

THE AWKWARD SOCIAL SCIENCE?  
ANTHROPOLOGY ON SCHOOLS, ELECTIONS, AND REVOLUTION IN NEPAL<sup>1</sup>

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*Vice-Chancellor, Warden, Colleagues, Friends:*

As an anthropologist of religion and ritual I am conscious of a duty to follow custom, and it is the custom on occasions like these to begin by invoking the ancestors. Of Oxford ancestors, the two who tower over the field are A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and E.E. Evans-Pritchard.

A French reviewer of my first monograph was kind enough to see in it the influence of Evans-Pritchard.<sup>2</sup> Evans-Pritchard, as many of you will be aware, gave an inaugural lecture in which he praised and endorsed the explicitly comparative and positivistic view of anthropology of his predecessor, Radcliffe-Brown. Later, he changed his mind and decided that anthropology should be seen as a kind of cultural translation and that therefore anthropology belongs properly with the humanities. In his Marett Memorial Lecture of 1950, he famously declared that ‘social anthropology is a kind of historiography, and therefore ultimately of philosophy or art’; consequently ‘it studies societies as moral systems and not as natural systems...[it] seeks patterns and not scientific laws...[and] interprets rather than explains.’<sup>3</sup> For anthropologists at the time, this must have come as a shocking and iconoclastic retreat from the conventional position enthusiastically advocated by Radcliffe-Brown.

One thinks of the post-war decades, and particularly the time when Evans-Pritchard was making these pronouncements, as a golden age of social anthropology—funding

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1 Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Oxford, held in the Examination Schools on 15 May 2009. I have preserved the main text as it was spoken. References and passages omitted in order to keep to the allotted hour of the lecture are given in the footnotes. To view the PowerPoint presentation that accompanied the lecture, see Appendix.

2 Gellner (1992). I referred to Evans-Pritchard explicitly just three times, though one of these was a prominent invocation, alongside Weber and Durkheim.

3 ‘Social Anthropology Past and Present’; see Evans-Pritchard 1962: 26.

pressures were few, research opportunities plentiful, classic ethnographies just waiting to be composed, and post-colonial guilt a distant cloud on the horizon. So it is chastening to read Evans-Pritchard writing in the *Oxford Magazine* in 1951 that ‘the members of the Institute are so overburdened with teaching, supervision and administration that they are unable to get on with their own research or even essential reading’ (Evans-Pritchard 1951). One’s first reaction is to exclaim that the pressures of 1951 surely *cannot* have been equal to those of today, but perhaps it was ever thus.

Evans-Pritchard’s successor, the pioneering anthropologist of Chinese society, Maurice Freedman, rejected the choice between his two great predecessors. He wrote that the dilemma between anthropology as art and anthropology as science was, in his words, ‘largely an illusion’ (1979: 26), because all that anthropologists were doing when they claimed to be scientific was affirming ‘an idea of rigour and objectivity in method and a faith in the ultimate orderliness of what they have chosen to study’ (ibid.). However, Freedman was writing before the rise of postmodernism, with its rejection of ‘orderliness’ in method, in the object of study, and in the way it is represented.

Freedman’s successor, Rodney Needham, famously deconstructed kinship and declared that it did not exist, and he took the same position on many other concepts that common sense would have us accept as human universals. Needham’s own inaugural lecture was none the less an affirmation of faith in the possibility of comparative work. The abstractness of his list of what can be compared might have astonished Radcliffe-Brown, including as it did ‘symbolic forms’, logical relations such as symmetry and asymmetry, modes of classification, and so on (Needham 1978: 17-21). But he affirmed unequivocally that there is a universal psychology and—with David Humean phrasing that was no doubt deliberate—likewise affirmed the existence of a universal ‘mode of reason proper and common to all men; and [he added] this crucial finding is an achievement, necessarily, of comparative ethnography and the discipline of social anthropology.’ A nice connection to my own subject matter is made by the fact that Needham, having served with the Gurkhas, could (as I cannot) sing Nepali songs, when suitably lubricated and in congenial surroundings such as the Turf Tavern or King’s Arms. It is said that he broke down in tears during his inaugural lecture when asking his audience to remember and honour the sacrifices of the Gurkha troops with whom he fought in Burma, one of whom (though he did not mention it at the time) had saved his life at the battle of Kohima.

Needham’s successor, John Davis, was and is probably more with Evans-Pritchard than with Radcliffe-Brown; but with *his* successor and my immediate predecessor, David Parkin, the pendulum has begun to swing back the other way. Parkin calls for a ‘holistic’ anthropology, one that is expansive enough to include the kinds of universal questions about humankind and innate human capacities that animated nineteenth-century

anthropology and that are being asked, with renewed urgency, by evolutionist, cognitive, and other scientifically inclined anthropologists (Parkin 2007).

As well as these institutional ancestors, as it were, I must remember my own literal and academic forebears—my parents (whose field site in Morocco I visited in 1978 long before I had one of my own in Nepal and to which we returned *en famille* in November 2008), my maternal grandfather who (I'm told) loved his time administering a remote part of Ethiopia at the end of the Second World War, and my teachers in Oxford—Steven Lukes, Richard Gombrich, Alexis Sanderson, and Nick Allen. I would particularly like to thank Richard and Sanjukta who came to visit me in the field in 1983—fortunately sufficiently far into my fieldwork that I could actually speak Newari, demonstrate some knowledge of my surroundings, and translate a talk Richard gave to the Young Men's Buddhist Association of Lalitpur on, as I remember, the radical re-interpretation the Buddha gave to Hindu concepts (conclusions that had quite controversial implications in those far-off Panchayat days).

I would also like to thank my wife, Lola Martinez, whose application of anthropology to contemporary global popular culture, especially films, is far more innovative than anything I have attempted or could attempt.<sup>4</sup> Finally, I would like publicly to embarrass my children by saying that their academic and musical achievements make their parents proud—all three have, understandably, declared that there are quite enough anthropologists in the family.

### **The Awkward Social Science?**

I turn now to my title—'the awkward social science'. Some of my colleagues, as I have hinted, would give a resounding endorsement to Evans-Pritchard's view that social anthropology has more in common with history and other humanities than it does with social sciences. Others would like anthropology to adopt the testing procedures of quantitative sociology and psychology, but in diverse cultural contexts.

In the mundane sense of being a part of the Social Science Division of this university, anthropology *is* a social science. But *should* it be?

For what it is worth, most other UK universities agree with Oxford (by a margin of 3 to 1). Eleven other universities put anthropology in Social Sciences (though Sussex hedges by adding 'and Cultural Studies'), four disagree, putting it with Humanities, Arts, or Arts and Humanities, Goldsmith's doesn't have Faculties or Schools, and Cambridge sits on the fence: it has one Faculty of Arts and Humanities, and another Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences—anthropology is in the latter, so our Cambridge colleagues can have their cake and eat it.

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4 See Martinez 2007, 2009.

As a way of approaching the question, I propose to examine three contexts on which my own recent work in Nepal has touched—namely schools, elections, and the Maoist insurgency or revolution.

It should be clear from this choice of examples that anthropology is closer to other social sciences than ever before because we are often studying in the same places and the same kinds of institution. If it ever was plausible to claim that anthropology had its own, protected subject matter, about which anthropologists could pronounce with authority and on which others should defer to them, it certainly is not so now. In an earlier age, some of my predecessors could calmly and blithely define anthropology as the study of simple societies, safe in the knowledge that other disciplines would not invade their territory, and safe also in the knowledge that the people they wrote about would not read what they had written. ‘Simple’ (or ‘primitive’ as they were once called) societies were defined precisely by their lack of just such institutions of modernity as schools and elections. Where there was ritualized rebellion, this was analysed so as to bring out its *difference* from the revolutions that marked the history of complex societies (Gluckman 1954). Anthropologists studied societies that were supposedly ‘without history’, as Eric Wolf (1982), who did as much as anyone to overcome this view, put it.<sup>5</sup>

Today, there are two fundamental differences with anthropology as it used to be. First—fans of Bruce Parry and the TV programme *Tribe* please take note—the anthropologist’s natural habitat is as likely to be an NGO or government office as a tribe or a village. Often, in fact, it is the headquarters of the tribe’s own NGO, and often enough the anthropologist is the academic adviser, political representative, or even the founder of the NGO in question. Second, the fields in which anthropologists study are swarming with other disciplines: development studies, sociology, politics, religious studies, historians. Furthermore, members of the societies studied are just as qualified in these disciplines as we are, even if they are usually still worse resourced than us.

Underlying the radical differences between the situation of anthropologists in the past and today is the presence everywhere of the *ideal* of the modern state, with its promises of development and democracy. Our forebears were working in the shadow of the colonial state, which guaranteed the peace that allowed them to do research. Today, because of that history, programmes like the US Army’s Human Terrain System that recruit anthropologists and other social scientists to help them do better in the task of pacifying Afghanistan and Iraq generate enormous unease and have been condemned by the American Anthropological Association.

Despite the colonial context of the older anthropology—and anthropology has spent considerable energy on expiating its guilt at not paying sufficient attention to it at the

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<sup>5</sup> Or ‘out of time’ as Nick Thomas (1989) phrased it.

time—enough remained of other ‘traditional’ spheres of life to allow the anthropologist to experience radically different ways of viewing, understanding, and being in the world. Today, by contrast, we are left studying ‘alternative modernities’. *Then*, anthropologists studied radical difference, *now* they study different ‘perspectives’ on shared aspirations.

Two aspects that have remained constant are: (1) the concern, one may say obsession, with having a minute, in-depth, and personal relationship to the material on which generalizations are made; and (2) a constant doubt and questioning about the adequacy and coherence of those materials. A venerable member of our profession, Clifford Geertz, complained that the worrying had descended in recent times into ‘epistemological hypochondria’ (Geertz 1988: 71) such that generalizations no longer get made at all. Anthropology has indeed been afflicted, perhaps more than other disciplines, with doubts about its viability, about whether one can ever know anything about another culture, about whether anything remains to be studied, and about whether anthropologists have the right to go about poking their noses into other people’s business. The levels of reflexive anxiety and the consequent refusal to attempt big generalizations have no doubt contributed to other social sciences’ puzzlement about or hostility to anthropology.

Anthropologists often do find themselves in an awkward position in trying to justify themselves, whether to other social science colleagues or to grant-giving bodies, or indeed to their aunts. That the general public are in the dark about what it is we really do may be shown in a number of ways—though Bruce Parry and Kate Fox may have done more than most to remedy that.<sup>6</sup> Certain it is that the very word frequently ends up as ‘anthropogy’ or ‘anthroplogy’ on the spines and covers of our books. Inevitably, anthropologists are still seen as experts in the exotic and the small-scale. Those social scientists who make use of fieldwork do not see any need to defer to anthropology just because they use ethnography as a major method. More textbooks on how to do ethnography have been written by sociologists than by anthropologists—by, I would estimate, quite a big margin. The journal *Ethnography* was set up by scholars in cultural studies, and one could argue that the whole discipline of cultural studies owes its existence to the lack of interest on the part of most anthropologists in studying modern popular culture.

So, can anthropology move beyond an endless refrain, ‘It’s not as simple as that’, addressed to other social scientists, as well as to those such as politicians, lawyers, development practitioners who have to act on the basis of imperfect understandings of the world? Or, to put it in somewhat more portentous language, can anthropology move beyond endlessly pointing out that other social sciences’ explanatory frameworks fail to capture the complexity and contingency of social life?

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<sup>6</sup> Possibly assisted by the many novelists (some of them anthropologists themselves) who have not been able to resist the trope of anthropologist as bumbling incompetent. MacClancy (2005) surveyed 170 examples of the genre (in some cases the anthropologist is the hero).

‘One cannot escape the impression that anthropologists do not generalize lightly’, wrote Keith Thomas (1963: 6) in *Past and Present* almost half a century ago. A jaundiced observer might say that with time they have learned both to generalize lightly and, in other cases, not to generalize at all. Model-builders and hypothesis-testers from other subjects are understandably impatient with endless deconstruction of the terms in which they pose their questions.

What I hope to show is that social anthropology can indeed reach the parts that other social science disciplines cannot reach. Of course you do not expect me to say anything else—to many of you I am preaching to the converted. For the rest, you are unlikely to be persuaded by any intricacies of argument or rhetoric that I might summon up in half an hour. Rather than try to *argue* the case for anthropology’s relevance, let me attempt to *illustrate* it. Perhaps ethnographic examples may persuade you, where special pleading cannot.

### **Three Examples from Nepal: Schools, Elections, the Rise of the Maoists**

#### *1. Schools*

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world and has had probably the highest level of non-military aid per capita in Asia over the last fifty years. A part of Nepal’s development since 1951 could conceivably be told as a success story: literacy and health indicators have shown a continual improvement, despite considerable rural-urban and regional variations. On literacy, for example, in Nepal as a whole, more than 50% of women and two thirds of men can now read (though in some far western and some Tarai districts female literacy remains below 20%). Similarly, in spite of the big increase in the population, there have been economic improvements and improvements in health.

One has immediately to point out that there are massive disparities between different districts. Large amounts of money are concentrated in the capital, Kathmandu. This has meant that an equally dramatic gap has opened up between the urban areas and the rest of the country, large tracts of which remain without electricity, roads, or properly staffed hospitals.

As you might expect, there have been numerous government and INGO reports, lots of recommendations, and so on, plenty of quantitative studies of education in Nepal. There have also been two outstanding ethnographic monographs which take education, or aspects of it, as their theme: I refer to Tod Ragsdale’s *Once a Hermit Kingdom* (1989) and Laura Ahearn’s *Invitations to Love* (2003). Ragsdale showed how the education reforms of 1973-4, intended to modernize the curriculum, in fact introduced a Kathmandu-centric and middle-class bias, with exam questions that would mean nothing at all to

rural children growing up far from the capital.<sup>7</sup> Ahearn started from over 200 love letters she collected from young people in her village. Though courtship and elopement existed long before schools came to her village, clearly the ability to write letters and to present oneself in writing to the object of courtship introduced a new kind of agency and choice into young people's lives.

These two books, by authors with a deep knowledge of the culture and society in which the educational institutions and practices they examine are based, are far better, richer, and more stimulating, than something like Jennifer Rothchild's recent *Gender Trouble Makers* (2006), even though it too is based on ethnography in and around the classroom. The problem is that Rothchild's categories are given by international agencies and Western common sense: 'This head teacher...spoke of gender differences as being "natural", when, in actuality, they were socially constructed' (p. 100). The author expresses no doubt about the actuality of social construction, nor much interest in or feel for the cultural categories that the children are bringing to the classroom.<sup>8</sup> Rothchild had no difficulty in having her two research assistants harvest a crop of quotes to show that Nepalis, of all levels of education and none, regard males and females as different and therefore have different expectations of them. Rothchild's monograph shows that ethnography on its own, however engagingly and revealingly written, is not enough if the questions and framework of the researcher are already set in stone before arrival in the field. She was determined to find patriarchy and inequality, and of course she found plenty of evidence for it.<sup>9</sup>

My own work on schools was more superficial than any of the three authors discussed so far, but I can at least say that I had made a prolonged study of the cultural background, since it was fourteen years after I first started formally studying in the Kathmandu Valley

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7 Ragsdale was also able to do some interesting ethnography of the 'everyday state'. He observed: 'In Kaski during 1974 one might wonder whether statistics had not been made into a new religion. The supervisor who was supposed to visit the Lamnasa middle school treated his job as a sinecure; his chief activity was making impressive statistical charts for display. These were shown to visiting dignitaries as well as to villagers, the latter duly impressed by the air of mystery emanating from them.... The supervisor whom the author accompanied on his two-week walk to schools in Kaski spent much of his time instructing teachers how to make statistical charts for their office walls.... Privately, this supervisor assured the author he thought the charts nonsense and little related to what was really going on' (Ragsdale 1989: 180-1).

8 Furthermore, she completely ignores the distinguished anthropologists who have written subtly and insightfully on gender in Nepal long ago, such as Lynn Bennett, Linda Stone, Sherry Ortner, Nancy Levine, Mary Cameron, and Kathryn March (and I suspect that not one of these would yield to Rothchild in their affirmation of feminism).

9 The books by Ragsdale and Ahearn study schools and literacy in their social and cultural contexts. Ahearn shows how literacy and schooling produce a different kind of personal self-consciousness and a different kind of 'self-making'. These are books that are built on a deep acquaintance with the village culture in which the school is a Trojan horse of modernity. Rothchild's, by contrast, though ethnographic in a sense, is really ethnography lite.



that I ventured into a school for research purposes. I studied two schools, but the one I want to focus on today I shall call JSBK for short.

Jagat Sundar Bwone Kuthi (JSBK) is a private, but government-recognized institution founded in 1990. It took advantage of the provision in the new 1990 Constitution of Nepal, which allowed primary teaching in the mother tongue. Newars are the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley (there are complexities about using the term 'indigenous' that I'll pass over here). The Newars are what Africanists would call a 'host tribe': i.e. the original inhabitants of the capital, but outnumbered in their erstwhile homeland.

During the ferment following the revolution of 1990, some educated female Newar cultural activists decided to start rounding up poor children who were not going to school and to teach them in their mother tongue, Nepal Bhasa or Newari. They received sponsorship at 3,000 rupees per child from senior Newar activists. CWIN, an NGO specializing in children's issues, also sponsored five children. Another activist donated the ground floor of his house as a temporary schoolhouse. A governors' committee was formed. At the beginning, the teachers taught without taking any salary.

The name of the school comes from one of the heroes of Newar cultural nationalism, Jagat Sundar Malla (1882-1952), a schoolmaster from Bhaktapur who translated Aesop's fables into Newari (Nepal Bhasa) in 1914. A statue to him was erected in the school in 2001.

The key to the development of the school was contact with a Japanese non-governmental social service foundation called HIKIVA (Hirakata Katao International Volunteer Association), based in Osaka. Japanese members of HIKIVA pay approximately US\$150 per year, most of which goes to pay the educational expenses of a Nepali child.<sup>10</sup> Selection of the children to receive sponsorship is carried out by the staff of the school and is on the basis of need. Teachers from the school interview the parents in the home to assess the economic level of the family.

The JSBK pupils are largely from poor and/or low-caste backgrounds. Most, but not all, are Newars. I carried out a brief research project there in December 1996, working with children from classes three and five in JSBK. I compared the essays and pictures they produced with those of children in the equivalent classes in the government school in Lalitpur next door to the house where I had lived for nineteen months while doing my doctoral fieldwork in the early 1980s.

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<sup>10</sup> See HIKIVA website: <http://www.kcat.zaq.ne.jp/aaahu309/>. HIKIVA also funds other schools in Nepal. At the time of my research in 1996-7, there were two others: Nilbarahi primary school in Kathmandu, and Satyawati secondary school in Kumpur village, Dhading, 235 kilometres west of Kathmandu. Jagat Sundar Bwone Kuthi is the school with which it has had the longest connection and where it supports the most children (currently 240). The website indicates that now (2009) HIKIVA is funding seven schools in all, the four new schools being in Bhaktapur, Dhading (two), and Chitwan.



The fact that JSBK was founded and is run in accordance with the ethos of Newar cultural nationalism did not appear to make a big difference to the children at the school in 1996-7. Ten years later, in August 2007, with the help of Basanta Maharjan, I tracked down thirteen of the twenty children who had participated in the earlier study. Asked about their time at JSBK, they were highly appreciative of the love and attention that they had received at the school. Many of them noted that they received funny looks when shifting to other schools in class six or seven, and that people were often under the misapprehension, if they had heard of the school at all, that all one could study there was the Newari language.

But only one out of thirteen children had even a passing interest in Newar cultural nationalism as an ideology. In other words, despite daily exposure to the messages of Newar cultural nationalism in their school days, as young people in their early twenties, struggling to make a living in Kathmandu, they were strongly resistant to the ideas of cultural nationalism. In the epidemiological language of my cognitive anthropology colleagues, cultural nationalism, while very ‘catchy’ to some in Kathmandu, does not make much sense to many others, particularly the urban working classes from whom JSBK tends to take its pupils. In the different terms—what one might call patrician Viennese Marxist—of Eric Hobsbawm, linguistic nationalism appeals to ‘the lesser examination-passing classes’.<sup>11</sup>

We can see, therefore, that there are radically different expectations and understandings on the part of the parents, children, Newar activists, teachers, and Japanese donors involved in Jagat Sundar Bwone Kuthi. The parents are mainly concerned to get a good education for their children, and the children are happy that they have a scholarship which means that their parents don’t have to pay fees. The governors of the school wish to preserve Newar culture and Newari as a medium of thought, writing, and cultural production; this is also the aim of the teachers, though they give even higher priority to the interests of the children. The teachers work for less than the market rate because of their commitment to Newari. It does not take much questioning before the teachers (who are all but one women) articulate, gently, a critique of the male activists for being all talk. The Japanese donors are primarily concerned with the uplift of poor and deprived communities in Nepal and the propagation of education. They could not care less about the ideology of cultural nationalism; in so far as they are aware of it (and I am fairly certain that most of HIKIVA’s supporters know nothing of the connection), they disapprove quite strongly. They do not wish to encourage anything that would stand in the way of a quality education—such as putting too much emphasis on Newari, which

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11 Hobsbawm (1990: 118). In other words, it has no appeal to those who have no chance of getting low-level government or other clerical posts. Hobsbawm does preface this by saying, ‘I do not wish to reduce linguistic nationalism to a question of jobs...’ For my original research in JSBK, see Gellner 2004.

is precisely the aim of the governors. By 2007 the Japanese funders' ideas had, perhaps not surprisingly, won out over the ideology of Nepal Bhasha purism.<sup>12</sup> The only subject still taught in Newari was Newari itself.

'Any institution that is going to keep its shape needs to gain legitimacy by distinctive grounding in nature and in reason,' writes Mary Douglas (1986: 112).<sup>13</sup> This may well be true. What this example suggests, however, is that it is the experience of being at school as such, *not* the particular kind of school or ideology that guides it, that is the most important determinant of the Nepali child's experience. Being graded, classified, and assessed for academic achievement, becoming 'an educated person' as locally measured, is the deep principle of justice that legitimates the school. The explicit ideology of Newar cultural nationalism is just a veneer. The explicit messages about Newar cultural nationalism, though repeated, no doubt ad nauseam, throughout the children's school life, are received but not internalized.

It may seem self-evidently true that the participants in an organization or institution must share some common understandings for that institution to operate at all. But careful ethnography reveals 'hidden transcripts', backstage backbiting, very divergent views of what is actually going on. On the basis of this case study, we can perhaps go further and say that the aims of the different participants can be wholly distinct, and yet the whole can function and flourish. Of course, there must be some overlap: the Japanese donors had an interest in providing a good education, the children and their parents wanted to receive it, and the teachers were interested in providing it. From that point of view, it may appear that the nationalist motivations of the school board were an irrelevance. But that is not actually the case: nationalist motivations were central to the founding of JSBK, to the local support the school received, to acquisition of the land for the school, to the work that was done in getting it registered and getting permission for it to expand, and to the teachers in continuing to work for the school at much lower salaries than they could command elsewhere.

My contention is that this particular school represents, in only slightly more exaggerated form, what is true of all schools and indeed perhaps all institutions. Ethnographies of youth and educational institutions, from Paul Willis's *Learning to*

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12 It is clear from what the HIKIVA vice-president, Takashi Khajita, wrote in a memorial booklet (*smarika*) produced in 2003 for the ten-year anniversary of the school's establishment that HIKIVA expected the school to become 'self-sustaining' within the next ten years. He reiterated the same point to me in an interview in Osaka in 2004. He told me that he has argued to the teachers and to the School Board that, by providing more instruction in English and Nepali, the school could make itself attractive to the middle class who could afford the fees. Mr Khajita stressed that, because of the selflessness of the teachers and the moral education provided, he regarded JSBK as a model school.

13 She continues: 'Any institution...starts to control the memory of its members... It provides the categories of their thought, sets the terms for self-knowledge, and fixes identities. All of this is not enough. It must secure the social edifice by sacralizing the principles of justice.'

*Labour* (1977) and Michael Moffatt's *Coming of Age in New Jersey* (1989) to Roger Goodman's *Japan's 'International Youth'* (1990) and Anthony Simpson's *Half London in Zambia* (2003), have all recognized this,<sup>14</sup> namely that educational institutions—no doubt also this august one—can operate, and operate successfully, turning out educated students, even producing research, despite the fact that the various 'stakeholders' have very different values, expectations, and understandings of what they are doing there.

## 2. Elections

I shall speak more briefly about elections, because, compared to schools, there is not such a long history of anthropologists studying them, either in Nepal, in India, or elsewhere. It is perhaps not so obvious that anthropologists, as specialists in the local and small scale, can contribute a radically different perspective from other social scientists. None the less, contribute they certainly can, as I shall show by talking about the 2008 elections to the Constituent Assembly in Nepal. This may also serve as an introduction to the following section on revolution.

On April 10<sup>th</sup> 2008 epochal elections were held to a Constituent Assembly. Even three days before they happened, UN officials and the foreign elite in Kathmandu were unsure that they would actually take place.<sup>15</sup> No one—neither political scientists, nor sociologists, nor politicians themselves—predicted that the Maoists, who had waged a ten-year war, their so-called People's War, would become the biggest party. If the Maoists had known how well they were going to do, they would not have repeatedly pushed for the election date to be put back, nor would they have insisted that 60% of the votes should be on PR, nor would Prachanda, their leader, have tried desperately before the election to forge an alliance with the UML, the Unified Marxist-Leninists—previously the biggest left party.

It was not only social scientists and politicians who failed to spot the wave of support that came the way of the most radical parties. Local civil society members in the districts, with their ears to the ground, also failed to see what would happen. I was told authoritatively in Birganj, just before the election, that the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) would be lucky to get ten or fifteen seats: had all the Tarai parties stuck together they would have swept the Tarai, but divided they had little chance. In fact the MJF swept to 52 seats overall.

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14 On the ethnography of schools, see the survey by Delamont and Atkinson (1980). Interestingly, they show that the British tradition, more sociological, has actually paid more attention to the details of intra-classroom interactions than the American tradition, more inspired by anthropology, which focuses on the issue of the clash of 'indigenous' or 'tribal' or 'other' cultures with the White middle-class culture of education.

15 Apparently many politicians from the Congress and UML parties were also unsure they would take place, which accounts for their relatively feeble attempts at campaigning and their comparatively poor showing.

How, then, are we to explain the results? A complex combination of factors was evidently at play. Certainly, as the Congress Party (NC) and others complained, in some cases there was intimidation by the Maoists. But that is very far from being the whole story. There were many places where people voted spontaneously, freely, and enthusiastically for the Maoists. Many people believed that the Maoists should be given power, both to make them accountable and to prevent them returning to the jungle, a sentiment I heard expressed several times in Kathmandu. It was certainly a vote for change, for a new possibility, something different from the old parties who had failed the country so often. The 'zeal' (*jos*) of the Maoists impressed people, and if some had died, this was not held against them.

I myself was present for the election, but as an international observer invited by the Carter Center. My own area of ethnographic expertise is the cities of Kathmandu and Lalitpur (Patan). But I asked to be sent outside, mainly because I wanted to see somewhere new and different. I was sent to Parsa district on the border with India, almost due south from Kathmandu, a highly strategic area because 70% of Nepal's external trade passes through it.

The contrast is very clear between long-term anthropological observation and what can be achieved by an international observer, however well briefed and backed up. On my return to Kathmandu, I talked to old friends in Lalitpur about the election. More than one asked me if I had seen children voting in Parsa. When I said that I had not, they responded, 'What kind of international observer are *you*? We saw children voting in Parsa sitting at home, and just watching the TV. The journalist gave the name of the polling station and the polling officer!'

A vital contrast is presented by Judith Pettigrew (2008), who has been doing fieldwork in a Gurung (Tamu) village north of Pokhara for fifteen years, revisiting every year, usually several times a year, right through the conflict.<sup>16</sup> Between 2003 and 2006 the village was under the de facto control of the Maoists. In Kathmandu, one week after the election, she was able to give a detailed account to an audience of (mainly) Nepalis about the election in 'her' village. It focused on the case of an informant whom she calls Thagu, an intelligent man from a relatively poor background who has worked abroad as a labourer, but was not able to join one of the foreign armies that are the most prized career destinations. When the Maoists first started arriving in the village, he was deeply resentful of the fact that they stayed, sometimes for considerable periods, and that he and other villagers had no choice but to house and feed them, and—even more worryingly—store weapons for them. When she turned up for the election in 2008 and went inside the polling station, she was surprised to see Thagu there—as the political representative of the Maoists. What had

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<sup>16</sup> See Pettigrew (2003, 2004, 2007).

happened was that, over time, and with continual contact with the Maoists, Thagu had come to accept their diagnosis of what is wrong with Nepal and had come to see them as the only party addressing the needs of poor peasant farmers like himself.

Thagu's story made a deep impression on the Nepali audience in Kathmandu because it showed a thoughtful and intelligent villager coming to a long-term and reason-based decision that the Maoists were the right party to support. I don't think the Nepalis had ever heard support for the Maoists described in those terms—the usual discourse in the capital is that Maoist supporters are dupes and victims.

At the same meeting David Holmberg (2008), an American anthropologist who has worked on the Tamangs of Nuwakot for over thirty years, was able to explain, based on his long-term acquaintance with the area, an ironic and counter-intuitive situation, namely why the local Tamangs—supposedly an oppressed ethnic group in the national scheme of things—support the Congress Party (now the party of the Establishment) and the local high castes support the Maoists (supposedly the party of the oppressed). What he shows, in the words of the title of his piece (borrowed from Tip O'Neill), is that 'all politics is local'. In Holmberg's own words, 'decisions on voting are made according to highly localised sets of relations.... Party ideology is more often than not trumped by social relations' (Holmberg 2008: 11).<sup>17</sup> In this case, Congress had once been the party of the oppressed, and still today dense links of kinship tie local Tamangs, at least the Tamangs of Holmberg's village, to the Congress Party.<sup>18</sup>

Such detailed local knowledge is, of course, no monopoly of anthropologists. It is for that reason that I have cooperated with an ethnographically inclined Nepali political scientist, Krishna Hachhethu, on a project on activists since 2002.<sup>19</sup> But it is only anthropologists who have the patience to hang around for more than a year, or to return to the same place year after year—political scientists, even ethnographically inclined ones, are usually content with visiting for a week or less.

A final point about elections, a point on which no anthropological copyright can be taken, but on which anthropology can certainly contribute: it is clear that in South Asia elections have strong ritual, festive, and symbolic aspects. Holmberg (2008: 20) quotes a Nepali friend based in the USA telling him that elections are a *jatra*, in other words, a

17 For an important analysis on the same lines in Argha-Khanchi district, see Ramirez (2000: 268f). For background on the Tamangs of Nuwakot, see Holmberg (1989, 1990) and Holmberg, March, and Tamang (1999).

18 At the same meeting, Mukta Tamang spoke about his village—both in the sense that it is his home village and that he studied it for his doctorate. He showed how rural people, who may not fully approve of the Maoists' methods, come to support them none the less. His report showed how, just as in Kathmandu, many people in the countryside shared the idea that the Maoists needed to be given responsibility so that they could held responsible and so that violence could come to an end, and that a vote for the Maoists was a vote for change (Tamang 2008).

19 Hachhethu (2002) is the standard work on the Congress and UML political parties.

local festival. Elections are indeed a great Durkheimian periodic rite, both symbolizing the nation and emphasizing divisions at the same time.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. *Revolution*

The Maoist revolution in Nepal comprises my third example. In terms of the speed with which it was able to go from armed rebellion to the strongest political force in the country, it is the most successful Marxist revolution South Asia has ever seen.

The questions one is always asked about the Maoist movement in Nepal are: (1) What role did the royal massacre of June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001, play in the Maoist success? (2) Are the Maoists backed by China? (3) Are they really Maoists?

The very short answers are: Some, No, and Yes.

Let me briefly answer all three. Yes, in the long run, the massacre did play an important role in de-legitimizing monarchy in Nepal. The most important sociological fact about the massacre is that the vast majority of Nepali people believe that King Gyanendra, who happened to be out of Kathmandu at the time, and whose wife and son, though present, survived, was behind the slaughter and somehow organized it. But, important though this is, it does not have quite the significance that Westerners usually assume. In the first place, kings have frequently murdered members of their families in the past and it has not, thereby, reduced their legitimacy one jot. If Gyanendra had been more intelligent, if he had cooperated with the political parties to isolate the Maoists, if he had been careful not to alienate India, he would still be King today. In other words, the biggest single reason for Nepal being a republic today is the foolishness of Gyanendra, or Mr Shah, as he is now known. Much more could be said on this subject, but let that suffice for today.

On the second question: The brief answer is that China was not backing the Maoist movement—on the contrary, they backed the King against the Maoists until the very last moment, just as the Pope backed King William and the Protestants at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. China backed the old regime in Nepal right up to the last moment. Now that the Maoists are in power, they have lost no time in cosying up to them, inviting their leaders frequently, and upsetting the Indians in the process.

On the third question: Are they *really* Maoists? There are certain affinities here with the question that anthropologists of Buddhism are familiar with: Are these peasants really Buddhists? When the observer, who so certainly declaims that they are not, is a Victorian Christian gentleman whose idea of Buddhism is based on a sentimental conflation of Christ and the Buddha, combined with another conflation between Buddhism and Protestantism, and a third conflation between *present-day* Buddhism

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<sup>20</sup> Mukulika Banerjee (2007) has stressed this theme in the context of Bengal recently. See also Hauser and Singer (1986).



and Roman Catholicism, so that all the evils of superstition and priestcraft are blamed on the decline of Buddhism from its pristine and rationalist original state, then we can confidently side with the peasants who believe themselves to be Buddhist. This is absolutely *not* to claim that the anthropologist must always assert 'My Native right or wrong'. Anthropologists have sometimes found themselves in philosophically tight corners when attempting to find their subjects right in everything. But the more serious point is that the interesting questions, when particular groups identify themselves as belonging to a given tradition, are not usually about their particular degree of orthodoxy, and it is not the anthropologist's first, second, and last duty to award their subjects a mark in the exam sheet of orthodoxy.

So, as far as the Nepali Maoists go, the basic rule of thumb is that, if it looks like a duck, claims to be a duck, belongs to the international duckist association, reads assiduously the works of Chairman Duck and the classic 'How to be a Good Duck' written by his right-hand mallard (later purged), then it is probably safe to say that it is a duck.

Now, there are many paradoxes and ironies when one considers the Nepalese Maoist movement. I will just mention three here:

(1) At the period when China was actively interested in exporting revolution to Nepal, Nepal itself seemed immune. Only a tiny coterie of Nepali communists, with little chance of attaining power, were interested. When a few of them attempted an uprising in 1973 in Jhapa, just over the border from Naxalbari in India, it was brutally and swiftly suppressed.

By the time a genuine and true-believing Maoist movement had emerged in Nepal, China itself was horrified at any idea that the people should revolt against the government, and denounced the Nepali Maoists as terrorists who were besmirching the good name of Chairman Mao. On February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005, King Gyanendra seized power and himself chaired the council of ministers, thereby turning himself into his own Prime Minister. He put the leaders of the political parties under house arrest and seized and imprisoned leading members of civil society. Gyanendra found that he had alienated India, the USA, and the European countries, and the only countries to offer him support were Pakistan, Burma, China, and Cuba. A year later, as Gyanendra's hold on power faltered in early 2006, he had to receive a lecture from his visitor, the Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China, on the importance of parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, and cooperation with political parties.

(2) When, in January 2007 the Tarai, the southern region of Nepal abutting India, rose up in revolt demanding representation for the Madhes, as they call it, the Maoists suddenly



demanded that the government take a firm line with these terrorists and hooligans who were undermining law and order.

(3) Following the elections of April 2008 and the formation of a new government led by the Maoists, Nepal's Minister of Defence was Comrade Badal, a.k.a. Ram Bahadur Thapa, one-time engineering student in the Soviet Union, during the civil war a leading PLA general, and a member of the Maoists' politburo. As mentioned already, having shunned them for so long, China has had to make up lost time in terms of building bridges with the Maoists, and has been assiduous in inviting Badal and others for official visits in the PRC. On the other hand, the Nepal Army is not at all happy at being formally under the command of one of their former adversaries. Tension over the amalgamation of armies issue has bubbled; now the tension has been exacerbated by the army continuing to recruit new soldiers to replace those retiring, despite explicit orders from the Ministry of Defence to desist. The Ministry of Defence got its revenge by not renewing the positions of the top eight brigadier generals. In yet another ironic turn of events, the generals then hired private lawyers to fight the lawyers of their own Ministry of Defence up to the Supreme Court in an attempt to keep their jobs.

Such ironies are to be expected in the looking-glass world produced by the peace process—and nearer to home are familiar from the incorporation of former Sinn Fein-IRA commanders in Northern Ireland as Ministers in charge of the police service.

The question here is: What should be the role of anthropology in studying this process?

Anthropology is not the kind of subject that often makes predictions. An exceptional example, highly relevant to the present discussion, by someone who might count as an honorary anthropologist, is the 1992 article by development and Latin America expert Andrew Nickson, 'Democratisation and the Growth of Communism in Nepal: A Peruvian Scenario in the Making?' Nickson arrived in Nepal in 1990. Most of his article is a political history, but he also observed the striking structural and geographical similarities between Peru and Nepal. In both, backward and despised mountain areas had reason to resent the state and the elites. In both countries, education was the one development indicator showing real success. In both, the state's bloated bureaucracy simply could not absorb any more of the educated and semi-educated unemployed. Nickson concluded (1992; 381):

The Peruvian experience suggests that economic and social frustrations experienced by graduates from ethnic minorities and other low castes could well be translated into support for the all-encompassing political ideology of Maoism with its promise of a 'new republic' of equality and democracy.

He noted evidence that the Masal (the precursor of the Maoists) had already established guerilla training camps, and he suggested that, barring an extremely unlikely espousal of radical reforms by the ruling Congress Party, there would be widespread support for revolutionary solutions.

Nickson's paper—in so far as it was noticed—was pooh-poohed both by Nepal specialists and by the elite in Kathmandu, but turned out to be highly prescient. With his comparative framework, Nickson had noticed something that had escaped the anthropologists who worked on the very region which became the crucible of Maoism in west Nepal, not to mention all other specialists on Nepal.<sup>21</sup>

So, though anthropologists may have failed to anticipate—like almost everyone else—what was going to happen, what can they contribute now that it has happened? There are four areas in which they are currently doing so.

First, as with elections, ground-level descriptions and analysis of what life is like under the Maoists: Judith Pettigrew, whom I've already mentioned, has written several articles on these lines: the titles will give you an idea: 'Guns, Kinship, and Fear' (2003), 'Living between the Army and the Maoists' (2004), and 'Learning to be Silent: Change, Childhood, and Mental Health in the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal' (2007).

Secondly, anthropologists have led the way in analysing how the Maoists have communicated their message and built their movement around symbols that reinterpret already existing Hindu notions of place and sacrifice. The pioneer author here is Anne de Sales, chargée de recherches at CNRS, but also an associate of our institute, ISCA. Her seminal article, 'The Kham Magar Country: Between Ethnic Claims and Maoism' (2003), has been anthologized in several places and is required reading for anyone interested in the issue. Her CNRS colleagues Philippe Ramirez (1997) and Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (2004, 2006, 2009) have also contributed much to our understanding on these lines.<sup>22</sup> The cult of martyrs as part of a political movement was not the invention of the Maoists, but they have certainly raised it to new heights in the Nepalese context. Not only has it been an important part of motivating and building a successful movement, it has generated similar cults on the part of other movements, and indeed on the part of the Nepal Army as well. Other anthropologists have also looked at the role of political

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21 Nickson wrote in 2005 that 'it did not take a stroke of genius in 1992 to predict that a radical Maoist insurgency would soon appear and make rapid inroads in Nepal'. He continued: 'Similarly, it does not take a stroke of genius to realise that a CPN (Maoist) government would be genuinely "pro-poor".' Therefore the British government and DFID should back them as the force most likely to enact their 'good governance' agenda (Nickson 2005). Augusta Molnar, a German anthropologist, had written a book on women in Thabang (Molnar 1981), the village that was to become the Maoists' capital and is now a site of leftist pilgrimage. In it, perhaps to protect her friends, she did not mention political affiliations or activities at all. However, we now know that communist teaching was going in a very open way at the very time she was there (Ogura 2007).

22 See also Steinmann (2006), de Sales (2003b). Another important edited collection, from this side of the Channel, is Hutt (2004).

theatre and cultural performance (songs, poems, plays) as a very important part of the Maoist movement.

A third anthropological perspective is to look specifically at those youth who join the movement. Two of my students, Rosalind Evans and Ina Zharkevich, have made important advances here. There had been anecdotal accounts linking the development agency discourse on empowerment to the appeal of the Maoists. I and others in Kathmandu have heard stories of Maoists turning up on the final day of a three- or five-day training camp paid for by INGOs. The Maoists ask to be allowed to give a talk to the participants, in which they say, more or less, ‘If you want real empowerment and real change, come with us’—whereupon many of the participants do indeed join up and go off with them. Roz Evans’ work with young Bhutanese refugees gives some substantial ethnographic grounding to this connection, showing that indeed it is often the most articulate, idealistic, and academically able students, who shine in the empowerment programmes run by Western and international INGOs, who join the Bhutanese Maoist movement dedicated to overthrowing the Bhutanese monarchy (Evans 2007, 2008). In the case of Ina Zharkevich, her close attention to the lives of young Maoists in Kathmandu and Thabang shows how—far from being a case of brainwashing, or victimization, as often portrayed—the process of becoming a Maoist is a deliberate and repeated choice about remaking the self, a conscious decision to seek education, self-improvement, and idealism (Zharkevich 2009).<sup>23</sup>

Finally, one of the interesting points about the Maoist movement in comparative perspective is the very large numbers of women involved. Some estimates put the number of women fighters in the People’s Liberation Army at one third. The theme of ‘Girls with Guns’ (cf. West 2000) has attracted some journalistic attention.<sup>24</sup> My belief is that the explanation for the high female involvement in the Maoists’ People’s Liberation Army can best be provided from anthropology. Women’s status is indeed secondary, compared to men, in Nepal. But it is, relatively, higher in many if not all Nepali sub-cultures than it is in most of north India. Thus, for women, joining the movement is definitely a step towards liberation (from household duties and expectations, whether in their natal home or in their husband’s home), despite the obligations and duties involved. Yet it is not an unthinkable step, as it would be in so much of north India. For men, on the other hand, accepting the discipline of the Maoist movement is less likely to seem like release from oppression, though they too are motivated by the altruistic desire to dedicate their life to bettering the country and doing something about poverty. On the question of gender, the explanation here is similar to that which is given to account for the surprising and

23 For some ethnography of the generations of activists who came of age before the rise of the Maoist movement, see Gellner and Karki (2007) and references given there.

24 Pettigrew and Shneiderman (2004) provide a preliminary discussion of the issue.

unexpected prominence of women in the Theravada Buddhist movement, as described in my book with Sarah LeVine: *Rebuilding Buddhism* (LeVine and Gellner 2005).

All these anthropological perspectives on the cultural and symbolic aspects of Maoism are an important counterweight to a more positivistic way of approaching the revolution encouraged by INGO donor funding, namely to look for the 'causes' of the revolution and to find them in the something called 'exclusion' or 'poverty'. Simple correlations, which attempt to show that Maoist violence is highest in areas with the worst poverty indicators, go together with simple policy recommendations: spend more money in districts X and Y. While the backwardness of far west districts of Nepal and the fact that people are literally starving there while all development is concentrated in the towns, particularly the capital, is certainly to be deplored, nothing is gained by advancing these simple-minded explanations, which leave entirely out of account social relations, politics, and history.<sup>25</sup> The explanation why the revolution started in the districts of Rolpa and Rukum cannot avoid history, anthropology, and the choices of particular people.<sup>26</sup> It is precisely in this kind of context that anthropology's message, 'It is not as simple as that', deserves to be repeatedly and forcibly expressed. Hopefully this can be combined with a more subtle historical account of just what those causes are (though that would be another lecture).

## Conclusion

I turn now to some concluding reflections. I chose to speak about these examples because increasingly anthropologists are studying social phenomena of equal interest to other social science disciplines, and I wanted to show that anthropology has something to offer those disciplines.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, anthropologists should preen themselves—rather than feel threatened—by the appearance of ethnography in educational studies, sociology, cultural studies, history, and so on. Many disciplines recognize that anthropological methods can serve their purposes too.

Anthropology can no longer maintain a fantasy, if ever it did, of being the queen of the social sciences. Its claims in that regard were even more fantastical than those of sociology, whether in Parsonian, Giddensian, or any other mode. But, on the other hand, it needn't be despondent that its subject matter has disappeared or is disappearing.

Overall, I believe the history of anthropology is better seen in terms of a gradualist English political history model, rather than, following French political history, as a series

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25 I am thinking here of analyses such as that by Murshed and Gates (2004), which was funded by DFID. A more sustained analysis, which does at least try to make use of the work of specialists on Nepal, is the book by Riaz and Basu (2007). In my case, they copy a table of governments of Nepal 1990-2002 from Gellner (2003: 14), including copying all the mistakes (Riaz and Basu 2007: 59).

26 See Ogura (2007, 2008a, 2008b) for some preliminary work in this line.

of revolutions which sweep away everything that has been before. Yes, the Malinowskian moment was indeed a major paradigm shift, as the conventional story has it. But thereafter I do not think that the overthrow of structural functionalism represented the same kind of radical change, whatever it may have felt like at the time, still less the supposedly radical shifts and new vocabularies that have been offered subsequently.

Anthropology in recent years has experienced so many ‘turns’—the hermeneutic turn, the postmodern turn, the material turn, the turn to embodiment, the linguistic turn, the Foucaultian turn, the cognitive turn, the rise of medical anthropology, the evolutionary turn—it is not surprising that some may feel more than a little dizzy. Others may claim that anthropology (and allied disciplines) has had more turns and more dead ends than an ornamental maze.

The postmodern critique that washed over the discipline in the wake of Clifford and Marcus’s famous collection, *Writing Culture* (1986), was always pulled in two quite contradictory directions. On the one hand, there was the line that stable cultures, and stable concepts, had always been exaggerated and ideological myths that traditional ethnographic method had bought into. Any attempt to represent another culture was and is inherently partial, and one interpretation can never be judged as better or worse than any other. On the other hand, there was a felt need to find better ways to describe and capture a changing, globalizing world. For the former position, postmodernism captured an eternal human condition; for the latter it was part of the *current* human condition. For the postmodern position, there was no objective way to capture social reality at any time. For working ethnographers, on the other hand, some kind of objectivity was possible, providing one’s methods were attuned to the social conditions obtaining at the time. This basic contradiction does not seem to have been clear either to Clifford and Marcus or to others at the time. It was evidently obscured by the iconoclasm of the moment. But the divide between those who deny the possibility of representation and those who seek more adequate means of representing seems pretty clear now, and the vast majority of anthropologists are with the gradual reformists rather than the revolutionaries on this issue.

Out of the ferment that followed *Writing Culture*, there has emerged much experimentation, some of it dotty, maybe—but I do not think that a variety of approaches should be seen as constituting a crisis, as is often thought. There is innovation in method of presentation—see, for example, Andrew Beatty’s recent book on Java, *A Shadow Falls*, which uses novelistic methods to convey ethnography about people’s changing experiences of Islam.

There is also great ingenuity in the places where ethnography is done. It is, inevitably, invidious to name names, but two that have caught my eye recently are Anthony Good (2007) writing on the British asylum courts and Tim Allen (2006) on

the institutionalization of human rights in Uganda. In our own department, we have exciting new work being done in medical anthropology, material and visual culture, on migration, and in cognitive and evolutionary anthropology—the only danger, as I see it, is that the constituent units will drift apart and fail to maintain their vital connection to the social and cultural mother ship and its tradition of long-term, intensive, historically engaged fieldwork in the vernacular.

Anthropology will, I am sure, maintain its ability to ask the awkward questions that often irritate fellow social scientists. Anthropologists will remain the specialists on getting the back story, what Gerd Baumann, in *Contesting Culture* (1996), his brilliant little book on ethnic politics in Southall, calls the ‘demotic discourse’ as opposed to the ‘official discourse’ or what James Scott calls the local knowledge or *metis* as opposed to the grand schemes and classifications of the state.<sup>27, 28</sup>

Moving beyond this task of giving voice to the voiceless and disrupting nationalist and other dominant narratives—being ‘awkward’ as I have put it—anthropology can and should attempt comparison and explanation. I am aware that I have not done it here, but it can be done in an anthropological and culturally sensitive intra-regional way, as with Adam Kuper’s *Wives for Cattle* (1982), a structuralist analysis of varying but related marriage practices in southern Africa, and Peter Rivière’s *Individual and Society in Guiana* (1984). There are, moreover, many possibilities for collaborative work, both between different branches of anthropology, and between anthropology and other social sciences.

Anthropologists do need to be more explicit about methods, about how we write, and about the standards of evidence expected. The days of making a mystery of our methods, of hinting to our audience that we know better than them but are not willing to divulge the sources of our knowledge to the uninitiated, are gone. Many of those who have called for more reflexivity have not been above such insinuations of superior insight.

As an evocation of another era on the methods front, but also as an expression of faith in the possibilities of total immersion participant observation, I would like to end with a story from Michael Gilson, formerly Khalid bin Abdullah al-Saud Professor for the Study of the Contemporary Arab World in this university.

27 On Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* (1998), see the important commentary by Li (2005) where she makes the case for anthropologists as specialists in studying the clash of high-modernist grand schemes and the resistance and compromises that become necessary as people are impacted by them: ‘the beyond of grand plans at particular sites and conjunctures’ (ibid.: 392).

28 We may, I hope, see historians like Shahid Amin as fellow travellers of anthropology. His book *Event, Metaphor, Memory* (1995), deals with an incident that occurred in a small town called Chauri Chaura, rather close to Nepal, in Uttar Pradesh. In 1922 a crowd, inspired by loyalty to Mahatma Gandhi, pursued 23 policemen into the local police station where they were burnt to death—thus leading Gandhi to call off his non-violent, non-cooperation movement. As a founding member of the Subaltern Studies group, Amin is, of course, concerned to recover the voices of the participants. Not content to restrict himself to the archive, he went to talk to the children of those who went to jail and were hanged for their part in the ‘riot’, who were, by the time he got there, either dead or in their eighties.

I have known the story in a slightly variant version for many years, and have frequently used it when teaching fieldwork methods, but for today's occasion I thought I should check it. So here it is, quoted straight from Michael's e-mail:

My memory is of writing to EP in total panic, city of 5 million, no cattle byres, no sacrifice, no wet season, dry season and basically saying 'help, what do I do' while knowing perfectly well that that was a fatal thing to ask. His reply, -- on one of those flimsy little blue airmail letter forms that you always opened somehow on the wrong join...

[For the younger members of the audience who have heard of letters but never actually sent one, and will certainly never have seen these blue airmail letters or aerogrammes, I include a picture; and part of the point here was that, if you wanted to, you used to be able to squeeze quite a lot of words on to one of these]

... -- was, more or less:

'Dear Michael (or was it simply Dear Gilsean), thank you for your letter. I am sure that you will do whatever is best in the circumstances. Yours ever, E.E.E-P.' [Very Zen of him. Utterly wise or utterly indifferent? Perhaps the same?] Between EP and the Sufi Saint...which was more powerful or more enigmatic? or dangerous?



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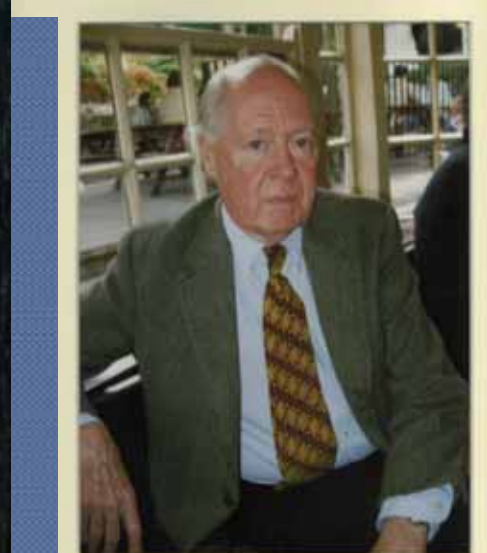
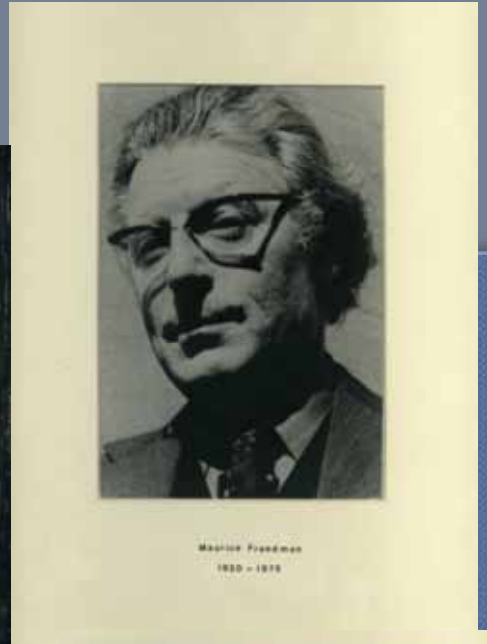
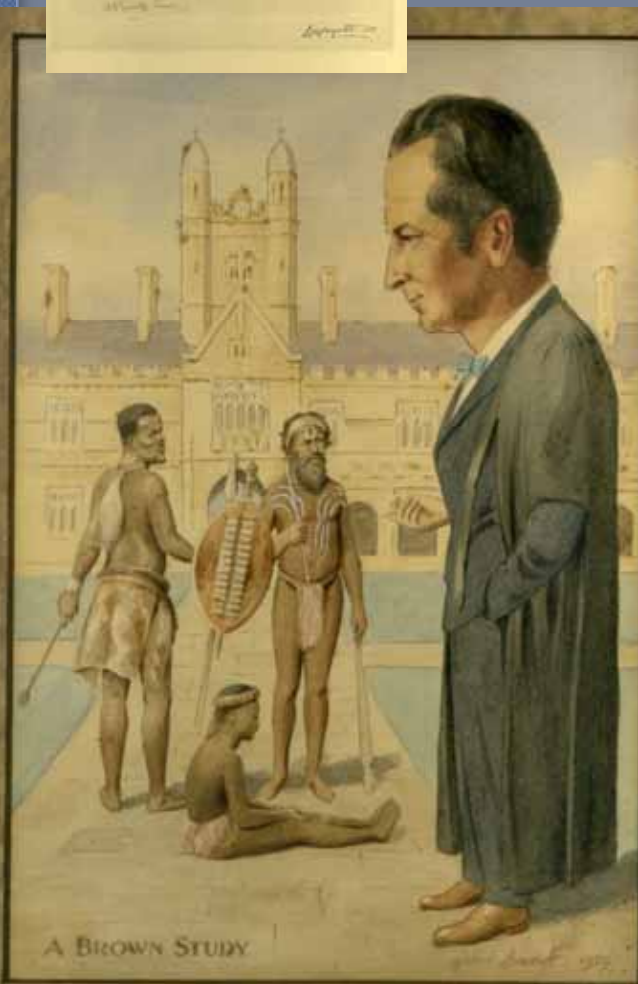


# The Awkward Social Science? Anthropology on Schools, Elections, and Revolution in Nepal

David Gellner



# Anthropological Ancestors





# Anthropology today?

Imagine Gary Larson's Far Side cartoon of anthropologists approaching over the hill and the grass-skirted 'natives' hiding their standard lamps and VCRs



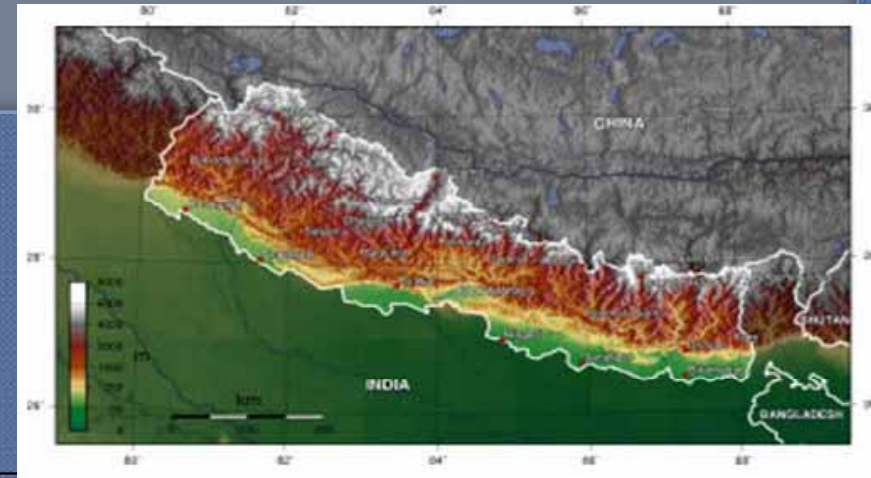
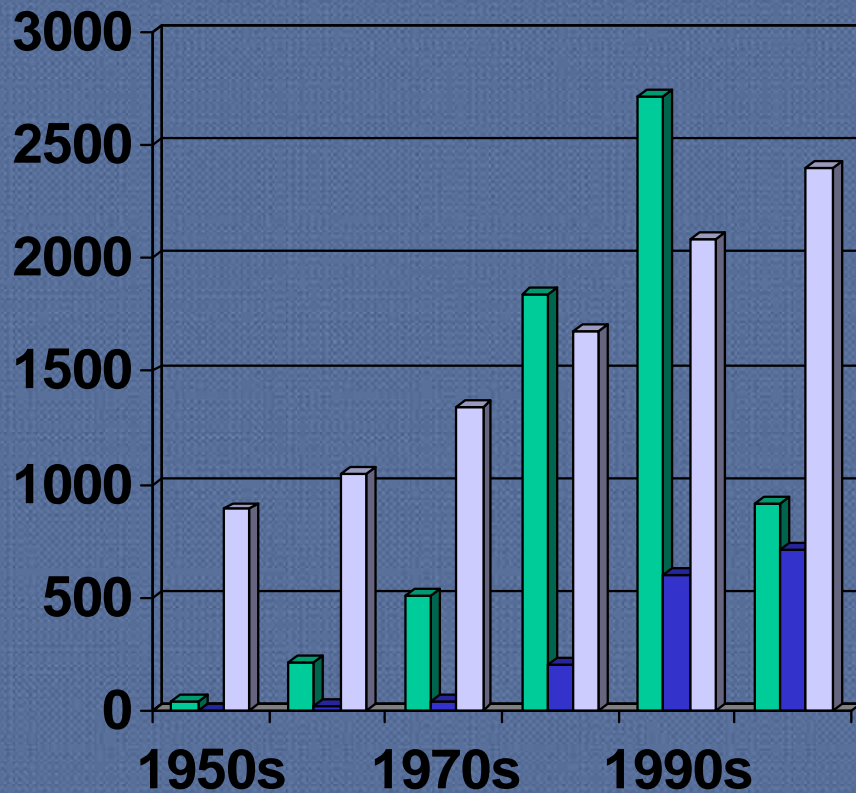
Bruce Parry

“The hope is that they will teach the military to behave in more 'culturally appropriate' ways and reduce the need for lethal force.”  
(BBC R4 programme on Human Terrain System)





# Foreign aid to Nepal 1950-2003



- Aid in \$m
- Aid p.c. in NC
- Pop in 10,000

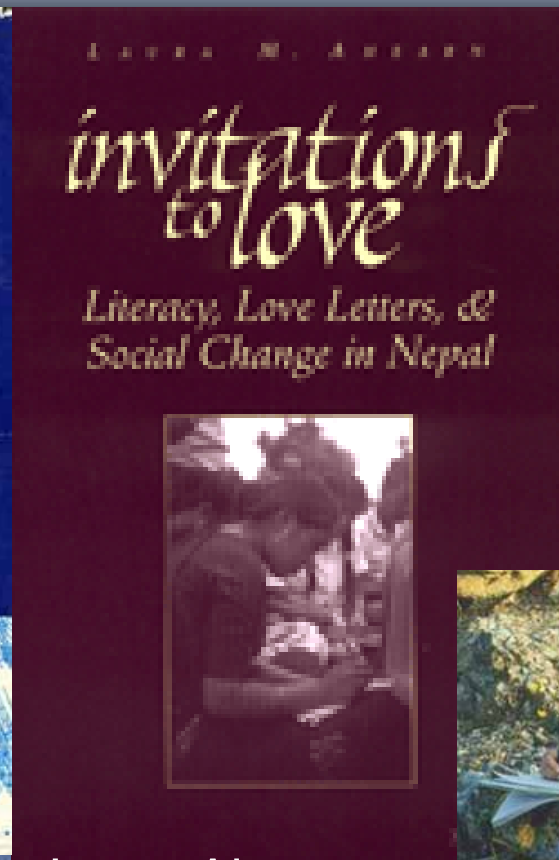
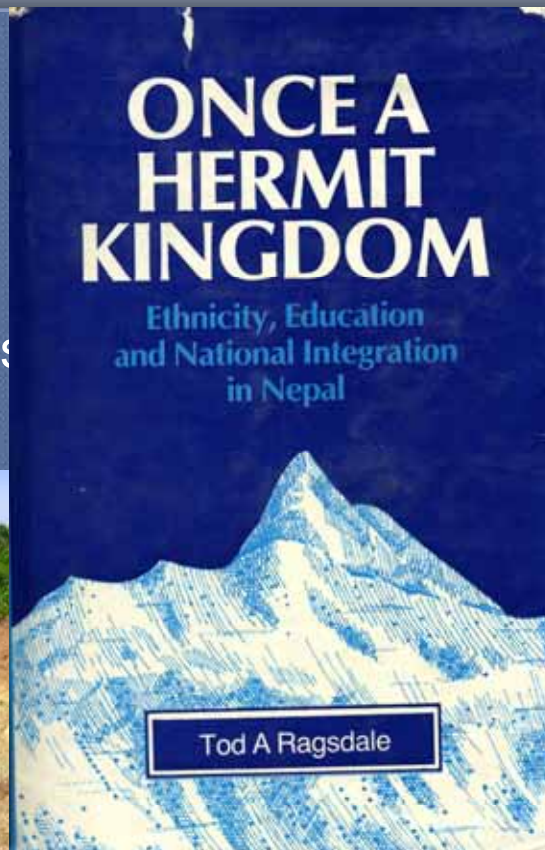


# Classics on education in Nepal

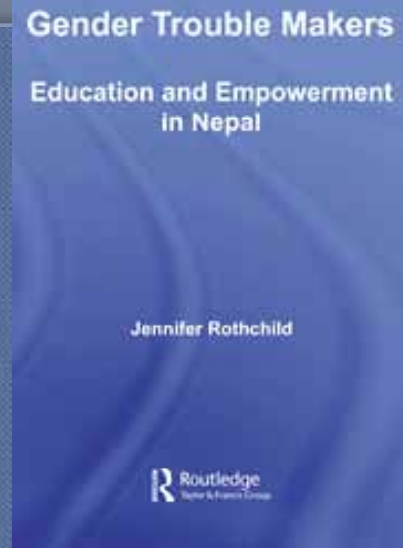
Tod Ragsdale in Laos  
2004-5



© TARagsdale, 2005



Laura Ahearn





# Jagat Sundar Bwone Kuthi: flagship for Newar cultural nationalism



**HIKIVA.org**

a Katano International Volunteer Association, Japan



From the Hikiva website:

## HIKIVA Scholarships and Loan Funds Program

Hikiva has been continuously adding up different scholarship schemes to the students of Nepal since 1990. Currently, HIKIVA is providing more than 450 scholarships to the students from three different schools Jagat ,i.e. **JAGAT SUNDAR BWONEKUTHI** (School), Kathmandu, **NIL BARAHI PRIMARY SCHOOL**, Bhaktapur, and **SATYAVATI HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL**, Dhading.

Jagat Sundar Bwone Kuthi:  
founded 1990;  
First contact with Japanese in  
1991;  
New buildings from 1993.

# Stakeholders in JSBK

1. Nepal Bhasa Misa Khala (female Newari activists)
  2. Children
  3. Children's parents
  4. Sponsors (individuals; today: 6,000 NC = £50 p.a.)
  5. Sponsors: HIKIVA
  6. Teachers (and other staff)
  7. School Board (male Newar cultural nationalists)
- Preservation of Nepal Bhasa (Newari)
  - Giving poor children an education
  - Enabling children to 'compete' with others from good private schools
  - Development through raising educational levels





## Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think*

“Any institution that is going to keep its shape needs to gain legitimacy by distinctive grounding in nature and in reason... Any institution... starts to control the memory of its members... It provides the categories of their thought, sets the terms for self-knowledge, and fixes identities. All of this is not enough. It must secure the social edifice by sacralizing the principles of justice.”



# Constituent Assembly elections, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2008



P. Chauhan (UML candidate) opens the voting at Pokhariya, Parsa 4, at 7.30 a.m. (he won the seat)



Carter Center Short-Term Observer Team number 17, standing on the Indian border

Counting the votes in a Birganj high school, watched by the candidates' representatives





# Three f.a.q.s about revolution in Nepal

1. What role did the Royal Massacre (1/6/01) play?
2. Were the Maoists backed by China?
3. Are they really Maoists?



President Hu Jintao and King Gyanendra in Jakarta, 23/4/05





# Three paradoxes of revolution in Nepal

1. China in 1960s and 1970s vs. China in the 1990s.
2. Nepali Maoists in opposition vs. Nepali Maoists in government.
3. China's attitude to the Maoists before and after they formed part of the government



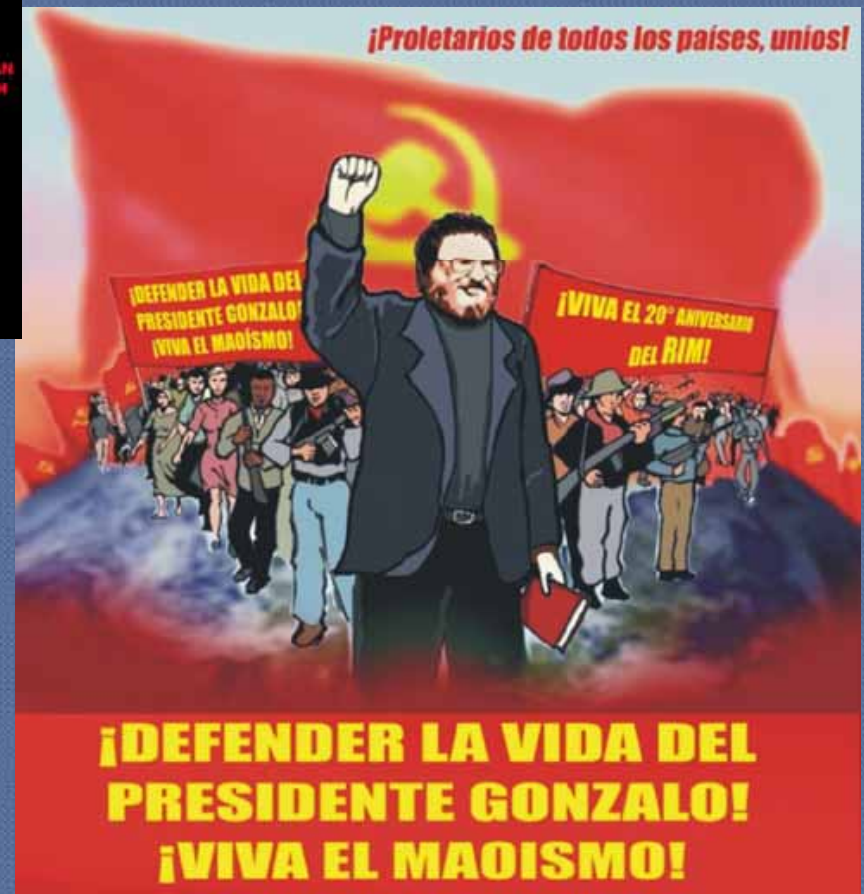
PM Dahal meets PM Wen Jiabao, 24/8/08, in Beijing



# Peru-Nepal comparison



“The Peruvian experience suggests that economic and social frustrations experienced by graduates from ethnic minorities and other low castes could well be translated into support for the all-encompassing political ideology of Maoism with its promise of a 'new republic' of equality and democracy.” (Nickson 1992: 381)





# Anthropological contributions to the study of Maoism in Nepal

1. Everyday life under Maoism
2. Symbolism and ritual of Maoism (cult of the martyrs)
3. Youth and empowerment
4. Gender



Headline  
4/2/09:  
Kathmandu  
proclaims  
8,000 Maoist  
martyrs



# Anthropology today

