

Ben Campbell

What are the personal and academic reasons behind your becoming a Nepal researcher?

I first visited Nepal aged 18 yrs in 1976. I had been trying to go to Iraq, to visit archaeological sites, but was not given a visa. I then continued overland to Nepal and never looked back. I then read all the anthropology I could find on Nepal as an undergraduate. In 1979, for one month, I helped my Cambridge undergraduate supervisor Caroline Humphrey on her research project in Eastern Nepal with Khardep. In May/June 1980 I trekked up to Langtang and met the Tamang speaking people of Rasuwa. I knew I wanted to return here for research, but was not sure of the topical direction. After several years outside academia (Margaret Thatcher's education policies were not encouraging for anthropological research), I had developed a strong interest in indigenous agricultural knowledge and cooperative labour practice, and decided to make this my PhD proposal for which I was registered in 1987.

What was the thematic focus of your research for your PhD? Also explain if any British national or disciplinary traditions were important in your selection of Nepal as a research site.

The title of my PhD dissertation, completed in 1993, was "Dynamics of Cooperation: Households and Economy in a Tamang Community of Nepal." I had been drawn further towards Nepal because of Alan Macfarlane, and Caroline Humphrey at Cambridge, but was interested too in the bigger picture beyond anthropology offered by Piers Blaikie, David Seddon and John Cameron, and University of East Anglia (UEA) offered more favourable rates for postgrad study. My PhD was supervised by Blaikie and Seddon.

Outside of the development context, I strongly felt Nepal was very marginal to 'British national and disciplinary traditions'. To be a South Asian anthropologist meant tackling caste theory, which apart from David

Gellner and Declan Quigley's attempts, rendered the substantive ethnography of the Nepal context highly peripheral to the concerns of subaltern studies and post-colonialism. I basically ploughed an independent furrow between development studies, which have a hard time with ethnographic detail and the micro-focus, and an anthropology which was so absorbed with 'Writing Culture' that studies of subsistence agriculture looked decidedly old fashioned.

In my dissertation I argued against the predominant approach to 'subsistence' agriculture in development studies and economic anthropology which assumes households to be the characteristic feature of social relations of production. This theoretical and methodological underpinning can be questioned when detailed ethnographic research revealed the Tamang 'households' to be extremely fluid in composition and in fact most agricultural production occurred in contexts of inter-household cooperation taking various forms and using a number of registers of 'household'. These deserve to be differentiated in terms of their reciprocal implications and of the boundaries between domestic 'units' which include and exclude people within their fields in differently constituted ways. Further, rather than being under threat from increasing commoditisation as the gift/commodity framework might expect, reciprocal labour groups were shown to have become a significant source of cash income in an inventive and permeable relationship between cash circulation and non-waged labour.

What is your research focus now? What other thematic transformations have occurred in your research in the mean time? How do you explain the changes that have occurred in your research focus?

Currently my research focus is on human-environmental relationships and regimes of nature protection. (You'll remember my early, theoretically stodgy attempts to think through this at a Martin Chautari seminar in April 1998). I am trying to complete my book in the next few months. There have been important shifts in theory in environmental anthropology, which I believe are important to the politics of nature protection in Nepal (politics with a small 'p'), and the whole conception of environmental intervention in rural Nepal – indirectly very significant for the events of recent years. Environmental projects have become a key avenue for intervention by the state into rural areas. Whether as biodiversity protection or community forestry, there are assumptions about territorial sovereignty and control that assume relationships between the state and local communities to be subject to institutional control. By using new theoretical positions in environmental anthropology this research shows how the 'environment'

ought to be remembered as a culturally specific idea that finds problematic translation in the lives of people who do not live in terms of a nature/society divide. Treating the environment as resources is a reductionist perspective which excludes a host of relationships between people and their environments which are rendered invisible by a materialist 'user interest' framework. Paradoxically, the value of taking an 'environmental' problematic within anthropological studies of Nepal has revealed a dialogic chasm between people interested in resources and those interested in ritual and symbolism. By attempting to bridge the chasm new possibilities emerge for considering human-environmental relationships in ways that acknowledge the significance of practical engagements with the environment along with their cultural representations.

Do you operate from a traditionally defined department or from an area studies centre?

I am based in Department of Social Anthropology in Manchester as a research fellow and sometime lecturer – not a permanent member of staff!

Do you teach and if so, at what level? What kinds of courses do you teach (or have taught in the past) and what Nepal-related content are included in those courses?

I teach at all levels, as and when required to do so: Development, Contemporary Issues in Anthropology, kinship and social life, postgraduate research issues, Thesis writing up seminar, tutoring of core anthropology students taking Culture and Global Diversity. I am currently teaching a development module at Hull University. I find the literature on Nepal difficult to include in many courses, as it tends to be very 'regionalist' and not easy to use for didactic purposes with general students. Vincanne Adams' *Tigers of the Snow* (1996) and Sherry Ortner's books (1978, 1989) at least talk about a specificity that has some familiarity and appeal with students. Lynn Bennett (1983) has value for gender topics. Others I use include Diemberger (1993), Campbell (2000a, 2000b), Burghart (1996), Shrestha (1995), and Pigg (1992).

Where have you published your Nepal-related books, articles and essays?

I have mostly published my articles as chapters in various edited volumes and in some journals. They are listed at the end of this text.

Do you converse productively with colleagues doing research and other works related to Nepal?

I have some communication with colleagues at Institute of Development Policy Management at Manchester on Nepal issues. The best forum for me is the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*. I now live too far from London to regularly attend School of Oriental and Arican Studies (SOAS) Himalayan gatherings. However Michael Hutt's Himalayan forum was absolutely vital to me when I was writing my dissertation. Exchanges with Declan Quigley, David Gellner, and Andrew Russell were all very useful. Nepali postgraduate students at UEA doing MA in Development were of great assistance too.

What institutional and human resources were available to you as a graduate student?

UEA had a resource centre on Nepal, which I believe no longer exists. The best resource was the library of CNRS Himalayan unit in Paris. The Centre for South Asian Studies in Cambridge held some Nepal literature and an incomplete set of *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*. For intellectual development, feedback and critique, it was as much other non-Himalayan anthropologists who helped, but Maria Phylactou who worked on Ladakh and was active at SOAS was extremely attentive to questions of my research.

What kinds of funds were available for your graduate studies and for field research in Nepal as well as for the final write-up of your dissertation? What are the institutional and funding resources in the UK (outside of the UK as well) that have made it possible for you to continue your research and teaching on Nepal?

I did my PhD initially through self-finance, working part-time. Two years into part-time study I received Economic and Social Research Countil (ESRC) funding for three years, ending 1992. ESRC gave me 18 months funding for my later research on Himalayan Biodiversity and Human Interests (1997-98). This was not long enough to complete a book, but publication is in sight.

What was the job market like for you when you finished your PhD?

The job market for me is very limited. I have worked as temporary lecturer at Edinburgh, Keele, and Manchester, and as mentioned am now teaching one module at Hull. I have never experienced continuity from one year to another. There are jobs within the London-Oxford-Cambridge Golden Triangle, but my mobility is limited by the fact of my partner being a Manchester-based professor and that we have a child. I should also mention that in addition to academic life I maintain a set of 'Himalayan'

terraces – *alu bari* – built by my *mit* and *mitini* from Rasuwa in 1998. These were featured on a BBC Countryfile programme. They are another reason for not being able to be a far-flung academic migrant labourer. I have tried unsuccessfully to get funding to research the issues I was looking at in Nepal (environmental citizenship) in a UK context, but other disciplines of geography and rural sociology seem to jealously guard the British countryside as their protected area for research funds.

Is a new generation of Nepal researchers being produced in the UK? If so, how is the next generation being mentored in the field?

I am currently supervising one PhD student preparing for fieldwork. The question of a new generation “being produced” sounds rather too intentional. It is entirely laissez-faire, as to what and where students choose research topics. There is no commitment to regional coverage in departments of the size of Manchester. The current absence of a Nepal anthropology specialist at SOAS is an indication that there is no planning as such of new generations.

What is the attraction for this new generation to study Nepal?

Current interests seem to lie in the field of globalisation and its various effects.

Are the conditions of their recruitment different from the time when you entered the field? How would you compare the institutional and financial resources available to them to become Nepal researchers today compared with those in your own time?

‘Recruitment’ is a word I simply don’t recognise as being applicable here. People volunteer themselves for lives of self-sacrifice and dedication, while the institutions they work in have zero respect for the kinds of commitment and unauditably long hours this involves. British academia is at an all time low. 3/4 of all academics are stressed and overworked. Prospects are not good, and anthropologists are all around under threat of take-over from sociology and other departments, in the logic of mergers for efficiency. This is reducing the identity of anthropology as a whole.

Do you communicate about your research with the national public at large in the UK? If so, how do you do it and how often? Please provide relevant examples.

I have addressed conference meetings of Nature conservationists for environmental policy, talking about my work in Nepal, and the BBC film mentioned above reached a surprising number of people.

What is the relationship between your current or past research and discussions in the various Nepali public spheres? Do you find that there is a tension between representing Nepal to your colleagues in the UK and making your research theme and conclusions 'relevant' and accessible for discussions in Nepali society?

This is a very good question. There is a huge tension. I have also always found it very hard to find dialogue with 'public spheres' in Kathmandu. I find my time better spent out of town, doing research into rural society which is so little understood by people in offices and cafes in Thamel or Patan. There are exceptions e.g., Pralad Yonzon. I do find it extremely hard to produce work that engages with anthropologists, and at the same time is communicable for discussions in Nepali society. I plan two articles for this purpose when my book is over.

How has the availability of many Nepali newspapers in the Internet impacted your work as a Nepal researcher based in the UK? Are their contents of research value?

They are more informative for the context of research and public agendas, rather than substantive value. It's hard enough to find time to read UK papers let alone Nepali ones.

How do you evaluate the state of Nepal Studies in the UK at the moment? Do researchers on Nepal languish at the margins of South Asian Studies in the UK?

I would say they do languish. Nepal is too exotic, not adequately post-colonial, and has not generated a critical mass of studies using sophisticated social theory of interest to mainstream anthropology, to inspire ambitious students. We have had a South Asia reading group in Manchester for a couple of years, but readings on Nepal never command general interest. The South Asia Anthropologists Group (SAAG) has been the best place for researchers to find a regional audience for discussing their work, but unless research is specifically oriented to wider South Asian literatures, interest is slight. Nepal attracts researchers for different kinds of reasons than those attracted elsewhere. I feel unable to comment on the UK situation as a whole for the state of Nepal studies. My impression is that Michael Hutt is the main inspiration.

There is a general sense that support for social science research is declining in the UK. If you agree with this reading, can you suggest some ways to arrest this trend so that its negative impact on Nepal Studies can be reversed?

Very true. No suggestions.

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Publications

Books

- In preparation *Living Between Juniper and Palm: Nature, Culture and Power in the Himalaya*.
- Edited volume *Re-Placing Nature: Anthropological Perspectives on Nature Protection*. Under consideration with a publisher.

Articles

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Reviews

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