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Axel Sommerfelt in the history of social anthropology

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ABSTRACT

An unsung alumnus of the Manchester School, Axel Sommerfelt (b. 1926) published little during his career, but has nevertheless had a major impact on contemporary Norwegian anthropology. Following six years as a lecturer in Salisbury, he taught at the University of Oslo from 1966 until his retirement in 1996. This article traces his intellectual itinerary. Beginning with a re-study of Fortes's Tallensi material, Sommerfelt later carried out fieldwork on inter-ethnic relations in south-western Uganda. He distinguished himself from his Norwegian colleagues through an interest in colonial history, nationalism and structural power which tends to be absent from Fredrik Barth's work. Sommerfelt's teaching and mainly unpublished writings reveal him as a supporter of a strong empiricist programme and a skilled Africanist who would have been a worthy contributor to the Manchester School, had he only published his work.

KEYWORDS

Manchester School;
ethnicity; Norwegian
anthropology

More often than not, the unsung heroes of our disciplinary history either wrote in a small language, were located in an unprestigious institution or failed to publish much. Axel Sommerfelt belongs mainly to the last category, although he did write extensively in Norwegian for the national encyclopedia. However, he was comfortably bilingual and saw no obstacle in the mounting pressure to publish in English. There were other causes for his reluctance to publish his work from East Africa, and perfectionism may have been one of them. His father was the renowned linguist Alf Sommerfelt (1892–1965), who was instrumental in introducing structural linguistics in Norway and a member of the government in exile during the German occupation from 1940 to 1945. Axel's mother was Aimée Sommerfelt (1892–1975), a highly regarded author especially of children's books, who was among the first in Norway to write fiction for young adults about Third World issues and later about immigration. Her *Veien til Agra* (1959, Eng. trans. *The Road to Agra*, 1961) about two poor Indian children in search of medical treatment for an eye disease, had a prominent place on my bookshelf as a boy, and truth to tell, my novel *Veien til Barranquilla* ('The road to Barranquilla', 2012), nods towards Aimée Sommerfelt in the title. Axel's paternal grandfather, an educator also named Axel Sommerfelt (1860–1939), was president of the Norwegian Academy of Science from 1914 to 1926.

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The Sommerfelt household in young Axel's household would have been an intellectually stimulating one but also one which set high standards.

Sommerfelt's intellectual itinerary has been documented in an extensive interview conducted by Rune Flikke and Jan K. Simonsen (2008), which appears for the first time in English translation in this issue of *History and Anthropology*. He tells Flikke and Simonsen that he was recruited to the resistance movement during the war as a teenager, through the boy scout movement. According to his own account, he was quite unfocused for a few years after the war, dabbling in Egyptology at the Historical Museum in Oslo, until he discovered that there were exhibitions representing people living today just two floors up the stairs. He introduced himself to the professor at the Ethnographic Museum, Gutorm Gjessing (1906–79), explaining that he wished to study anthropology. Gjessing welcomed him, adding that it would be nice to have a student since there were at the time none, but warned him that there were just four positions for anthropologists in the country, and they were all occupied by young men. Sommerfelt would soon become a central figure in the 'attic gang', a handful of dedicated students increasingly under Fredrik Barth's intellectual leadership, who were determined to create a new discipline, fresh and sharp, devoid of the layers of dust that had for generations gathered on the mahogany furniture in the Ethnographic Museum.

Gjessing, trained as an archaeologist, had a wide-ranging, multidisciplinary approach to the study of humanity (Eriksen 2018). He wished to synthesise cultural history, archaeology and geography as well as sociocultural anthropology, and was unimpressed by the new, slimmed-down, narrowly focused social anthropology from the British school, to which Sommerfelt and his contemporaries were committed. When Sommerfelt's fellow student Harald Eidheim (1925–2012) prepared for his M. Phil. degree (*magistergrad*), Gjessing suggested that he could build his dissertation on the collections in the museum. Eidheim refused and went on to do fieldwork on Sami–Norwegian ethnicity in Northern Norway. Sommerfelt was also keen to do ethnographic fieldwork, but the plans fell through for financial reasons, and in the event, he wrote a theoretical re-analysis of Meyer Fortes's Tallensi studies from Ghana (Sommerfelt 1956). Sommerfelt came from a family which was well endowed with cultural and intellectual capital, but they were not materially wealthy.

At the time, the young anthropology students, who would go on to shape the discipline in Norway in the next decades, saw themselves as rebels and innovators confronting the crumbling edifice of dated cultural history. Posterity has tended to view their role in this way, and not entirely unfairly, but it should nevertheless be pointed out that Gjessing, for all his shortcomings, represented a vision for anthropology, as early as the late 1940s, which would later gain traction, namely that it should take seriously Third World issues and environmental destruction (Gjessing 1977). A political radical, he was a founding member of the Socialist People's Party (now the Socialist Left Party), which broke away from Labour in 1961 chiefly for its Third World engagement and opposition to NATO.

Sommerfelt's view of the scientific endeavour differed from Gjessing's, although they would have shared many of the same political views. He may have been the most consistent empiricist of his generation, rejecting generalisations which were not carefully underpinned by empirical documentation. His critical attitude to Gjessing's occasionally lofty speculations and explicit normative statements would later reappear in his rather cool view of structuralism and dogmatic versions of Marxist anthropology. In the

aforementioned interview, he comments on the rivalry between Max Gluckman and Edmund Leach by indicating that

[Leach's] material is very thin considering the large and comprehensive conclusions he draws. Gluckman is more of a ground-crawler (*markkryper*). He wants to be down there and build his conclusions on very close observations. (Flikke & Simonsen 2008, quote from longer, unpublished version)

Yet Sommerfelt concedes that both Gluckman and Leach were looking in the same direction, towards a more dynamic view of social life than that offered by the rigid, tidy models from structural-functionalism. As students, the 'attic gang' had been shaped by Radcliffe-Brown's elegant models of social integration, but structural-functionalism was by now under fire from several quarters. Evans-Pritchard himself had repudiated the quest for 'natural laws of society' in his inaugural lecture at Oxford (Evans-Pritchard 1948). Isaac Schapera – a student of Malinowski – visited Oslo in the mid 1950s and strengthened their belief in an actor-centered perspective, and Sommerfelt further mentions Gluckman's BBC lectures (Gluckman 1956) as decisive for him. In the book based on the lectures, Gluckman does not quite abandon the structural-functionalist concern with social integration, but shows how conflict can ultimately be integrative (arguing along similar lines as Lewis Coser, but with superior empirical documentation), and also shows that societies such as Nuer communities can be torn between contradictory principles of cohesion, in their case loyalty towards village versus lineage, respectively. Sommerfelt's re-analysis of Fortes is indebted to these perspectives.

Before taking up a lectureship in Salisbury (now Harare) in 1960, Sommerfelt carried out extensive fieldwork among the Konzo, as described by Tone Sommerfelt in this issue. By then, he had established a relationship with the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Lusaka. This fieldwork did not turn out to be easy, and when Gluckman visited, he exclaimed that he would have refused to do fieldwork under such circumstances (Sommerfelt, personal communication). The Konzo lived in scattered homesteads on steep mountain slopes in the Ruwenzori mountains, having been forced into marginality by the dominant Toro, their huts camouflaged and invisible from a distance to prevent raiding. Apart from the physical strain, Sommerfelt once told me about the virtual impossibility of getting close to the Konzo. Whenever he met them, asking an innocent question, they would typically burst out in laughter instead of answering. As a result of these difficulties, Sommerfelt began to spend time following court cases, which were public and therefore accessible. In a report written in the field, Sommerfelt nevertheless confesses that

[a]fter nine months in the field I am still largely unable to obtain direct and inside information from the litigants themselves when I work on court material. So far I have had to rely on the information brought forward in court and on what I have been able to gather from contacts who knew the litigants personally. (1959: 1)

The decision to spend substantial time in court may not have been a bad move although it was an emergency solution. Sommerfelt's involuntary turn to legal anthropology was not only consistent with interests being developed at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, but it was by the 1950s a central concern in British social anthropology (quite unlike the situation in France and the USA), perhaps especially because the British

colonies were governed through indirect rule. A result of this was legal pluralism, where it became a matter of paramount interest, and not just of academic relevance, to understand how customary and colonial law interacted.

The reluctance of Konzo to engage with Sommerfelt was a result of their being a minority in a region dominated by Toro. This comes across in all his papers about the Konzo, which include field reports as well as papers presented in academic contexts such as the *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* symposium, but also at the East African Institute of Social Research in Kampala. The Konzo material suggests a culture of resistance sometimes reminiscent of David Graeber's much later account of the Tsimihety in Madagascar (Graeber 2007), who had developed remarkable skills in keepin state and foreign domination at bay. At the same time, Konzo welcomed British rule because it brought peace. Unlike Graeber's Tsimihety, they were not anarchists, but acted strategically in a complex situation of unequal power relations.

Sommerfelt would later regret that he did not bring history and comparison into his critique of Fortes (Flikke & Simonsen 2008), as Worsley (1956) did in his Marxist re-reading of Fortes's Ghanaian work. Yet in the Konzo ethnography, carried out only a few years after the Tallensi analysis, there is a great deal of both. In this work, the influence from the Manchester School is evident, but his contact with the EAISR in Kampala should also not be underestimated. At the time of the fieldwork in 1958–59, Lloyd Fallers had just left the institute. Fallers, who died young in 1974, was a product of the Chicago branch office of British-style social anthropology, but his main interests were in social stratification and nation-building. In an article based on his work in Uganda, Fallers (1961) discusses the logical and factual possibility of a shared Ugandan sense of identity and the relationship between local, tribal and national identities. His last book, entitled *The Social Anthropology of the Nation-State* (Fallers 1974) was ahead of its time, published a decade before nationalism began to be discovered by mainstream social science thanks to scholars such as Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, and fifteen years before the first batch of anthropological studies of modern nationalism were published.

At the time of Sommerfelt's fieldwork, Aidan Southall was the most significant anthropologist at the institute. Another unsung hero in the history of the discipline, Southall worked in Uganda from 1945 to 1960 and published important critical appraisals of the notions of 'tribe' and 'nation' as designations for large ethnic groups in Africa, implying that it was impossible for Nuer and Dinka to conceive of themselves as members of imagined communities (Southall 1976).

Through his close association with the Rhodes-Livingstone group and especially Jaap van Velsen and Max Gluckman, as well as his relationship with the EAISR, Sommerfelt developed an understanding of ethnic relations which was historically grounded and with an attention to power discrepancies. While these dimensions were not absent in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, the book had its impact mainly because of its formal, ahistorical modelling of ethnicity as a kind of social relationship whereby social boundaries are produced for instrumental reasons and justified by reference to assumed cultural differences. Sommerfelt's reports from his Ugandan fieldwork point in a different direction. He is far from being a primordialist and does not deny that ethnicity is socially constructed. After all, the urban anthropology pioneered by Gluckman, Mitchell, Epstein and van Velsen, as well as by Southall, showed how the 'de-tribalisation' predicted as a result

of urbanisation did not happen; on the contrary, 're-tribalisation' took place in the mining towns of the Copperbelt. This was a reflexive reinvention and reconfiguration of tradition aimed to strengthen tribal (or ethnic) ties in a new social setting. To Sommerfelt, this much was obvious. Although the Konzo were not being urbanised, the circumstances of their society were changing owing to cash cropping, British colonisation and the relative weakening of Toro supremacy; but this did not change their identification based on place and kinship, even if social change led to new expressions of ethnicity. However, in Sommerfelt's analysis, power discrepancies are fundamental. When he says that 'it appears that the mechanisms that maintain boundaries, work stronger in places where the boundaries are being most heavily attacked, due to political and economic interests linked to ethnic affiliation' ('Ethnicity in Toro', this issue), he departs from the formal models inspired by Goffman and introduces inequality and power disparities as fundamental dimensions of ethnic relations. At a time when identity politics predominates both from above and from below, it is difficult not to see the significance of power discrepancies for an understanding of ethnic relations (also see Jakoubek 2021).

Sommerfelt's papers about the Konzo thus show that his ethnographic gaze was quite different from that represented by Barth in his almost simultaneous work in Swat (Barth 1959). Whereas Barth's only concern is with the Pashtun landowners and their political strategies, for which he was duly criticised (see e.g. Asad 1972, Ahmed 1980), Sommerfelt, writing about a similarly hierarchical society, writes from the perspective of the subordinate group, structurally comparable to the landless workers in Swat valley.

A reading of Sommerfelt's Konzo material reveals it to be richer than he was willing to admit, and as the quotation above implies, he became somewhat disillusioned and saw the fieldwork at least partly as a failure. This is a shame. The manuscripts he produced during and after Uganda contain a wealth of material about economic matters, legal disputes, property rights and shifting patterns of political power. The Konzo papers suggest an unfortunate absence in 1960s Anglophone anthropology, namely a monograph which carries the theoretical concerns about the Manchester School to a rural setting and shows why Ugandan nation-building was deemed to be partial and incomplete, notwithstanding the shouts of *Uhuru* that began to reverberate, even in distant Ruwenzori, in the late 1950s.

* * *

As a student of Sommerfelt for a decade (from 1982 to 1991), I had the privilege of becoming familiar with his academic positions and intellectual style. He did not teach the courses on ethnicity (his contemporary Harald Eidheim did), but taught introductions to social anthropology and political anthropology at the undergraduate level, apart from specialist courses on Africanist research. He succeeded in combining the stiff upper lip with a warm personality and a hint of radical naughtiness, perhaps best epitomised in his knitted, woollen ties. Not wearing a tie at all would be taking it too far, after all, but at least one could signal a position by rejecting fashionable silk ties. His lectures were always lucid, well-prepared and crystal clear. As a fellow student once remarked, 'some of Sommerfelt's sentences can be written down verbatim as capsule summaries, or assessments, of entire books'. One of his 1982 lectures dealt with Abner Cohen's *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa* (Cohen 1969). The book shows how Hausa traders in Yoruba

Ibadan draw on ethnic networks to get a foothold and build a powerful economic position in a foreign town, and in the lecture, Sommerfelt pointed out – I still remember that sentence – that ‘the economic element is the underlying motivation, the political position achieved is a necessary instrument, and the kinship, emotional and religious ties provide the fuel that anchors and commits people, creating boundaries which are thin, but just thick enough to keep the capital within the group’. Nuff said.

Sommerfelt was my principal supervisor for several years, initially for my M.Phil. (1985–87) and subsequently for my PhD (1988–91). He did not profess familiarity with the Creole islands I was studying, first Mauritius and then Trinidad, but he knew the literature on complex societies well and had an acute understanding of social life beyond its mere instrumental aspects. When preparing to leave for fieldwork in Mauritius in winter 1986, I had been reading up, eclectically, on Bourdieu and Giddens for structural scaffolding, on social phenomenology (Schütz, Berger & Luckmann) for methodological sensitivity, on Mintz and Wolf for the political economy of plantation colonialism, and on the latest in poststructuralist anthropology (Clifford & Marcus, Ardenner and others) for theoretical inspiration. Sommerfelt was encouraging, but not uncritical. He implored me to place my ear close to the ground and keep an open mind before, eventually, narrowing the scope. Still devoted to his pipe, he took a pensive puff during our last meeting, saying that I should be attentive to ‘what it is that makes people tick’ (he said this in English), in other words, what was at stake for them personally. Trying to follow this advice, I soon came to realise that ethnic relations and interethnic competition (*kominalis* in Kreol) formed the lens through which most Mauritians read their wider sociocultural world. Contrary to my initial plans, which consisted in doing an ethnography of the Creoles (the ethnic group of mainly African and Malagasy origin), I shifted my gaze and ended up writing about ethnicity and the attempts to build a shared Mauritian identity transcending ethnic allegiances. This was the lens through which everybody seemed to read their social world. By asking these questions, I unwittingly returned to the problems Fallers had raised in his 1961 article about Uganda, and with which Axel had first-hand experience, not only because of his Ugandan work, but also from being evicted from Ian Smith’s Rhodesia for having a different view of nationhood from that of the white elite.

As the fieldwork unfolded and ethnicity became inevitable as a focal point, the anthropology of ethnicity would become a major source of inspiration and advice in the field and afterwards. However, there was not just one anthropological perspective on ethnicity, as Sommerfelt would remind me. Not only Abner Cohen, about whose instrumentalist view of ethnicity I had reservations, but also the legacy of the Manchester school needed to be taken into account, in addition to the Scandinavian school of ethnicity research. The significance of colonial history, power discrepancies and the role of emotions for ethnic attachment made their way into my early work, to a great extent thanks to conversations with Sommerfelt.

When leaving for Trinidad a few years later, I was better prepared and more focused, knowing that the issue at hand consisted in the complicated relationship between class, ethnicity and nationalism, with colonialism and plantation slavery as a sometimes unacknowledged historical backdrop. By then, I had read up on Ernest Gellner’s theory of industrialisation and nationalism (Gellner 1983), which in the end did not quite fit the polyethnic situation in either Mauritius or Trinidad. I had also familiarised myself with Benedict Anderson’s approach (Anderson 1983), where print-capitalism took centre stage. His

theory could more easily be reconciled with efforts to build a shared national identity in both plantation societies, where the majority of the population was more or less literate in French or English, and where radio and television helped integrate people culturally if not socially. It is not irrelevant to mention in this context that Gellner's template for nationalism was Central European and assumed that nation-states were by default dominated by one ethnic group, while Anderson, originally a historian of South-East Asia, drew his main examples from South America and Asia, where national identity existed but did not require a shared ethnic identity.

Sommerfelt continued to be an encouraging supervisor. It was with anticipation rather than anxiety that I entered his office for a meeting, and this feeling was shared by his other PhD students. His criticisms were presented in a cultivated, understated manner and took a while to digest, but they were no less penetrating for that. He never objected to theoretical orientations as such. If we wanted to quote Foucault or Said, that was fine with him, but only in so far as they could shed meaningful light on our ethnography and make a positive contribution to the analysis. Although Sommerfelt was – and is – a gentleman with a liberal outlook, he would not tolerate incomprehensible nonsense or flighty generalisations. The bottom line in his criticism was nearly always: 'So, how exactly do you know this?'

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