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Im Dialog / In Dialogue

An Interview with Geoffrey Benjamin¹

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Geoffrey Benjamin received his PhD (Social Anthropology) from the University of Cambridge. His academic employments have been at the University of Singapore (1967-76), the Australian National University (Canberra, 1976-81) and the National University of Singapore (1981-2000). Since 1999 Geoffrey Benjamin is Associate Professor in the Division of Sociology at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore. He has also held visiting appointments at (among others) the CNRS (Paris, 1985) and the IAS (Leiden, 1997). Geoffrey Benjamin has conducted research on various Orang Asli groups, Malay, Singaporean and Indonesian society, as well as on Mon-Khmer and Austronesian linguistics. In 2002 he co-edited with Cynthia Chou a collection of papers named "Tribal Communities in the Malay World".

¹ The interview took place at Prof. Benjamin's office (Division of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University) in Singapore on 11 June 2008. Some questions and answers have been slightly edited for improved clarity. Christian Wawrinec would like to acknowledge the financial support (Forschungstipendium FNr.180) by the University of Vienna.

Christian Wawrinec: For those readers who do not know yet about your research in South-East Asia - could you give some information on your academic background? In your curriculum vitae you mention that you did your BA in both the natural and the social sciences.

Geoffrey Benjamin: Well, my first degree was in biological sciences (botany, zoology, biochemistry). Then I switched to social anthropology with linguistics. Finally I went straight to a PhD in social anthropology.

CW: What were the reasons why you did not continue within the biological sciences?

GB: I did not particularly enjoy the laboratory work. If I had continued I would probably have gone into animal behaviour. Although I went to university intending to become a biochemist, that interest dried up after a while. But I discovered while I was there that anthropology contained a lot of things I was interested in, although those topics (linguistics and ethnomusicology) were rather peripheral in terms of what was taught in Cambridge. However, after studying the subject a little - especially with Edmund Leach, who was my supervisor - I really got interested in the central areas of social anthropology too.

CW: Why did you decide to do your research in South-East Asia?

GB: Two reasons, I think. First of all, Edmund Leach himself. He was my tutor in Cambridge and he was a long-time South-East Asian specialist who worked in different parts of the region. As an undergraduate I took the course on South and South-East Asia that he taught, with just one other student attending. The second reason is that an expedition of the old-fashioned kind was arranged to go to Malaysia, by a Malaysian student studying at Cambridge, and I agreed to go along as the ethnologist. It never took place, but by then I already had begun reading up the little material there was at that time. Edmund Leach and I thought that one particular group, the Temiars, would make a good topic. There was initial work on them done in the 1930s and Edmund Leach himself had thought of continuing that. The Temiars seemed to exhibit several of the things that were interesting in anthropology at that time. One was swidden farming, another was cognatic kinship structures. (It later turned out that they had something that Edmund Leach denied existed, namely cognatic descent groups.) The added interest for me was their Mon-Khmer language, which gave me a chance to actually do some linguistic fieldwork and get the grammar and vocabulary. It worked out because I had also been a student of John Lyons before he became well-known as a linguist. I had not been in South-East Asia before and in those days - these plans were taking place in 1963 - you could

not fly there unless you were extremely rich. I went there by ship and came back by ship at the end of the fieldwork. That is how I got started.

CW: Your initial fieldwork took place between 1964 and 1965. Could you tell me about your memories on those days?

GB: Recently, I have written some of this up because NUS Press is planning to publish two books of mine based on my work - one on Temiar society (Benjamin forthcoming a) and one on Temiar religion (Benjamin forthcoming b). In the Foreword I have tried to provide some of the background. I was working in a very remote area - indeed, so remote that I had to go in by helicopter and my food had to be literally parachuted in once a month by courtesy of the various military agencies then operating. This was during the Vietnam War and my research area was in a part of Malaysia where the communist emergency had not in fact ended. It was a tightly controlled area. There was a flying doctor service, so once a month I could get letters out, but it took many weeks to receive a reply. Nowadays you can drive into this area in a normal car, but I was really isolated in those days. It was two days' walk to the nearest town, Gua Musang, which was then only on the Malayan railway, not on the road. Now it is a big town on the highway. Things have changed a lot. I did not speak much Malay in those days but it was my contact language. Within six weeks I forced myself to switch to Temiar, which is completely unrelated to Malay. After about three months I got reasonably fluent, but it was two or three years before I finally correctly phonemicised the language. It took a long time.

CW: So what exactly were your tasks during this first year of fieldwork?

GB: It was more than one year - it was eighteen months. During that time I got basic material on social organization, religion and language. Although I had a home village I also travelled into many other valleys. I was not particularly fit when I started, but I was very fit when I ended. Then I went back to Cambridge to write up the PhD thesis. It took me about a year to decide on Temiar religion as the topic. In the meantime I wrote some of the basic papers on the Temiars that were later published. After I had finished, within the same week of the oral exam of my PhD I was back in Singapore for a newly opened position at the old University of Singapore in the then brand-new Department of Sociology.

CW: Some of those essays you have published during the last decades will now be included in your two books?

GB: Yes, four of those early essays on aspects of Temiar social organization will be chapters in one of the new books. There will be some later material too. Since I have been going back to the field in the last two years after a very long gap, recent changes will be dealt with as well. And the changes have been quite massive. It is not really a tribal society anymore: some individuals are tribal, others are rural proletariat, and so on, but with a great deal of internal differentiation. Modern politics has entered, and I was able to look at the campaigning amongst the Temiars during the recent Malaysian general election. The religion has very much changed: now it is not a matter of Temiar religion in the singular, but of Temiar religions in the plural. There have been adoptions of world religions like Islam, Christianity or Bahai, and there have been revivalist cults from within their own tradition. I should nevertheless point out that, although my main ethnographic focus has been on the Temiars, I have worked in one way or another on all the Orang Asli groups. I have also worked on Malay culture and linguistics.

CW: In your curriculum vitae you also mention bio-sociology as one of your fields of interest and expertise - what exactly is meant by that?

GB: I guess it is what would otherwise be called biological or physical anthropology. It is a passive interest, not something I do active research in. I try to keep up with the literature and I do keep in active touch with at least some of the people who are doing research of that kind in Malaysia and Indonesia. I am also prepared to teach human evolution and human variation at a very elementary level. But in terms of active research - no, I do not do that. I have done some language classification work and I have done some work on the ethnohistory and prehistory of the Malay Peninsula in which the linguistic data have figured quite highly. Others have since tried to see if the things I have said made any genetic, biological or archaeological sense.

CW: Talking about interdisciplinary studies. Do you think “interdisciplinarity” is just a fashionable talk nowadays or is there more on that? What do you think can the various disciplines that you actively pursue contribute to interdisciplinary research?

GB: I have a quite definite view on this. For me disciplines are teaching devices, and not really research devices. They are very useful for getting students orientated to train their minds, but when it comes to real-world research I think disciplines should be put aside and people should focus on problems. Of course, they will bring their specialist training to their work but they must keep their mind open to all the other things that feed in. I have - apart from the period

when I was in the Prehistory and Anthropology department at ANU - always been in a sociology department. I have never felt it strange not being in a social anthropology department. Any research today inevitably involves aspects of culture, social organization, political science, history and geographical issues, and even linguistics. (Linguistics does require a bit more of specialist training, which unfortunately most anthropologists in the British tradition do not have. In the American tradition they do.) Interdisciplinary research brings in music too. There is a central core area of social science where we do not need to distinguish disciplines, and then there are ancillary areas where you can spread out into things like language and music, or - if you are interested - representational art, architecture and so on. In the real world these things are not separate from each other.

CW: Coming to the Austrian tradition of research in South-East Asia - you wrote an introduction to the reprint of Paul Schebesta's "Among the Forest Dwarfs of Malaya" (1973). Have you been influenced by this Austrian anthropologist?

GB: Yes, I wrote a short introduction to the reprint of his *Urwaldzwerge* book based on my own short ethnographic researches among various Semang groups, but I was not exactly influenced by that book, as it does not have a great deal of material in it on my primary concerns. It is his big three-volume work "Die Negrito Asiens" (1952-1957) which contains his most detailed material. (There is a Human Relations Area Files translation of this. Those files are difficult to get, but there is a set at the National University of Singapore library.) There are aspects of Schebesta's work from which one could learn quite a lot of things. He worked mainly on the Semang, whom I have also worked on. These groups, who neighbour the Temiars, were - traditionally at least - nomadic hunter-gatherers. One thing I liked about Schebesta's work was that he was a quite honest researcher. He was sent out to find amongst the Semang people evidence for *Urmonotheismus*, the idea of an original monotheism, and indeed his expedition [in 1924] was financed by the then Pope [Pius XI.]. But he later admitted in his writings that there was no such thing and that the Semang were thoroughgoing polytheists. He had to give up the idea of primitive monotheism, but in doing so he nevertheless gathered a lot of information, including some quite valuable linguistic material.

CW: Do you think that those old texts still contain important information for young scholars?

GB: Well, there has been quite a lot of research in recent years and we have a bibliography on Orang Asli studies put together by Lye Tuck-Po (2001) which has many hundreds of items

in it. I would say almost every Orang Asli group by now has had at least some study done of them. Some of this has not been published unfortunately, even though some people worked there 30 years ago or so. But there is now a substantial body of workers. We get on very well with each other and have our own newsgroup to exchange information. An archive has been set up in Keene State College² where Rosemary Gianni works, and there is another archive in Malaysia run by Colin Nicholas at the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns³. There are also a few Orang Asli themselves who are scholars and contribute quite seriously.

CW: Was there any special reason why you did not go back to the UK to take a university position after finishing your PhD studies?

GB: I just seem to be happy in this part of the world (which includes Australia, where I was for six years). I have nothing against the UK, but I have been closer to my field area here. I sort of settled down here and I am perfectly happy in South-East Asia. It is not as opposed to anywhere else - it is just that, in its own terms, it suits me.

CW: As a final question - do you have any practical advice for young students just trying to figure out what subject to choose for themselves? What should they pay their attention to?

GB: That is a little bit difficult. I mean, let's face it - a lot of students come into university, especially in this part of the world, with some kind of vocational aim in mind. Some parents tend to push them into subjects they believe their children can easily get a job in. The actual situation is not like that, and I would say that most of our students spend at least some of their time stretching their minds. That means not coming up to the professors asking 'What is it that we need to know to pass the exam?', to which I always reply 'There is no limit: the more you can put into what you do, the higher grade you are going to get.' I find that students these days do not read as much as students were previously expected to read. This may be because there are other competing sources now, like the Internet and television. It is only about ten percent of students who really do read the large amount of material that students traditionally were asked to read. But even if they cannot manage that, I feel that from time to time they should deliberately tackle some quite difficult material from the original literature. They should not just read in the textbooks. They should read the sort of material that professional social scientists and researchers have written for other researchers to read. When they start on such a reading they think they will never understand it. Then, as

² Orang Asli Archive, Keene State College, NH, USA. <http://www.keene.edu/library/orangasli/>

³ Centre for Orang Asli Concerns, Subang Jaya, Malaysia. <http://www.coac.org.my/>

they proceed they achieve a little personal victory and realize that after all they are getting their minds stretched. Of course, the majority of graduates do not become professional social scientists but go into quite different areas. That is fine: it will be all the better for them to have done something that does enlarge their outlook. The only other advice I can actively give students is: make sure to do something that interests you. In the final analysis, most employers do not want people who already think they know what is what. They want people with good classes of degrees who they can further train on the job. So if you want to get a good class of degree - do something that interests you.

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