

## Digital Himalaya: Nepal in Context<sup>148</sup>

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### Introduction

I hope that I may be allowed the indulgence of looking back over work and visits to Nepal and what I have learnt from them. My first visit was part of the research for a Ph.D. in anthropology at the School of Oriental Studies, starting in December 1968, for 15 months. I was only able to return again in 1986 with my second wife Sarah Harrison. Since then we have visited the Gurungs almost every year for between 1-3 months. We have made over 15 visits, and I have spent about 36 months in Nepal. If I add on the time spent with me by my first wife Gill, and Sarah, this makes well over five years of data collection.

During that time I have concentrated my work on the Gurungs, and particularly the village of Thak (Gurung, Tolson) to the north of Pokhara, where Sarah and I have been engaged on a longitudinal study. We have gathered what must be one of the most extensive sets of data – annual censuses, crop and land surveys, photographic surveys of every person and house, over 120 hours of film and video and many other kinds of material – that has been made in relation to a Himalayan community over a period of 35 years. Here we are building on the work of earlier anthropologists such as Bernard Pignède, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf who have worked in the area.

The problem, however, is that in a way we have too much knowledge and too much data. I would like to highlight two difficulties. The first is that one becomes so involved in a place and people that they become like one's family. It is difficult to be objective or stand back, or to treat as a subject. The second is that there is so much material at so many levels that it seems very unsatisfactory to write just a few articles or even books on the community. Writing seems dry and fails to capture the spirit of what we have experienced. This article will try to address these two problems.

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<sup>148</sup> I would like to thank the Association for inviting me to give the lecture, and particularly Dr. David Gellner for suggesting the article be published in this form. I have not changed the content, except to turn some notes into full texts and add references.

### **The problem of storage, communication and representation.**

As a historian as well as an anthropologist, I am aware that the materials we have collected are unique. They describe a world of Himalayan shamanism and village life which is changing rapidly, and will soon be largely a thing of the past (electricity and roads are reaching Thak even as I write). For future Gurungs, as well as others, I feel that this material should not only be preserved but made available to the Gurungs themselves.

This explains part of the title, “digital Himalaya”. With Mark Turin and Sara Shneidermann, Sarah Harrison and I launched a project called “Digital Himalaya” in 2001 to explore the potentials of the new communications media to store and distribute archival materials about the Himalayas. There are a number of aims, as explained on the web-site at [www.digitalhimalaya.com](http://www.digitalhimalaya.com). These include returning cultural materials to the places where they came from. This is a modern version of an earlier project to use optical videodiscs to store and return materials to the Nagas of Assam, which is currently also being put on my website.

As the philosophy and techniques of this project are described on the above website, and in a briefer form on my own at [www.alanmacfarlane.com](http://www.alanmacfarlane.com) it is unnecessary to go into this in detail.

In essence, we are working with Gurungs and others (who have also started a cultural heritage centre in Pokhara in which we have long been involved) to preserve information of all kinds about the history and culture of these peoples. There are obviously considerable ethical and political problems in this kind of work, yet we are already finding it is considered to be helpful by many. We hope in due course to make as much of the immense body of data we have collected into a safe and accessible archive, and in particular to make the films of Gurung life available for teaching, research and to enrich the local community.

This endeavour, alongside formal accounts such as my book *Resources and Population: A Study of the Gurungs* (1976) was made accessible in a cheap copy (and with a new preface on what has happened in Thak over the last thirty years) when re-published by Ratna Pustak Bhandar in 2003. This describes the past and very briefly the collapse of the hill economy in the path of mass outward migration and capitalist penetration. Alongside Pignède’s pioneering work, which Sarah Harrison and I translated and edited, this creates the backdrop to the changes which have occurred among the Gurungs.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Bernard Pignède, *Les Gurungs* (Mouton, Paris, 1966; re-published in translation as *The Gurungs* (Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu, 1993).

## Nepal in Context

When David Gellner invited me to give this lecture, he alluded to my wider work on the development of western civilization and suggested that the way in which my Nepalese experience fitted into this might be of interest.

D'Alembert quoted Montesquieu to the effect that "Germany was made to travel in, Italy to sojourn in, France to live in, and England to think in."<sup>150</sup> For me, Nepal is above all good to feel in. What I have found is that both the personal experience, as well as the observation of a Himalayan community, have been a wonderful way of experiencing certain aspects of life more deeply.

I went to Thak originally to try to find out what it is feels like to live in a "pre-industrial community" and to try to understand, from another viewpoint, something about my own privileged background. I believe working in Nepal over a period of 35 years has more than done this. I owe to my friends and family in Thak and Nepal more generally an immense debt, and in particular to the late Dilmaya Gurung and her family.

The flavour of what I have learnt can be seen in of one of my books, *The Savage Wars of Peace* (1997). There I wrote in the preface as follows.

"In order to broaden my framework into a comparative one I went to Nepal in December 1968 for fifteen months, to work as an anthropologist among a people called the Gurungs. It is difficult to analyse the effects of this experience and of nine further trips between 1986 and 1995, in altering the way I approached the English past. Much of the influence was at a deep level of perceptual shift which alters both the questions one asks and the implicit comparisons one has in mind when evaluating evidence."

Witnessing the perennial problem of disease, the sanitary arrangements, the illness of young children, the difficulties with water, the flies and worms, the gruelling work and the struggle against nature in a mountain community made clear to me, in a way which books or even films alone could never do, some of the realities which the English and Japanese faced historically.

Of course it was different. Each culture is different. But to feel in the blood and heart and to see with one's eyes how people cope with a much lower amount of energy, medical care and general infrastructure makes one aware of many things. Without this experience I know that I could not have written this book. Trapped in late twentieth century western affluence it would be impossible to feel or know much of what has been important to the majority of humans through history. Watching and studying a village over the years also makes one more deeply aware, as does all anthropological work, of the inter-connectedness of things, the holistic view of a society.

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<sup>150</sup> Quoted in J.C.Collins, Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau in England (1908), p.178.

It is important to stress this experience, for in the body of this text Nepal is scarcely mentioned despite the fact that much of what I have seen when examining England and Japan has become visible by setting them against a backdrop of Nepal. De Tocqueville once explained, “In my work on America...Though I seldom mentioned France, I did not write a page without thinking of her, and placing her as it were before me.”<sup>151</sup> Nepal helped me to understand the Japanese case, which I shall shortly describe, and Japan helped me to get England into perspective. A straight, two-way, comparison of either England-Nepal or Japan-England would not have been enough.

At the theoretical level, the Nepalese experience enabled me to look at England and indeed the whole of western Europe from the outside and to see more clearly its demographic and economic peculiarities.” This summarizes as well as I now can some of the ways in which Nepal contributed to my intellectual and emotional development.

### **Some reflections on “How the World Works”**

I would like to expand this idea of the hidden comparative model and the way in which experience seeps into our little examined “habitus”. I would like to reflect a little further on the part which experience in Nepal over the years has shaped both the questions I ask and the answers I give in relation to various other parts of my work.

Over my life I have written over a dozen books in which I implicitly or explicitly compare the anthropology and history of western Europe, Nepal and India, Japan and China. Recently I have decided to try to bring together the themes in all these books and other writings into a set of short letters addressed to a wider audience – represented for the moment by my granddaughter Lily, imagined to be about 16 years old.<sup>152</sup>

These letters try to answer a number of basic questions of a universal kind – why do people go to war, why do they believe in God or gods, why does power tend to corrupt and so on. There are thirty of these. Each is preceded by a “walk” to explain how I arrived at my opinions.<sup>153</sup> Nearly all these walks nearly all take me through my Nepalese experience to show how it has radically altered my perception or awareness of larger topics. Let me briefly reflect on some of the questions I try to answer in my next book and a few of the ways in which working in Nepal has influenced both the questions and the answers.

Among the questions I ask in the book are a few of those which are directly related to what I have learnt in Nepal. The first is , “Why would

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<sup>151</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Memoir, Letters and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville*, (Cambridge, 1961), vol. 1, p. 359.

<sup>152</sup> Alan Macfarlane, *Letters to Lily: On How the World Works* (2004)

<sup>153</sup> These “walks” can be seen on [www.letters2lily.com](http://www.letters2lily.com)

we expect human civilizations to develop rapidly? What is the intellectual potential of human beings?"

Here the very basic, but absolutely fundamental thing I learnt in Nepal was about the natural curiosity and strange determination of human beings. Watching and filming children at play, talking to and observing my adopted family, I realized that both intelligence and curiosity are distributed *equally* and *universally* throughout human societies. It re-affirmed that bed-rock of anthropology, the "psychic unity of mankind". There was nothing pre-logical or intellectually challenged about the Gurungs with whom I worked. The potential for rapid growth was there. The nonsense written by many historians about how our ancestors were somehow less intelligent, or were emotionally stunted, is impossible to sustain for any length of time when one lives in a village such as Thak. Badrasing Gurung, Dilmaya Gurung and many others were as intellectually gifted and emotionally complex and sophisticated as anyone I have met at the University of Cambridge or anywhere in the world.

This leads me on to ask. "If humans everywhere are so bright and inquisitive, why has there been much less rapid development of knowledge and technology in some places than others? Why then do humans run into bottle-necks of an intellectual kind?"

Here the Thak experience informs my answer in various ways. For example, I consider the inhibiting effects of education. Experience in village schools in Nepal gave me a sense of what rote learning with poor educational materials could be like. Certainly, through a mixture of pressures much of the natural inquisitiveness of children is destroyed in many parts of Nepal by the time they leave school. Or again, watching the back-biting, competition and suspicion in certain groups in Nepal, though not really among the Gurungs, has brought home to me other inhibitions on intellectual adventurousness.

Clearly the answer to the question of the inhibitions on education and inquisitiveness has to be answered at a wider level than that of individual thought, or even village schools. So I go on to ask: "what other inhibitions are there on thought and initiative? So what are the effects of bureaucratic centralization?"

A major inhibition on thought systems and all kinds of initiative are certain forms of bureaucracy. Experience in Nepal, not mainly in the village, but in Pokhara and Kathmandu, helped put some flesh on the bones of what I had read about bureaucratic centralization and its inhibiting effects. When I encountered the local bureaucracy in Nepal it had many of the features of a debased version of an Anglo-Indian imperial system. There were many delays, advice to "come back tomorrow". Deference and wasting of time was expected, offices were filled with meaningless paperwork. This is the sort of thing which Dor Bahadur Bista

has analysed in his book on *Fatalism and Development* (1991). This was so even though Nepal is a tiny and hardly governed country where I did not really experience a strong bureaucracy. In the village there was an oral culture and scarcely any bureaucratic structure. Yet I can see even there the tendency for bureaucracy to grow. The growth of bureaucracy is particularly evident in the attempt to deal with the tidal wave of educated, largely unemployed, young men and women.

I ask: "What makes for the development of large, fairly mindless bureaucracies?" One of the factors is political centralization and absolutism. Here the Nepalese experience provided a real contrast to my experience in England. On my first fieldwork in 1968-70 Nepal was even less of a political entity than it is today. The government was weak and far away, the villagers seemed to run their own lives in an informal and relatively harmonious way. Formal politics was largely irrelevant, though it has become increasingly intrusive over the years. The gradual intrusion of the State, and the difficulties of the tension between too much centralization and too much fragmentation, which we now see in Nepal, does however give food for thought. The tendency for power to corrupt and absolute power to corrupt absolutely is well illustrated in much Nepalese history and recent events.

This leads us into another area, that of one very powerful force towards political centralization in almost all parts of the world, namely the effects of war. It is clear that one of the most important factors in the growth of political absolutism is offensive and defensive warfare. So this has led me to be interested in the causes and effects of war on societies. To understand Gurung history and culture I had to understand the role of this famous "martial race" in the Gurkha regiments of the British army. Why had they been recruited, how had they performed, how did they adapt when they returned from service, were they mercenaries? Above all I had to try to resolve my surprise at the difference between the apparently very gentle, humorous, non-aggressive peoples I found in the village, and the accounts of the bravery, daring and martial spirit which had made them amongst the most famous warriors in history.

A great deal of what I have written about warfare is based on experience of working with this "martial" group, some of whose number served with my father and two uncles in the Second World War.

The effects of army life are often economically positive for the Gurungs. Yet army pay and pensions also tended, for a while at least, to increase economic differences in the village and has, of course, done the same at a wider level in Nepal. So this leads me on to the question of what effect warfare has on creating stratification and more generally what are the reasons for inequality in human societies.

It was only when I went to work as an anthropologist in Nepal that I began to feel some of the weight of inequality. I began to experience daily the unfairness of the struggle of poor peoples in the Third World, but also the internal differences they create in their own world. The Gurungs with whom I live are cross-comparatively extremely egalitarian in their social, gender and age relations. Yet even in a Gurung village there are two "strata" who were placed, at least by some, as unequal. On the fringes of the village there are also "out-castes", Blacksmiths, Tailors, Leather Workers. To see people who are ritually unclean, who can not come into one's house, cook us a meal, touch us, brought the curious human desire to place people on different points of a scale of status and ritual cleanness into context.

The contrasts between the Gurung village, and even more so the major Indian world of castes, and the world that I began to understand through the intensive study of the historical documents on English history became even more intriguing. How was I to make sense of these contrasts and patterns?

One aspect of this particularly interested me. This was how stratification was limited to the classic debates about the nature of peasant societies and the emergence of modern individualism and capitalism.

In my earlier training I had read about peasants in abstract, but it was only working in Nepal that made me understand what peasants really are. Although there were strong traditions of commercial wage labour in the army, and links to an earlier pastoral way of life, the Gurungs living in the villages were basically "peasants". That is to say, the unit that produced the wealth was the family, consisting not just of the parents, but also children, brothers and other family members. What they produced was largely consumed within the household. Only a small part was sold in order to buy other things. So, basically, the family group consumed most of what it produced. All children had a share in the family land at birth and they could not be disinherited. This was a real domestic mode of production.

When I returned to England I read further about peasant societies in some of the classic books on China, India, South America, Eastern Europe and western Europe before the middle of the nineteenth century. I began to see that the deep patterns of peasantry were almost universal. The peasant path was an effective way to organize production and consumption with an agricultural way of life and it had come to be the form which existed in all settled agricultural systems in the world by the fifteenth century.

It was with this strong, experienced, structure in my mind that I returned to an intensive study of the English from the thirteenth century.

I found to my amazement that they had never been peasants in this sense. The privatization of property, development of market relations, manorial and other legal systems, meant that they had gone down a different path not only to that of the Nepalese, but most European societies nearby. This was what the great legal historian F.W.Maitland called “their individualistic path”. This was one of the major discoveries of my life. I could not have made it without the experience in Nepal.

This discovery was linked to another puzzle. This was the question of why was it that England was the first country to industrialize. Putting it another way: “Does being a peasant or individual based society also affect the chances of economic progress?”

It was only when I did anthropological fieldwork in Nepal, when my own body was stretched to its limits in walking and carrying, and I lived with people who were ground down by an unequal battle with a deeply inhospitable environment (steep mountains, no roads, poor soil, receding forest supplies) that I became really interested in toilsome work. In my first fieldwork I did very detailed time and motion studies of how people worked. As I did these, the contrast between this world of grinding labour, with periods of complete leisure, and the relatively leisurely agriculture and crafts of the English over the centuries began to strike me. I often wondered why the technologies to assist the human body were so underdeveloped in Nepal. I wondered why even the wheel was hardly used in Nepal and in particular why the use of animals was fading out in the hill villages.

As I learnt more, I began to discover that Nepal was not exceptional. Most of the world still lived in grinding work and only small parts enjoyed something different. It became even more amazing that an industrial revolution had occurred in England. And yet the “industrious”, hard working path which not only Nepal but Japan had followed began to become apparent.

One aspect of this situation of gruelling hard work that interested me was the question of hunger and malnutrition. I was so worried about this problem early in my academic career that I decided to make the interrelation between growing population and food supplies the centre of my doctoral research as an anthropologist. So in Thak I studied in meticulous detail the production and consumption of food from the steep hillsides and the way in which rising population was pressing on increasingly scarce resources. In *Resources and Population* I predicted that famine would soon stalk the central Himalayas. Famine has not occurred, even though malnutrition seems to be growing in some hill areas. The Gurung experience has given me a lot of background experience in my general discussion of the causes of famine and its absence in some places.



I have already quoted from *Savage Wars* to show how my interest in disease and sickness was made concrete by the experience of living in Thak. There I saw a population which had until recently suffered from major epidemics and who faced illness and pain almost every day in their lives. I did a detailed health survey with a doctor which showed the universal incidence of minor painful and debilitating conditions such as goitres, sores, coughs, scabies, worms, all of them easily preventable except that people did not have any money or medicines.

I also noted the numerous infant deaths from diarrhoea, as well as the numerous adults who suffered from amoebic or bacillary dysentery almost all the time. Comparing my village to other parts of Asia I became aware of the vast incidence of tropical diseases such as malaria and cholera. My thesis and book included an extensive study of mortality from various diseases and I tried to compare them to the patterns in the English parishes which I was working on. The puzzle of how the English and Japanese escaped from the Malthusian trap of rising disease rates which I have tried to solve became even greater given the experience in Thak.

The other side of the demographic coin is, of course, fertility. When I went to Thak in 1968 the theme of the world population explosion was at the front of my mind, so fertility and its social setting, that is kinship and marriage relations was a central interest. It was clear that attitudes to fertility were largely shaped by family structure and marriage patterns.

Frequent revisits to Nepal from 1986 have reminded me of the power of family systems in many countries today and the great difference between a familistic world among my Himalayan friends and that which I experience in England, where it is the individual and not the family which is primary.

Yet, clearly the reasons for variable fertility are wider than family and marriage systems. A major pressure on fertility are religious beliefs. So I needed to discuss the role of religion and culture.

In Nepal I had the privilege of actually experiencing an enchanted world where the Reformation separation out of religion (spiritual power) from ordinary life had not occurred. I learnt that what I had thought of as ritual, sacrifice, taboo, evil and so on in my English up-bringing were but pale shadows of the real thing. I learnt, or rather unlearnt, many fundamental things. That the Durkheimian separation of sacred and profane does not work in Thak. That the Judaeo-Christian lumping of ritual, ethics and dogma together into something called "religion" is not universal. That one can inhabit pluralistic worlds which combine Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Shamanism and western scientific rationalism and not see these as conflicting. It has led me to question completely all of the fundamentals of what religion and ritual are and do.

To take just one aspect, ever since I did my doctorate on witchcraft in England, I have been interested in the question of whether there are particular aspects of the supernatural which close the human mind and intellect? And if so, why are they so attractive? And how one can break out of them?

So, when I went to Nepal, the subject of witchcraft was constantly at the forefront of my experience, even if none of this was described in the thesis and book on the fieldwork. At first I was misled by the otherwise superb book by Bernard Pignède which I was translating. He had been told that the Gurungs did not believe in witches. I accepted his account. Fortunately, the proofs of my *Witchcraft* book arrived in the Himalayas and when I explained what they were about, and that Pignède had said there were no real witches, my best informant, Prembahadur, explained that of course the Gurungs believed in real witches.

So I spent many weeks documenting anti-witchcraft rituals. Then and over the years since we have attended and filmed a number of long shamanic rituals designed to cure and drive away witches. Unlike most historians, therefore, I have lived in a world of witchcraft beliefs and both felt and seen these beliefs in action and talked to those who believe in magic and witchcraft and try to counter its power. I have undergone rituals to cure me of witchcraft (a possible cause, the shaman said, of my deafness). I have talked to young, educated, town Gurungs who combine modern scientific knowledge with witchcraft beliefs. So I now have a better sense of the hold of witchcraft on the mind.

To accuse someone of witchcraft, is, of course, illegal in Nepal. So this brings us to the question of the effects of legal systems on belief and politics more generally.

My experience in Thak, where law as an instituted process hardly exists, again proved a wonderful foil to my English experience. The contrast with the English villages which I examined could not be more extreme. In Thak a small community seemed to organize itself on the basis of custom and consensus with hardly any legal apparatus at all. The police were far-off and feared, legal documents and the State interference were kept to a minimum. Consequently the written records available for a future historian would be almost non-existent. I was reminded of what an amazingly rich and complex system had existed for many centuries in England. When people were occasionally taken from the village or their homes in Pokhara to be interrogated by the police, I saw examples of the system of brutal, unchecked, abuse of power which again contrasted dramatically with the Common Law system of England.

In *Letters to Lily* I end by noting that the *Letters* suggest a somewhat grim picture of our world. So I write to my grand-daughter a letter on beauty and the senses. These cover the pleasures of smell, sight, sound,

taste and touch. Working in one of the most beautiful places in the world, with the Annapurna mountains towering up behind us, and full of birds, butterflies and flowers, has enormously enriched my senses. In my letter I end by talking of two areas where all the senses come together. One is in gardens. The other is in children. On the latter, also, I owe Thak a great debt.

As an anthropologist in Nepal, as I became close to my adopted niece Premkumari from the age of two, and filmed her growing up to be a young lady, I experienced the engulfing pleasure of watching and inter-acting with a child. Over a number of years I developed a relationship which had few of the responsibilities of fatherhood or power. I begun to consciously relish in small children their innocence, enthusiasm, playfulness, trustingness, physical snuggling, high expectations, loyalty, ingenuity and moments of sudden beauty in a gesture or look. It was this experience which inspired me to undertake a similar study of Lily and to write her the *Letters*. So once again I owe Nepal a great debt.

Through *Digital Himalaya* and the archives we are setting up I hope to repay part of that debt. By explaining to those who wish to know some of the deeper laws which govern "How the World Works", I hope to repay my debt in another way.