EDMUND LEACH
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL LIFE

STANLEY J. TAMBIAH

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CHAPTER 1

Edmund Leach (1910–1989): achievements

Edmund Ronald Leach was born in Sidmouth, Devon, England, on November 7, 1910. He went to school at Marlborough College and later entered Clare College, Cambridge, as an exhibitioner and read mathematics and mechanical sciences, obtaining a first class BA degree in 1932.

After some years of civilian life in China he returned to England and studied social anthropology under Bronislaw Malinowski and Raymond Firth at the London School of Economics. He was an active member of Malinowski's famous seminar. An abortive field trip to Kurdistan in 1938, frustrated by the Munich crisis,[1] was followed by a prolonged trip to Burma in 1939 in the course of which the Second World War broke out. From fall 1939[2] to the summer of 1945 he served with distinction as an officer in the Burma Army. He saw much of northern Burma, and he gained an unrivaled knowledge of its hill tribes, particularly the Kachin, on whom he was an undisputed authority.

Leach gained his Ph.D. from the London School of Economics in 1947 where he also obtained his first teaching appointment. He carried out a survey in Sarawak and his report entitled *Social Science Research in Sarawak* (1950) set out the guidelines for subsequent investigations by a number of distinguished anthropologists (particularly Derek Freeman, William Geddes, and Stephen Morris).

Edmund Leach[3] relinquished a readership at the LSE in 1953 in order to return to Cambridge as lecturer (1953–58). In 1954 he published

[1] On the basis of this aborted field trip, Leach wrote *Social and Economic Organization of Rowanduz Kurds*, London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropologyn, no. 3, London, 1940.

[2] Although recruited in 1939, he was allowed to continue with his fieldwork and he did not begin active service until 1941. He volunteered to join the Second Burma Rifles and was involved in the British retreat from the Japanese. He later commanded the Kachin irregular forces behind the enemy lines.

[3] He disliked his middle name Ronald and he did not use it. But he always used the initials E.R.L.

Political Systems of Highland Burma which embodied some of the results of his work in Burma. A field trip to Ceylon in 1953 provided the information for a second work of distinction: *Pul Eliya, A Village in Ceylon* (1961). He was in due course promoted Reader at Cambridge, and in 1972 the university honored him by appointing him to a personal chair. His research and writing vigorously continued throughout his career, despite mounting administrative and other responsibilities.

Leach's escalating academic recognition was signposted by his winning twice the Curl Essay Prize (1951, 1957) and the Rivers Memorial Medal (1958). He delivered the Malinowski Memorial Lecture (1959), the Henry Myers Lecture (1966), the Mason Memorial Lecture (1970), the Cantor Lectures at the Royal Society of Arts (1973), the Munro Lectures at the University of Edinburgh (1977), and the Huxley Memorial Lecture (1980). He spent a year in the United States in 1961 as a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, and a term at the Johns Hopkins University in 1976 as John Hinkley Visiting Professor. He was the first and only anthropologist so far invited by the BBC to deliver the Reith Lectures (*A Runaway world?* 1967) which notably brought him to the attention of the general public.

In the United States, Edmund Leach delivered the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures at The University of Rochester in 1975, the John Hinkley Lectures at the Johns Hopkins University in 1976, the Harvey Lecture Series, University of New Mexico (1983), and the Patten Foundation Lectures (1984–85) at Indiana University. I have most likely missed some other instances, but one might say that Leach accomplished a grand slam of distinguished lectures on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

Leach's wide-ranging substantial contributions to knowledge are attested by his impressive bibliography.[4] It is no exaggeration to say that in sheer versatility, originality, and range of writing he was and still is difficult to match among the anthropologists of the English-speaking world. His contributions have touched on kinship and social organization; hill tribes and valley peoples; land tenure and peasant economy; caste and class; myth and ritual; binary thought, classification, and liminality; information theory, semiotics, and symbolic communication; art and aesthetics; ethology and archeology; computer technology and model building; British structural-functional method and the

[4] See Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, *Edmund Leach: A Bibliography*, Occasional Paper, no. 42, 1990.

structuralism of Lévi-Strauss; biblical materials and the myths of classical Greece.

Altogether Leach was the author of some eight books, co-author of one, and editor of several essay collections. A hallmark of all his writings was a forceful, vigorous, direct and clear prose, effective in exposition as in debate. He was a tireless reviewer of books in anthropology and a variety of cognate disciplines, and a prolific essayist not only in professional journals but also in publications for the general reading public such as *The Listener*, *New Society*, *New Scientist*, *The Spectator*, *Encounter*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *New York Review of Books*, *London Review of Books*, and *New Republic*. He in fact wrote for and spoke to a much wider public and audience than the vast majority of social anthropologists are prone to, and positively sought to have a dialogue with specialists in other disciplines. All this added to his fame in mature years both as a notable spokesman for the discipline and as a commentator on general contemporary issues.

Apart from a distinguished academic career as a social anthropologist, Edmund Leach rendered noteworthy services to education, knowledge and professional societies in general. In 1966, he succeeded Lord Annan as Provost of King's College, a college which counts among its twentieth-century luminaries Lord Maynard Keynes, E.M. Forster, Goldsworthy Lowes-Dickinson, Rupert Brooke, Arthur Waley, Arthur Cecil Pigou and Lord Kaldor. As Provost of King's until 1979, he also served as Fellow of Eton College. In addition to being head of a famous college, he served at the highest levels in the administration of the university itself. His fellow anthropologists honored him by electing him Chairman of the Association of Social Anthropologists (1966–70) and President of the Royal Anthropological Institute (1971–75). His gaining a wider academic recognition was signified by his election as President of the British Humanist Association (1970) and as a Fellow of the British Academy (1972). He was a member of the Social Sciences Research Council for a number of years beginning in 1968, and was elected Honorary Fellow of the London School of Economics (1974), Honorary Fellow of the School of Oriental and African Studies (1974), Honorary Fellow of Clare College (1986), and Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1968).

A high point of Leach's career was reached when he was knighted in 1975, and also elected a trustee of the British Museum (1975–80). In 1976 the University of Chicago conferred on him the honorary degree

of Doctor of Humane Letters, and Brandeis University honored him in the same way.

This enumeration of achievements might unproblematically convey the idea that Leach by virtue of his own capacities, his social background, comfortable circumstances, public schooling and Cambridge education, and his considerable writings quite naturally ascended the ladder of achievement to become a much honored member of the British Establishment. However, the canonized Leach himself would not have settled for a hagiographic narrative, nor did he want himself to be considered as aspiring and conforming to the career of an honors list grandee. We have before us a complex person, subject to tensions and frustrations, blessed with a creative experimental and reflexive mind that was more concerned with restlessly probing than with consolidating knowledge. While he tested the presuppositions and limits of orthodoxy, he was deeply protective and conservationist about the institutions he valued.

Consider these examples where Leach "deconstructs" and subverts himself while in doing so he also makes a social commentary:

Adam Kuper wrote in *New Society* in January 1987, in one of the unusually informal, humorous and revealing interviews he had with him: "Professor Sir Edmund Leach – knight, former Provost of King's ... establishment figure incarnate now – says that when he has to revise his entry in *Who's Who* he always roars with laughter. 'Who is this comic clown? There I am, aged 76, with all this long list of honours. The whole hierarchy of the establishment – the good and the great – is a joke. But I use it. And why not? I still have (academic) political objectives.' " One should of course not miss the pride behind this comic stance.

Another window on to Leach's scheme of evaluations and what he thought was worth working for is provided by his reply (dated July 21, 1975) to my own letter to him congratulating him on his knighthood: "The Knighthood has elicited an enormous shower of mail from people all over the world, some of whom I haven't seen for forty years! On the other hand, my appointment as a Trustee of the British Museum, which is really much more distinguished but for which I have to do some work, though likewise announced in *The Times*, did not produce a single letter!" In his own distinctive way, he celebrated and turned to anthropological advantage his elevation by giving a witty and perceptive lecture on the ritual of investiture as knight. Again at the University of Chicago in the following year, as I walked beside him in the academic procession to the neo-Gothic Rockefeller Chapel where he would receive his honorary

doctorate, Leach chuckled and directed my attention to the order of the procession: on the way to the chapel the president of the university with the candidates for the honor were last in position and to enter, and no doubt when the ceremony concluded, they would be at the head of the departing procession: a little lesson to me on processional order, entry, and exit, and the marking of status hierarchy.