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Editorial Introduction: Studies in memory of Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1962-2024)

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Abstract: This is the introduction to a special section in *SST* journal, celebrating the work of Norwegian anthropologist and small-state researcher Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1962-2024). It first offers a bibliographical sketch of his intellectual life. It then presents the two core ideas of his oeuvre. Eriksen, a specialist on ethnicity in modern urban settings, held that ethnic pluralism could be integrative given a firm political framework. This idea was offered in contradistinction to two more widespread views: a nationalist view and a multiculturalist view. He also held that globalization, which should be celebrated for bringing individuals and groups together, also exerts heavy pressure on people's time resources. Finally, this introduction presents the other contributions to this special section.

Keywords: Thomas Hylland Eriksen, cultural anthropology, ethnic pluralism, hybridization, nationalism, multiculturalism, globalization, small states

Introduction

I had the privilege of being a lifelong friend of Thomas Hylland Eriksen (in Photo 1, taken in 2011). I met Thomas at the first-year study of social anthropology at the University of Oslo, Norway, in 1982. We were both studying small states. Indeed, Thomas edited a Special Section of *Small States & Territories* on the Seychelles with Penda Thérésia Choppy only five years ago, complete with a piece by himself (Eriksen, 2020). It is, therefore, quite poetic that the same journal is now setting aside a Special Section to honour his work.

Education

Thomas was a Norwegian anthropologist and a consummate student of no less than three small states: Mauritius, Seychelles and Trinidad and Tobago. His first object of study, or 'field' as social anthropologists say, was Mauritius. That was a bit of an accident. He was actually headed for Kenya, where he had spent a year in High School while his father was working as a journalist; but a diplomatic tiff between Norway and Kenya made that impractical, and he headed for Mauritius instead. The point was to carry out a doctorate on urban ethnic relations under conditions of modernity, and he found Mauritius to be a first-class location for that, both professionally and personally. He re-visited that Indian Ocean small island state for a second field work after his initial one in 1986 and maintained contact with the country and his interlocutors throughout his life. He wrote his Master's Thesis on Mauritius, published a full monograph on the island

(Eriksen, 1998), edited a book on Mauritius with a Mauritian colleague (Eriksen and Ramtohul, 2018) and visited the country for the last time the year before his death.

Eriksen's second field work for the doctorate (Eriksen, 1992) took place in another small island state, Trinidad and Tobago, in 1989, where his main interlocutor was a local intellectual, Kim Johnson, arguably the world authority on steelpan music.

Photo 2: 1994: The author of this article, on the right, plays the bass guitar; while Thomas, on the left, plays the guitar.

Key arguments

The major finding from his two early field works concerned the relationship between cultural variation and social organization at large. For him, given that the state could provide common institutions that could serve as common denominators for various ethnic groups, social cohesion would not be threatened by cultural variation. In other words, given fair laws and law-abiding citizens, the differences created by the various ethnicities of those citizens would not threaten the social fabric. The basic idea goes back to Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?", where he argues in favour of running states and societies on the principle that people may do what they want to do as long as they follow the law. Kant's advice to rulers is that:

> one who is himself enlightened, is not afraid of shadows, and has a numerous and well-disciplined army to assure public peace, can say: "Argue as much as you will, and about what you will, only obey!"' (Kant. 1784).

Thomas himself traced the argument back to Max Weber's work, and in anthropology to Ernest Gellner (Neumann, 2024). However, Thomas placed the problematique firmly in emergent, non-western modern societies and was able to generalize it in ways that gave it added purchase. That happened primarily in his 1995 book *Ethnicity and nationalism*. The message waw powerful enough for that book to make his name.

Thomas placed the idea that ethnic pluralism could be integrative given a firm political framework firmly between two competing, and arguably more widespread views: the nationalist one and the multiculturalist one. In his own words,

> Hegemonic nationalism refuses the members of minorities the right to be different, whereas multiculturalism refuses them the right to be similar (Eriksen, 2009, p. 289).

Thomas made no bones about his normative commitment to what he saw as the heterodox ideal of a hybrid society, where cultural interchanges unfolded within a political frame that

guaranteed not only the pluralism of ethnic groups but also their interaction. As he put the point, invertedly, to an historian of ideas in a book-length conversation,

> There is a whiff of the existentially and cognitively poor about an identity that is exclusively built on kinship and origin (Eriksen, quoted in Herbjørnsrud, 2019, p. 117).

As Norway's leading public intellectual, he also spent prodigious amounts of time on debating, disseminating and intermittently also researching how the process that he knew so well – from Port Louis, Mauritius to Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago – worked itself out in Oslo, Norway. In her contribution to this special section, Ramola Ramtohul documents how he was also a public intellectual in his 'island home' of Mauritius. This aspect of Thomas's life work fits neatly with what Anglo-German sociologist Norbert Elias termed 'civilisation agency' and defined as work that would bring alienated groups closer together, so that the use of violence and also possibility of violence would diminish (Elias, 1986; also Elias, 2000). The other idea that is prominent in Thomas's work is the related but different one, also known from David Harvey's work, that globalization is characterized by and even defined by a compression of the time-space continuum. Thomas celebrated difference not only on the level of sovereign states, but also on the upscaled level of the globe. Again, he singled out hybridization as the single most and also the normatively cherished trait of globalization. However, compression also meant pressure: pressure on resources on all levels; and not only natural resources, but also on time as experienced by individuals, that is, temporality. He first tackled the question in one of his many trade books, *Tyranny of the moment: Fast and slow time in the information age* (Eriksen, 2001). It then formed the core of a large, ten-year long project based at his *alma mater* and life-long workplace, the University of Oslo, and came to fruition in a book based on a short field work in Queensland, Australia, aptly named *Overheating* (Eriksen, 2016; also 2018). In her contribution below, Penda Choppy applies this powerful reading of the globe's overall situation to the situation in her native Seychelles.

Polyhistorian

Thomas was a life-long reader, a translator of systems theorist and social anthropologist Gregory Bateson, as well as a campaigner for the environment since his youth. In his maturity, his interests were increasingly drawn to earth sciences and natural systems. His final book, which appeared in Norwegian in the year of his death under the title *Det umistelige* – that is, the inalienable – was intended as his *magnum opus*. It brought together the study of pluralism in both social and natural systems, as well as his (now well-honed) ideas on ethnic relations, globalization and temporality. Thomas worked on the English version at the time of his death from pancreatic cancer. It will appear posthumously with Pluto Press, his trusted English publisher.

Thomas had other glories to his name. His textbook in social anthropology, *Small places, large issues,* is by now in its fourth printing (Eriksen, 2023). He was a member of the Norwegian Academy of Sciences and Letters, an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, and he held honorary doctorates from Stockholm, Copenhagen and Charles Universities. All that need not detain us here. In the long run, a researcher is only as good as their reputation, and that reputation rests on how and how often a researcher is able to inspire the ideas and work of others. Below, we present a clutch of contributions that do just that.

Tributes

Giulio Panettiere's discussion of life in a relocated Fijian village, which was co-written with Thomas, gives detail and colour to a story that has been at the forefront of climate news for

years now, namely the consequences of sea rise and inundation. The problematique is as old as agriculture itself. Rising tides bring salination, and salination brings barrenness of the soil. So it was at the turtlebacks in southern Mesopotamia where continuous agriculture emerged some 5500 years ago, and so it is in a number of island and riparian settings today. Panettiere also tells a well-known story of power differentials and clashing perspectives in how relocation was carried out. Throughout, this article is riffing off Thomas' work on how overheating brings environmental and identity concerns to boiling point (Panettiere and Eriksen, 2025).

Space and time are the two basic shapers of social life. Firouz Ghaini's contribution opens with a review of Thomas's work on temporality, that is, lived human understanding of time. It began in Trinidad, where he came across the local phenomenon of liming, that is, the art of doing nothing. Liming is autotelic, a goal unto itself. It must not be confused with the many-stranded phenomenon of waiting, which is goal-oriented and also one of his concerns. When Thomas came home from Trinidad, we actually formed a blues-punk duo under the name 'The Limers' (Eriksen: solo guitar, Neumann: vocals and bass). However, the main thrust of Thomas's work was directed towards what he memorably called the tyranny of the moment, of how time has recently accelerated. One of his last books concerned how the few pauses that are left tend to be filled by smart-phone use, thus adding further to the acceleration. In the article's second part, Ghaini asks if there exist insular perceptions and experiences of time that may act as counters to the overall trend of acceleration. He finds such antidotes in miniscule cronotopes at the Faroese Islands and suggests that we look to such small island territories for slow inspiration (Ghaini, 2025).

Gro Ween's imagined conversation with Thomas turns on his partially Sámi background and his work with Finnish colleagues on Northern identities. In his own contribution to that work, Thomas tackled a challenge to his main view as set out above, that as long as the state could provide common institutions that could serve as common denominators for various ethnic groups, cultural variation between those different groups would not threaten social cohesion. That challenge was regional autonomy, as experienced by indigenous groups with a certain measure of it, *in casu* relative Sámi political autonomy within Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. The gist of it is that autonomy implies some kind of submission, which will by necessity have knock-on effects on life worlds. Ween specifies this by demonstrating how experienced losses of identity markers such as language, religion and nature, fall outside the framework applied by Thomas. Ween also notes, this time with Thomas, that in the days before the nation state, ethnic identities were not necessarily imperative statuses when Sámi and other ethnic groups interacted. Regional identity rather pitted Northerners against Southerners within respective nation states (Ween, 2025).

Penda Choppy's contribution to this special section is a fully-fledged reading of how overheating is playing out in one location of our world, namely The Republic of Seychelles, a small independent developing state in the Indian Ocean neighbouring Mauritius. Choppy stresses how the runaway processed and treadmill competition that Thomas identified as characterising globalisation at the present time are at the heart of the problem. Since its international airport opened in 1971, Seychelles has seen its economy move from agriculture and fishery to tourism. This hooking up to global flows has led to a dramatic increase in the standard of living, but also to unprecedented levels of pollution. While the Seychellois are quick to blame other states for the visible and invisible impact of plastic waste, Choppy notes that average Seychellois themselves actually produce 74 kilos of plastic waste *per capita* annually. With a term that Choppy lifts from Thomas, who in turn lifted it from that great source of inspiration Gregory Bateson, whose work Thomas actually translated into Norwegian, Seychelles is caught in two double binds. The country wants to consume and sustain

consumption just like a high-income country while not having the resources that such countries enjoy; and meanwhile also navigating its economy in a greener direction. Consumption depends on maintaining and even increasing the size of the tourism sector, but that means overheating sustainability levels. Given that a key reason for tourists to come to Seychelles in the first place is to experience something pristine, and that overheating spells the destruction of the pristine, the present equation is simply unsustainable (Choppy, 2025).

In the final contribution to this special section, Mauritian colleague Ramola Ramtohul, who was Thomas' key interlocutor and collaborator during his later trips to the island, takes us through Thomas' writings on and activities in Mauritius. His first *magnum opus, Common Denominators,* has become the cornerstone of the literature of ethnicity in the island, and references to things Mauritian crowds his entire oeuvre. Where most scholars have a hard time acting as a mentor to students and colleagues as well as a public intellectual in one country, Ramtohul documents how Thomas pulled the feat off not only in his native Norway, but also in what he came to think of as his island home. Here we see Thomas as an Eliasian civilisational agent in at least four different aspects: in picking and studying tension between groups as a topic; in working analytically to highlight the common denominators that keep those groups together; in being an outside point of reference for those groups when they discuss themselves; and in negotiating the relationship between himself as an observer and marginal observer on the one hand, and the Mauritian academic community and public on the other (Ramtohul, 2025).

Conclusion

As demonstrated by this special section, Thomas's work as a scholar and also as a public intellectual was voluminous and had a broad reception, geographically as well as thematically. Small wonder, since his object of study was the globe and his major themes ethnicity and globalization. Those of us who study small islands and territory are doubly blessed, since his work came to fall within that area and since it continues to be a vibrant source of inspiration for us all.

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