Historical and institutional establishment of anthropology in Denmark

Given the assignment to do a "brief account of the historical and institutional development of Anthropology" in whatever country or region in question, you are inevitable faced by the necessity of one of the most anxiety-provoking requirements for an anthropologist – or for me as an anthropologist at any rate: to suppress the detail. It is not at all incidental that one of the key anthropological phrases states that ‘detail matters’. So, acknowledging the importance of detail, the following will expose itself to a whole range of justified points of critique from Danish peers. Notwithstanding this little detail, I will try to make a generalized overview of the most distinct movements and tendencies in Danish anthropology within the last century.

One of the few accounts of the historical development of Danish anthropology can be found in the book Antropologien i Danmark (Høiris, 1986 – Anthropology in Denmark). Through a fieldwork amongst the work of Danish anthropologists, Høiris establishes a comprehensive review of the principal tendencies within the academic field of Danish anthropology. Høiris’ objective is to maintain the societal function of Danish anthropology in general, and Danish anthropological research, in the period from 1860 to 1960. Apparently, according to Høiris, there is not much to display as regards the theoretical provision of the field in this period:

"The theoretical developments of Danish anthropology has very rarely been able to hold its ground in international context. Primarily this is due to the fact, that its practitioners have perceived anthropology as an empirical science. As a result of this, the theoretical awareness has been very low, and the comprehension of theories developed the last 80 years almost absent, and contributions to theoretical development totally absent."(Høiris; 1986: 9 – my translation).

Certainly this seems like a harsh verdict on Danish anthropology still in embryo, but, nevertheless, maybe not a totally unfounded one.

The early institutionalized anthropological work and research in Denmark were – naturally - influenced by the social, political, economic and scientific environment at the time. Among the paramount influences, on the role of the dawning anthropological insights, was the case of Danish colonialism. At that time Denmark had liquidated most of its colonies and only Greenland remained as Danish colonial territory. This fact impacted on the discipline in the way, that a lot of work evolved around Greenland as a specific anthropological topic (Eskimology), and it was around this
work the only independent epistemological work was initiated. Perhaps due to the relatively insignificance of Greenland to Danish society, and the fact that anthropological eskimology focussed on prehistoric matters rather than contemporary societal matters, these epistemological developments never really assumed definite form, and topical conditions of that time, were only made subject for analysis to the extent that they could elucidate prehistoric conditions. (Høiris: 11)

Therefore, according to Høiris, Danish anthropology was not confronted with any demands regarding contributions to the solving of societal matters, and consequently the independent theoretical development that such a confrontation in other countries had brought along, failed to materialize. Indeed the prehistoric focus had great influence on anthropological work at the time, and also on the academic regulations of the anthropological study, when it was initiated as an independent study in 1945 at Copenhagen University, and in 1963 at Aarhus University. The few people working ethnographical or anthropological – who also were assigned to the education of the ‘new’ anthropologists - all had educational background in archeology, history or geography, and therefore these academic disciplines dominated the theoretical and practical inputs to the study. Likewise, the study in Copenhagen as well as in Aarhus was placed physically and theoretical in close connection with the existing prehistoric museum collections.

The establishment of an independent and preponderant anthropological research environment under these conditions were, of course, difficult if not impossible, and, consequently, anthropology were conceived either as an appendix to the archaeological collections of the National Museum, or to foreign anthropological work. (Høiris: 12)

Additional to the strong influence from prehistoric sciences on incipient Danish anthropology, the initial education of anthropologists were centred around cultural geography, and the inspiration were sought in German and American cultural anthropology (Høiris: 256).

New inspirations

In the mid- and late 60’ies a whole range of societal and institutional transformations took place, that had influence on the anthropological study and epistemology. This counts for Denmark as well as for many other European countries. In Denmark however, besides the general societal transformations, the possibility to study ethnography was established in 1963 in Aarhus, and anthropology at the University of Copenhagen commenced as a separate and independent institute in 1965. Beside these institutional changes, the content and potential of the anthropological insight were readjusted, and the focus turned to more contemporary matters. The prevailing and dominant
museum anthropology, and the interest towards material and historic culture were supplemented – some would say replaced – by the social anthropology school.

Through the next decades, the study and research in city- and peasant societies, developmental tendencies in 3. World countries, and the impact and nature of imperialism, were seen as unavoidable elements of the anthropological education, and the definition of theoretical foundation and sphere of interest were subject for intense debate. Høiris (1986; 269) describes this, as one of the most distinctive breaks in the history of Danish anthropology, and one of the students from the newly started ethnographic study in Aarhus recounts:

“The museum was a setting for the everyday life as a student. We helped building up the exhibitions. But the study was on its way to a higher sphere, and soon we - the students - developed a mild contempt toward museums. (...) Paradoxical because it all started in 1953 when the faculty of humanities initiated the ethnographic collection at University of Aarhus.” (Dybbroe et al. 1991: 19)

In continuation of the new role assigned to anthropology, the need for distinctively new ways of perceiving the societies and people that were the objects of the study became apparent. The development inevitable entailed a rupture with classifications like ‘the primitives’, and solidarity with the people studied became a truism.

Some of the main theoretical inspirational sources, in this period of transformation, was British social anthropology – later primarily the Manchester school and the network theories (Høiris et al.; 1999: 92) - but also Barth, one of the leading Scandinavian anthropologists at the time, and his concept ‘transactional anthropology’ played a significant role.

Moving on to the present headlines in Danish anthropology, in the next section I will refer to some of the more recent tendencies regarding educational structure, educational and research priorities, and institutional environments. Some of the more apparent inspirations in recent Danish anthropology, are rooted in linguistic science with its structuralism and cognitive anthropological research in the structure of reasoning, and postmodernism also influenced the tradition with its self-critical oriented reflexivity. Concomitant to these new lines of approach, the orientation against more applied forms of anthropology, e.g. medical anthropology, endures.
Contemporary anthropological education and research.

Danish universities are adhering to the regulations of the Bologna process, thus sustaining a system of education with a 3-year undergraduate programme, a 2-year postgraduate programme and the opportunity to proceed into a 3 year PhD programme. However, a new PhD-system has been introduced, where students after under graduation and 1 year post-grad can apply for a PhD scholarship. Likewise international students can apply for a PhD scholarship on basis of a 4-year bachelor or a 3-year bachelor and 1 year post-grad. or equivalent qualification.

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In Denmark anthropological degrees can be acquired at two universities; University of Copenhagen (CU), and University of Aarhus (AU).

University of Copenhagen:

In Copenhagen the anthropological study was established Just after Second World War in 1945 at the Nationalmuseet, and twenty years later the study commenced as a separate institute. This institute was, and still is, placed under the faculty of social science. Today the institute has approximately 26 researchers, 25 PhD.-students, and in 2006 there were 563 registered students of Anthropology.

Institute of Anthropology

The institute has picked out five research priority areas:

- Health and lifestyle: Founded on classical medical anthropology this field of research has moved in direction of more global health anthropology. The institute endeavour to combine
these two directions in the three central research themes AIDS/HIV (focusing primarily on Africa); Reproductive health and fertility problems (primarily Vietnam); and lifestyle and health promotion in Denmark. In 2004 the institute in collaboration with Department of Ethnography and Social anthropology, AU established an MA-degree in Health anthropology (MSA).

- **Integration and welfare:** This second area combines the research into integration with research into welfare, and includes organisational- and policy-anthropology. In the autumn of 2006 the institute and Copenhagen College of Social Work established an MA-degree in Anthropology and welfare (MIAV).

- **Globalisation and exchange:** The third area researches into the leaping rhythm and shifting intensity of global exchange, and the social roots and dynamics of this exchange. Thereby offering a deeper insight in the meeting between different knowledge forms and different understandings of the surrounding world.

- **Security and Technology:** The scientific focus on risk society and ontological uncertainty characteristic of late modernity is the outset of this research area. The human need for a contextualising frame is a basic need, and it is the object to locate the different frames and technologies that ontological certainty is being based upon. The scope of empirical research in this focus area covers as different fields as magical conceptions and rebuilding processes of post-conflict societies.

- **Trade and innovation:** This area of research has been established as a result of increasing demand for anthropological competences in business. Especially regarding technologies of innovation the institute seeks to enrich traditional analysis of organisation- and enterprise culture. It is the ambition to develop and profile this area on background of research in organisation culture, new markets, relative value concepts, cultural creativity and materiality.

Research programs at Anthropology, CU:

- **FIID** - *The Family as an integrating Institution for Refugees and Immigrants in Denmark: Local and Global Life contexts*. This project focuses on the significance of family relations and family networks (local, regional and global) for refugees and immigrants in the integrationprocess.
• **SF-centre** – *Centre for Research on Social Difference and Health Promotion*. The centre aims at developing a critical comparative understanding of health promotion policy in relation to social differences.

• **NECEN** - Nordic and East / Central European Network for Qualitative Social Research. NECEN is a project-based network, which offers a framework for a wide range of cooperative academic activities. The network provides opportunities for discussion, cooperation, joint fundraising, joint publications, student and teacher exchange programs etc.

• **Habitation in time and space** – A research of how people (especially the sociological defined middleclass) in Denmark nowadays form their identity and express their connectedness to others through habitation. Especially with focus on the relation between spatial and social structure.

• **The Interfaces of Reason** – *The interfaces of Reason: New perspectives in anthropological studies of magic, social technology and uncertainty*. A research into the shared features of the ‘irrational’ everyday search for meaning and the scientific claim to rationality.

Other research programs affiliated with this institute are: Bilingual children in Danish Kindergartens, Tororo Community Health, and Civilising Institutions in a Modern Welfare state.

As a student at Anthropology, CU, you will find that many of the preliminary courses are held in English. A specific course plan for international students is however available.

**University of Aarhus**

Anthropology and Ethnography at AU is part of a joint institute between Anthropology, Archaeology and Linguistics. It is situated in beautiful surroundings, neighbouring the archaeological and ethnographic Moesgaard Museum. Since the initiation of ethnography at AU in 1963, there has continuously been a close connectedness between the ethnographic and archaeological university departments and the museum. A result of this is a far-reaching professional and administrative community to the benefit of both parts, involving around 80 experts - archaeologists and ethnographers from the museum and the university.

Whereas the institute in Copenhagen is attached to the Faculty of Social Science, the institute in Aarhus is attached to the Faculty of Humanities. In 2005 the Faculty of Humanities appointed three
research priority areas. Two of these are coordinated and directed by anthropologists from Department of Anthropology and Ethnography, AU:

- **Globalisation**: This research project gathers some 75 scholars from the Faculty of Humanities. The research projects seek to analyse the complexities of lived global realities in a cross-disciplinary approach, and in a historical and comparative perspective. The project is divided into three sub-themes: *Materiel Culture and identity shaping in a global past and present; Politics, identity and development in a global world; and aesthetics and literature on globalised terms*.

- **Cognition, Communication and Culture**: CCC is a cross-disciplinary project and function as a forum for the exchange of ideas, and a network for the interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation of projects related to the subject. The intention is to serve as a cluster of autonomous yet coordinated units of research. The project is organised into five subtopics: 1) Cognition and the Brain, 2) Explanation and Evidence in a Mental and Neural Context, 3) Comparative Linguistics, 4) Memory and Cognition, 5) Culture and Cognition. CCC arranges regular monthly workshops.

**Department of Anthropology and Ethnography, AU**

The department includes around 22 researchers, 13 PhD.-students, and in October 2006 a total of 462 students were registered. The research profile (in preparation) for the department emphasizes the compliance with anthropological tradition of empirical research based on ethnographic fieldwork. Furthermore it stresses a wish to maintain regional expertise within the following areas: Africa, the Arctic area, Asia, Europe (especially the North Atlantic region and Denmark), the Middle East and the Southern Pacific. Thematically the department has designated six research priority areas:

- **Globalisation, conflict and development**: Subversion of the traditional opposition between local and global, cultural and politics creates a chasm in which the need for anthropological research has arisen. The actual research interest in this field concerns themes as ethno-religious violence; conflict and reconciliation; the new global synthesis between politics and religion; democracy and decentralisation; the global political struggle for rights for natural resources amongst ‘natives’ etc.

- **Culture and politics**: This research area examines the increasing politicisation of the culture concept in light of the multifarious ways in which cultural phenomenon’s are welded with
power enactment e.g. in identification processes, social demarcation, and political in- and exclusion.

- **Religion and modernity:** The simultaneous development towards religious reappearance and secularisation of society is the focus of this research area. Comparative ethnographic analysis of how the role of religion is negotiated in public space seems central to understanding modern world and the global challenges.

- **Welfare and health:** The department is conducting theoretical as well as applied research into the field of illness and health especially regarding the socio-cultural definition and distribution of psychic, functional and epidemic illness, health politics and prevention, medical ethics etc.

- **Cognition and knowledge:** This priority area is part of the rapid increasing research into science and technology (e.g. development projects and research in neurology); ethnographic studies of learning and cognition; relations between knowledge and practice; and the theoretical perspective of culture in which culture appears as different knowledge domains and knowledge traditions.

- **Innovation:** In recent years the department has developed research into this field. Especially with interest in user-powered innovation. I.e. innovation created in interaction between supplier, customer, user, collaborators and leaders. The department will seek to strengthen its research into this field in the future.

Research programme: **The Re-Enchantment of Politics in Asia.** The project consists of five individual research projects, and examines different aspects such as the dynamics of democratisation and local politics in post–conflict Maluku; the manner in which religious beliefs and practices inform political practice and imaginaries in Tibetan Buddhist communities; the prevalence of esoteric experiences and their use in everyday politics and the negotiation of morality in different spheres of life in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; the role of the Catholic Church in the nation-building process in Timor; and the role of history in identity making in Bahrain.

In the **International Course Catalogue** it is possible to find courses at Anthropology and Ethnography, AU, offered in English.

The UNESCO-collection: Department of Anthropology and Ethnography administers the collection of ethnographic items from different areas around the world. Since 1964 the UNESCO-collection
has disseminated teaching material to Danish educational institutions. Today the collection consists of 40,000 items.

**European and Common Ethnology, CU** (danish site)

Ethnology was introduced as a university subject in 1971. It began as a lector ship at the department of Cultural History in 1954, upgraded in 1959 to a professorship in the new subject of Material Folk Culture. In 1971 it changed its name to the one at present: European Ethnology. Today it is part of the SAXO-institute which consists of departments of History, archaeology, Ethnology and Greek and Latin. Some 220 students are registered at department of Ethnology. A holistic perspective is dominant and the interest points toward historic and present studies of everyday life and cultural differences in modern societies. A common feature in many recent ethnologic studies is the interplay between different cultures within the studied society. The field of study is Europe, but primarily Denmark and its neighbouring countries are in focus.

Examples of problems associated with modern ethnology could be: How can one culture be built, maintained and changed in relation to other cultures? What connection remains between states, different life forms and the individual? How is science linked to these processes?

For further information about the institute and requirements see [Information for international students](#) and [Course guide](#).

The **Danish Research School of Anthropology and Ethnography** was established in 2001. It is supported by the Danish Research Training Council and was established to strengthen PhD training in anthropology. The Research School is based at the country's two anthropology departments, and is committed to developing dialogue and practice around central concerns in anthropology today. PhD students in anthropology and their supervisors at other institutes are welcome to participate in the Research School’s activities.

**Concluding remarks**

Shortly after the admission of new students at Danish universities this year, a debate arose in the medias. The background was a decrease in the number of applicants for a university study, and especially the humanities were affected by descending interest. The faculty of humanities at University of Aarhus for instance, noted the fewest number of applications in a ten-year period. If
you have a closer look at this statistic however, it shows, that most language-studies and studies like archaeology, history, theology and philosophy certainly have experienced a decrease, while studies like linguistics and ethnography have an increase in admissions\(^1\). The same tendency applies for the study of European and Common Ethnology (35/2007 – 43/2008), and to a lesser degree Anthropology at University of Copenhagen (94/2007 – 95/2008). Naturally, mere numbers say nothing about the state of the art, but only inform us about the ability to attract new successors to the discipline. Regarding the state of the art, I believe that the above outlined different teaching programs and topics of research-projects indicates a very healthy and integral profession, with the excess to join forces with, and make use of, other disciplines within the same area of interest. My own place of work - Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research – is a very tangible example of the latter, due to the composition of the staff. Counting some 35 employees, the two largest groups are anthropologists/ethnographers and psychologists, and besides this, there are employees with educational background in sociology, philosophy, political science and law.

Other departments and centres where anthropological theory and method are applied in research and teaching, are:

- Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies (ToRS), CU,
- Centre for Comparative Cultural Studies, CU
- Department of Intercultural Communication and Management, Copenhagen Business School

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\(^1\) Actually Ethnography and Social Anthropology at University of Aarhus are increasing the number of students from 80 (2007) to 94 (2008).
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