built, more people are flying, more people are becoming literate, have radios or televisions, and access to a wider range of externally produced goods. An expanding virtual elite has access to E-mail and the Web.

In a very real sense, our notion of physical distance, and with it, social distance, has become radically transformed, as any of you who watched the funeral of Princess Di, or will watch the Soccer World Cup in Paris, will know. Friends in Cameroon took the day off in 1994 to watch President Mandela being inaugurated, saying to me that 'it was as great a day for us in the rest of Africa as it was for you in South Africa'. Bedouin tribesmen with satellite television, Masaai herders with cellphones, Amazonian Indians making videos of themselves for use by NGO activists to promote their cause in Europe and America (Ahmed and Shore 1995:20). If you want proof that people, ideas, goods are moving at a qualitatively different level, ask epidemiologists who are trying to plot the world-wide spread of AIDS.

Miller suggests that there is 'a shift in the consciousness of the people we [as anthropologists] study, who almost all now view themselves in direct relation to an explicit image of modern life' (1995:1) – although, the way in which they do so, varies considerably. Some people seek to emphasize their own local identity in the face of potentially homogenising ideas and commodities emanating from 'the West'.

2) Something like fifty million people have been uprooted in Africa alone since World War II (de Wet 1995:2). Of these, some 20 million are refugees – and that figure excludes the most recent Rwandan and Burundian genocides and the flight to Zaire in the mid 1990s. These are both external refugees, (i.e. those who have fled their country) and internal refugees (i.e. those who have remained within their country), which constitute the great majority of refugees. Other uprooted people include those who have been displaced by famine or because of political policies, or development projects, such as dams, roads, agricultural schemes, urban renewal. Some 25 million people have been made to move by their governments into concentrated settlements, or villagisation schemes in Africa. World-wide, some 10 million people are moved each year to make place for development projects (Cernea 1996:2), and more than a million people are due to be moved in China with the damming of the Yangtze River. The collapse of the Soviet Union has also seen displacement on a massive scale.

What do these developments mean for the way in which we view place in anthropology? Can we still maintain it as our anchoring concept? People are increasingly developing links, whether in terms of media or actual travel, which extend beyond their place of origin. People in different places can participate in, and internalise the same events, or messages, such as members of the Irish diaspora following, and possibly participating in the recent referendum on peace issues in Ireland, or Indians and Pakistanis living overseas following the recent tussles around nuclear capability, or Hutu exiles in Montreal following developments in Central Africa by electronic media (Malkki 1998). We clearly do need to rethink the links between place, culture and community. We face 'the loss of place as a dominant metaphor for culture' (Hastrup and Olwig 1997:7) – at least in the linear, reified sense in which we have often used place in anthropology.

Our strategy of contextualising culture and community has to change – we are no longer contextualising our unit of study in terms of a 'reifiable entity' called place, but rather in terms of a social space – which will often cut across actual physical places (Hastrup and Hervik 1994:2). Culture will still be that which is learned, and shared, but it will be located, not in a particular place, but in the relationships that link those people that share that culture, and along which relationships that culture flows.

So, where will we go to 'the field', to do our research? Our fieldwork site becomes oriented towards the field or network of relations that are activated by the people we study (Hastrup and Olwig 1997:8). Obviously, to locate people in order to gain access to their network of relationships, we have to locate them somewhere, in some place – and we cannot chase a diaspora community all over the world. Suppose you took an identifiable social group which had some ties to an identifiable physical place – such as an immigrant ethnic community that was based in a few suburbs in Johannesburg, which was actively seeking to maintain its ethnic identity and culture. Many of the family members are likely to be living overseas, either back in the country of origin, or as second-order immigrants in Europe or North America or Australia. It would be difficult to make the network of relationships activated by the 'home community' our field area – we would be able to use the post, telephone, tape recordings, videos and hopefully e-mail to do our research, but we would still lack the on-site experience to be able to contextualise the cultural exchanges which we as anthropologists would now be sharing and even becoming party to. So the interface between social space and physical place remains a problem.

A colleague and I recently tried a much less ambitious study of this sort. I have been doing research in two communities in the Keiskammahoek area of what was the Ciskei for a number of years. Globalisation on a small scale has been taking place in their lives – it might better be called regionalisation, but the principle is the same. A substantial number of the middle generation from one of the villages work in the East London/King William's Town area – where they have houses of their own. In the last 10 years or so, the minibus taxi industry has taken off in the area, more particularly since the road past their village has been tarred. The middle generation members live in the urban areas with their families, but come 'home' to the rural areas once or several times a month – bringing with them goods and ideas from the urban areas. We used my contacts with the older generation to get their children's addresses in the urban areas and went to visit them there, trying to cover the various physical places in a single social space (de Wet and Holbrook 1997). But again, we needed a 'home community' with a fixed place and we needed to go to other fixed places within the total social/cultural space we were trying to understand. Micro-level detailed, contextualising research cannot take place in empty space.

Appadurai makes a useful distinction in this regard, between 'locality' and 'neighbourhood'. For him 'Locality [is] primarily relational and contextual, rather than scalar or spatial; constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technology of interactivity and the relativity of contexts' (Appadurai 1995:204). So, locality would be a kind of social space, a kind of metaphorical common place. Let's take our example of the immigrant ethnic community in Johannesburg with children overseas. The common locality they share is a sense of common place which is built up of an amalgam of shared experiences and affections ('the sense of social immediacy'), the nature and frequency of communication between them, including actual physical travel ('the technology of interactivity'), and their perceptions of, and indeed, ability to grasp, each other's living conditions and attachment to place ('the relativity of contexts'). Locality is a sense of common place, but which is different from any of their actual home places. It is the non-spatial context, within which they experience their shared culture.

'Neighbourhood' on the other hand, is 'the actually existing social forms in which locality, as a dimension, or value, is realised. Neighbourhoods are situated communities' (Appadurai 1995:204) i.e. in actual physical space.

Part of a neighbourhood's sense of locality is going to be affected by the state, which in many countries seeks to make neighbourhoods conform to its vision of what they should be (Appadurai 1995:213 ff.) – such as when Tanzania sought to transform the countryside into ujamaa villages with a strong collective component, and with direct links to the ruling political party. The apartheid state similarly sought to impose its vision upon rural settlements in the then homelands, first by moving people into concentrated villages, then by pulling them into the homeland administrative and economic context, but trying to limit their incorporation and participation in the wider South African state. So, the state as an agent of globalisation – pulling people into a wider set of relations and seeking to control the terms of that participation – is an often unwelcome component of a neighbourhood's social space or locality.

We can take up residence in a neighbourhood and follow up the outside components of its locality through phone calls, e-mail, newspaper clippings, interviews with state officials – but how are we to contextualise (and in anthropology, contextualisation is a non-negotiable) those extra-neighbourhood components? It is seemingly not just their subjects that are not in their 'proper' place, but also the anthropologists who now need to work out where their proper place should be, and how to strike the balance between being in actual neighbourhoods, and on the telephone and on the internet and reading the newspapers. How do we turn a non-territorial field of relationships and cultural exchanges into a field site for study?

Let me take human rights as an example. 'Human rights has become one of the most globalised political values of our time' (Wilson 1997:1), and has become intimately bound up with the rights of indigenous groups (or the 'Fourth World', as they are sometimes known). A classic case is that of the Amazonian Indians of the tropical rainforests of South America. The territory they occupy is suffering steady encroachment at the hands of local farmers, as well as by international business and development interests. The area is becoming traversed with new highways, being opened up to mining interests, and seeing the construction of large dams to generate hydroelectricity for Brazil. Having been blasted by waves of western diseases, their numbers decimated, these Indians huddle in reservations which are of course not immune to further encroachment from outside interests. But, besides being what some romantics regard as the last repository of 'the natural condition of humanity', the Amazonian Indians sit on one of the world's largest sources of oxygen supply – the Amazon rainforests. So, human rights activists are now teaming up with environmentalists and with the Amazonian Indians to form an alliance to protect both human rights and the environment, using the world media system to publicize and proselytise the Amazonian cause in world political and environmental fora. The Amazonians are using global groupings and technology to fight their local battles against The World Bank, the development agencies, the Brazilian government (Conklin and Graham 1995). The empire strikes back. A social space, a locality, is forming around what the Amazonians and the activists perceive to be common values and interests, a symbolic and at times successful struggle against the 'enemy' of the world economic system. Fascinating stuff for an anthropologist to get involved in – but that's exactly the problem – the price of being allowed into the area to study this struggle, is that you become pressured to get involved in the struggle, to take sides. Not only is the field site no longer a site of normality, but of struggle, it is also no longer a site of detached observation – it may become a site of involvement and struggle for the anthropologist – with unseen allies on the other side of the electronic media, and with unseen enemies on the other side of the equator. Even the field site is no longer its 'proper' place.

There is a paradox here. The activists may seem to be helping to liberate the Amazonians from their 'proper place' as obedient servants of the nation state and the world system. This general obedience is the context in which most anthropologists have done their fieldwork, among subjects compliant with higher authority, and this has probably helped make for the anthropologist developing an unrealistic sense of norm-abiding coherence as typical of the observed community. However, the Amazonians only have value to the international activists as long as they conform to the stereotype of Amazonians as untouched by Western civilisation, as not only noble savages, but as 'noble ecological savages', whose culture is inherently protective of the environment. That is the stereotype that has purchase, and purchasing power – that pays NGO worker's salaries – in the West. So, when Amazonian leaders do ecologically incorrect things like selling logging rights to timber companies, the NGOs categorise such people as corrupted, as unrepresentative, seeking to make the Amazonians conform to a Western stereotype, to keep 'the natives' in their proper symbolic place (Conklin and Graham 1995). Not unlike the kind of thing that anthropologists are frequently accused of!

This last term we did a course on Amazonia with the students, and I spent several lectures on cannibalism. I went into detail on the symbolic significance, deep religious meaning, parallels to sacrifice elsewhere in the world (Conklin 1995). The students were clearly prepared to be sympathetic. When I mentioned that the Brazilian government had banned cannibalism in the 1960s, one female student was angry – how could they do that? One should respect other people's cultural traditions! 'Well then, what about clitoridectomy?' (the excision of the clitoris, analogous to male circumcision). 'No' she said fiercely. 'Why not?' I asked. 'Women's rights!' she answered, again fiercely. 'Well then' I asked: 'why is cannibalism kosher, but not clitoridectomy? On what grounds do you OK some cultural constructs, but veto others? And on what grounds do you choose a global cultural construction like women's rights over a local cultural construction like clitoridectomy?' In terms of the argument we have been developing so far, women's rights, indeed the whole notion of human rights, is a non locality-specific cultural value – precisely because it is regarded as applying internationally, and therefore cross-culturally, whereas cannibalism and clitoridectomy are situated, i.e. in particular cultural contexts, with some basic association with particular places – they are localisable practices.

Clearly, as the example of the alliance around the ecology of the rainforests shows, people at local level are aware of, and involved, in debates around wider human rights issues. They are participating in a global discourse – also to use it for their own local ends. They join forces with the Western activists to argue for autonomy, to preserve their culture, as according to the Western stereotype, they are the ones who really know how to look after the rainforest. They then use that autonomy to claim the right to sell logging rights to foreign companies!

Anthropology can make a real contribution to the issue of human rights by doing detailed, on site research, to show how a universal and non locality-specific global item like human rights is contextualised in specific situations, how the dialogue is conducted and negotiated, in terms of which globally acknowledged rights are 'embedded in local normative orders, while also being caught up in wider webs of meaning and power, which extend beyond the local' (Wilson 1997:23).

Thus far, I have tried to show that we can no longer study culture and community as if they could be confined within the parameters of a single place. But we still seem to be unable to operate without the concept of place, or neighbourhood as situated community, even if we argue that there are a plurality of places within a social space or locality. And we also still seem to have been assuming those things that old-fashioned functionalism seemed to assume – basic continuity, coherence, normality – even if of a more complex kind. Indeed, the social sciences seem constrained to make assumptions of this sort if we are to achieve comparison and generalisation. How can one generalise from cases of discontinuity, from exceptions? Even if we are analysing conflict within society, we tend to look for patterns, trends, for the norm, to fit individual instances of conflict into models or theories of – i.e. into generalisations about – conflict.

But, as Malkki asks, what happens if the phenomena we are studying are of a 'transitory, deterritorialised, unfixed, processual' – and potentially unrepresentative, kind? (1997:86). Malkki is concerned with Hutu refugees in Tanzania, who fled there in 1972, in a round of violence well before the recent genocide, in an area where people have survived by being on the move, or ready to move, as violence flares. One suspects that they have survived perhaps precisely by not having a place that is too permanent, too much like 'home'. This suggests that their network of relationships, their set of face to face relationships that we might be tempted to call 'community', will be likely to be very different from, and to be much more provisional and ad hoc than, those of people in more stable, more permanent neighbourhoods. This will be reflected in the way we understand their culture, i.e. those commonly held beliefs, practices, etc. that are the result of shared socialisation and experience. But if the idea of continuity that we tend to build into our concept of community is problematic, then so is the way in which we try to understand the culture of a collection of people who have been together for a few years in an area that is temporarily regarded as safe – a collection of people that we would not readily regard as a community – precisely because they do not have any great expectations of staying in that place for any length of time. And how does one do long term fieldwork in a context of constantly changing settlements and settlement composition? Are quick in/quick out research methods the only feasible way to do things?

And what of the people who are actually in the refugee camps, who were regarded as safe because they were in a country of refuge – until the invasion of the refugee camps in Zaire in 1996 made even that a doubtful matter? A refugee camp is an ambiguous kind of settlement – almost by definition it is temporary; it is there to serve until the problem 'back home' is sorted out and it is safe to go back. In practice, many refugee camps have become all but permanent. However, with refugees recently being increasingly pressured to repatriate, to go back home to their countries of origin, the temporary or permanent nature of camps remains ambiguous, in the minds of administrators and funders, as well as of the refugees themselves. This has direct implications for the way in which the arbitrary collection of people in a refugee camp do or do not become a community, for the degree of contact they cultivate with people in their country of refuge (i.e. the country where the camp is), for the preparations they make to repatriate, and for the links they keep up with people 'at home' – if that is where they still see home as being.

The theoretical tools that were designed to study more or less stable, permanent communities do not seem to be readily applicable to what, from the perspective of mainline social theory, would seem to be unrepresentative, temporary situations, which are to only a limited extent useful for purposes of generalisation. We seem to need to develop new theoretical and research tools to deal with what, for want of a better term, and an apparent contradiction in terms, we might call 'impermanent communities'.

We tend to think of civil war and of ethnic style violence as the major causes of population flight – but we also need to remember that disasters, particularly famine, are a major cause of population dislocation, and have a different dynamic from that of the flight of refugees from violence – not least because of the urgency with which refugees from violence have to flee, and because of the different factors affecting decisions about returning home. So famine refugees would form a different kind of impermanent community from war refugees – which would suggest that we might need to use different research tools in the two cases.

But we do not need to go to the refugee camps of Central Africa to find such impermanent communities – we need only look at the situation of the estimated 8 million people who live in shacks around the urban areas of South Africa. Sean Jones (1993) tells us of young people, who have spent time in a number of social and residential situations – a year here with grandparents, two years with mother there, a year here with father, a few years in a rural settlement to escape political disturbances at urban schools, and so on. Such people have not been in one place or with one set of people long enough to have cultivated a set of relationships that one might call 'home' in the sense that most of us here tonight might regard home. Some anthropologists working in shack areas find such a high turnover of people within individual shelter structures that they prefer to talk of shacks or structures, rather than of households, i.e. the people living in, or associated with particular structures. And then shacks are continuously being demolished and rebuilt. What kind of fieldwork area does an anthropologist delineate for her/himself in such circumstances? Which networks does one try to keep up with? And what does participation mean in such circumstances?

Chronic impermanence, with its accompanying movement, is the lot of substantial numbers of people in the world – people who do not have an enduring sense of locality or social space – and we can no longer regard them as an aberration, and not of central concern to social theory. That means that we need to rethink the way we conceptualise the relationship between culture, community and place.

Let me briefly look at another kind of situation of people 'no longer in their proper place' – which is somewhat different in that it has a greater degree of permanence about it. I refer to forced relocation, where people are ordered to move for political reasons or to make way for development-style infrastructure, such as dams, urban renewal, etc. Unlike refugees, there is usually no prospect of return home, as your home has either been flooded by the waters of the dam, or a road built where it was, or whatever. Such people are often moved onto settlement schemes. Unless you abandon the scheme, this is your permanent new home. For most people, the forced move is very traumatic, an uprooting, which leaves many people socially disrupted and economically impoverished. Most people set about trying to convert this new place into a social space, to make it economically viable and to build up a community in the sense of an enduring set of face to face relationships, i.e. to invest in the resource base as well as in relationships. The literature – including my research in the former

Ciskei (de Wet 1995) – suggests that in the great majority of cases those resettled people do not recover their previous standard of living, or quality of relationships, and that it is really only after a generation, i.e. when the second generation, that grew up in the new area, takes over, that one can speak of settlement having been achieved, in the sense of a new stabilised and institutionalised set of relationships (Scudder 1993).

What is interesting for our purposes is that here we have an opportunity to study a dislocated group of people over a period of time, because they remain in one place. We can see how they reconstruct their socio-cultural system – which gives us a compressed, condensed view, i.e. over a shorter period of time than in undisrupted communities, of the dynamics of socio-cultural systems (Scudder, personal communication), and of the interplay of place, culture and community. We find that place plays a key role in this process, that people seek to invest their new place with meaning, to convert it into social space, or locality, and that new social groupings tend to develop around the physical characteristics of the area, around the way residential areas are designed, and around the way in which it is or is not possible to maintain a continuity between groupings in the pre-and the post-resettlement areas. The locality that develops over time clearly reflects the characteristics of the new place.

So, in conclusion, we seem to have come full circle in several ways. I would argue that we are still with our triangle of concepts, and that place still plays a key role in it, in spite of the fact that we have come a long way from the construct of a desert island type of situation where culture, community and place fit congruently on top of each other in an unproblematic and neat way, and can be geographically isolated and bounded. The communities and the cultures with which our examples from globalism and from displacement confront us, are less clearly bounded, and in many ways, less permanent. But they are still located, i.e. in places. We seem to be in a bit of a Catch 22 situation about the concept of place – it has become problematic to think with it, but you can't do research without it. It is at the heart of anthropology, and at the heart of the problems that anthropology is currently struggling with, and the direction in which anthropology develops will to a large extent be influenced by the way in which our thinking about the place-space-locality set of concepts develops.

We are also full circle in terms of the relationship between fieldwork and theory. We argued earlier that our field work agenda had dictated our theoretical agenda in as much as if we were to obtain the kind of micro-level data necessary to show the complexity of the situation we were studying, we had to be able to delineate a manageable area in which to do research – hence the idea of culture and community as circumscribable by place. Now that people are no longer in their 'proper' place, in the sense of no longer living only in one place, now that people who might identify with each other are all over the place, or now that people are not in a place long enough to form community-type ties, we need to rethink our research techniques in such a way as to deal with the tensions inherent in the concepts of 'unbounded communities' and 'temporary communities' – both of which reflect the

tensions inherent in the concept of place. As in the past, so in the future, it is not unlikely that we shall be tempted to conceptualise culture and community in a way that is compatible with the ways in which we are practically able to study them. So, the realities of fieldwork may determine our theories yet again.

I personally find it very exciting that we are at a juncture in anthropology where we are willing and able to rethink the fundamentals of our discipline. It shows that there is an honest interaction between theory and practice; that theory, as it should be, is the servant of the richness and complexity of human behaviour; and that anthropology's commitment to be faithful to that richness remains undimmed by the forces of homogenisation and disruption.

I have not addressed issues of ethics or of development in any direct sense in this lecture. They are complex issues in their own right. All the local level complexities that my colleagues and I are trying to decipher are directly related to issues of development – which I take to be about the augmentation of people's choices and of the degree of control that they exercise over their day to day circumstances. But understanding, contextualisation, has to come before action. The record shows that whatever outsiders may do, whether to, or with or for other people, does not usually have any lasting beneficial effect – indeed, often the opposite – unless we first understand something of the complexity of the situation into which we are inserting ourselves, and the baggage that we bring with us.

Whichever way we land up thinking about culture and community, anthropology's abiding contribution to the understanding and to the improvement of the human condition remains its 'focus on detail, and its unfailing respect for context in the making of any generalisation, as well as the full recognition of persistent ambiguity' (Hastrup and Hervik, p.10). To that end, I hope that I have been able to persuade you of something of the centrality, and of the elusiveness, of the concept of place.

Mr Vice-Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen: thank you very much.

REFERENCES

- AHMED, A.S. and SHORE, C.N. (1995) 'Is Anthropology Relevant to the Contemporary World?' In A.S. AHMED, and C.N. SHORE (eds 1995) *The Future of Anthropology – Its Relevance to the Contemporary World*. London: Athlone Press.
- APPADURAI, A. (1995) 'The Production of Locality'. In R. FARDON (ed 1995) *Counterworks – Managing the Diversity of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- BEATTIE, J. (1964) *Other Cultures*. London: Routledge.
- CERNEA, M.M. (1996) 'The Risks and Reconstruction Model for Resettling Displaced Populations'. Keynote Address presented at the International Conference on *Reconstructing Livelihoods: Towards New Approaches to Resettlement*. University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Programme, September 1996.
- CHEATER, A. (1995) 'Globalisation and the New Technologies of Knowing'. In M. STRATHERN (ed) *Shifting Contexts – Transformations in Anthropological Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- CONKLIN, B. (1995) 'Thus are our Bodies, Thus was our Custom: Mortuary Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society'. *American Ethnologist*, Vol 22, No 1, pp.75-101.
- CONKLIN, B. and GRAHAM, L.R. (1995) 'The Shifting Middle Ground: Amazonian Indians and Eco-Politics'. *American Anthropologist*, Vol 97, No 4, pp.695-710.
- DE WET, C. (1995) *Moving Together, Drifting Apart – Betterment Planning and Villagisation in a South African Homeland*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- DE WET, C. and HOLBROOK, G. (1997) 'Regionalisation of the Household: a Temporary Phase, or a Longer-Term Trend?' In C. DE WET and M. WHISSON (eds 1997) *From Reserve to Region – Apartheid and Social Change in the Keiskammaboek District of (former) Ciskei*. Grahamstown: Institute for Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University. Occasional Paper No 35.
- FERGUSON, R.B. (1990) 'Blood of the Leviathan: Western Contact and Warfare in Amazonia'. *American Ethnologist*, Vol 17, No 2, pp.237-257.
- HASTRUP, K. (1993) 'Self-Defining Worlds – The Anthropological Notion of Reality'. *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy*, Vol 28, pp.61-79.

- HASTRUP, K. and HERVIK, P. (1994) 'Introduction'. In K. HASTRUP and P. HERVIK (eds 1994) *Social Experience and Anthropological Knowledge*. London/New York: Routledge.
- HASTRUP, K. and OLWIG, K.F. (1997) 'Introduction'. In K.F. OLWIG and K. HASTRUP (eds 1997) *Siting Culture – the Shifting Anthropological Object*. London/New York: Routledge.
- JONES, S. (1993) *Assaulting Childhood – Children's Experiences of Migrancy and Hostel Life in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- MALINOWSKI, B. (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York: Dutton.
- MALKKI, L. (1997) 'News and Culture: Transitory Phenomena and the Fieldwork Tradition'. In A. GUPTA and J. FERGUSON (eds 1997) *Anthropological Locations – Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. Berkeley/London: University of California Press.
- MALKKI, L. (1998) 'Envisioning African Futures – Dystopia and the Social Imagination of Political Disaster'. Unpublished paper presented at the Conference on *The Growth of Forced Migration: New Directions in Research, Policy and Practice*. University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Programme, March 1998.
- MILLER, D. (1995) 'Anthropology, Modernity and Consumption'. In D. MILLER (ed 1995) *Worlds Apart – Modernity Through the Prism of the Local*. London: Routledge.
- SCUDDER, T. (1993) 'Development – Induced Relocation and Refugee Studies'. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol 6, No 2, pp.123-152.
- SØRENSEN, B.R. (1997) 'The Experience of Displacement: Reconstructing Places and Identities in Sri Lanka'. In K.F. OLWIG and K. HASTRUP (eds 1997) *Siting Culture – the Shifting Anthropological Object*. London/New York: Routledge.
- WILSON, R.A. (1997) 'Human Rights, Culture and Context: An Introduction'. In R.A. WILSON (ed 1997) *Human Rights, Culture and Context – Anthropological Perspectives*. London/Chicago: Pluto Press.