Michael Wilmore

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

I never set out in my studies with the intention of becoming a Nepal researcher. Having studied archaeology as an undergraduate (1988-91) at a rather 'theory-light' department, I realised that if I wanted to study archaeology at research degree level I would need to do a preliminary Masters degree. I chose to do this at University College London (UCL, 1992-93) studying Social Anthropology, as this department was developing the sub-field of material culture studies under the guidance of people like Danny Miller, Mike Rowlands, Barbara Bender and Chris Tilley, all of whom had started out their academic careers as archaeologists. The only element of my masters education that touched upon the subject of Nepal was the use of Sherry Ortner's book *High Religion* (1989) on the reading list for the masters student seminar series.

I had, however, become hooked on anthropology, especially within such a large and vibrant academic community. This was a totally different experience to doing my BA and so I abandoned the idea of doing archaeological research in favour of anthropology. One thing I did retain from archaeology was an interest in the development of technological innovations and so I decided to take this as the general focus for my research. It was at this point that I started to read media anthropology and became interested in the work of Terence Turner, Faye Ginsburg and Eric Michaels on indigenous media. This seemed like the sort of thing I was looking for as a more specific research topic.

Choosing to do my fieldwork in Nepal, specifically to look at Ratna Cable Television (RCTV)'s work in Tansen, came about purely by chance. I was discussing my research ideas with Danny Miller and he mentioned a recent conversation with a friend, Mike Thompson, who had done research in Nepal (as well as being a mountaineer). Somewhere during their talk Thompson had mentioned the work of a couple of media organisations in

Nepal, so Danny rang him to find out more. Thompson told me that he knew a Nepali academic, Deepak Gyawali, who was then in the UK doing research and I should talk to him to find out more. I met Deepak in Oxford and over lunch he described RCTV and *Communication for Development Palpa* (CDP) to me and, having listened to a description of my research interests, he said he thought that what was happening in Tansen could form an interesting case-study in the anthropology of media. This was the point when I decided to do the fieldwork for my research in Nepal. So, to quote from my thesis:

My choice of Nepal as a fieldwork site happened largely by chance. Having developed an interest in the anthropology of media I was lucky to meet a Nepali economist, Deepak Gyawali, who was working as a researcher based at Oxford University. It was he who first told me of Ratna Cable Television's work in Tansen and encouraged me to visit Nepal to learn more about their activities. In this respect I find an affinity with Eric Michaels' work on indigenous media in Australia. Michaels (1994: 22) says: "My own interest in coming to Australia was not Aborigines per se, in whom I had no specialist background, but their experience of coming to the media as a test of and an analogy to questions posed within the modern Western tradition. Ultimately, I wanted to understand our, not their, media revolution" (Wilmore 2002: 19)

I completed my PhD in 2002. I also became involved in another research project (since 1997), investigating the ethnography of archaeological fieldwork, shortly after returning from doing my fieldwork in Nepal. So, in terms of my research interests I would say that my PhD research obviously dominates, but it does not wholly define who I am as an anthropologist and researcher.

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.

My PhD research investigated the development of media in Nepal through an ethnographic study of a local cable television and video production organisation in Tansen, Palpa District (Wilmore 2002). It placed this use of television in the context of the wider political-economy of media production and examined the impact that new media technologies have had upon Nepalese society. It examined the articulation of the multiple agencies involved in the funding, production and distribution of media in Nepal and South Asia in order to understand how the diverse social, economic and political interests of these agencies are accommodated within such enterprises. More broadly, my research analysed how some socio-cultural

groups have become increasingly marginalised within both the global and regional economic and political systems. One question is at the heart of my work: how are power, media and identity connected in an era characterised by globalisation? As this suggests, my research is multidisciplinary in its conception and contributes to the analysis of globalisation, the media's role in the formation of identities, and the anthropology of development and urbanism in Nepal.

As I said above, my decision to focus my research on Nepal came about largely by chance. The particular theoretical and thematic subject of my research was also developed through reading works by US media anthropologists, rather than by anything in the British anthropological tradition. My work has, however, been influenced by work within British media and cultural studies, particularly the work of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, who I first encountered whilst doing my masters degree (via Barbara Bender's work on the anthropology of landscape; Barbara is one of the organisers and originators of the other research project I'm currently undertaking – you can see how my academic genealogy is quite mixed-up!)

Having said above that choosing Nepal as a research focus was largely accidental, it is important to state that the biggest influence on the development of my research project has been the growth of my knowledge about Nepal. I came to Nepal with few preconceptions and so at each point in my research I've found my understanding of my thematic focus, indigenous media, is inseparable from my search for a better understanding of life in Nepal. I can't imagine thinking about the anthropology of media without thinking it through my knowledge of Nepal, Tansen and RCTV. I think, that's what having a specific research interest is all about – the ability to test both your own and other's claims against your own detailed empirical knowledge. Equally, my own analysis and interpretations have been challenged by events in Nepal since I did my fieldwork (1995-96).

Since completing your PhD in 2002, what have been your plans regarding publication of that research? Also are you planning to do any new research or publication project in relation to Nepal?

Both my examiners (Prof David Morley of the Department of Media Studies, Goldsmiths College, London and Dr David Gellner of the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Oxford University) were keen that I try to publish my thesis in its entirety, either as a book or monograph. David Gellner suggested that I contact Oxford University Press in Delhi as a potential publisher, so I'm currently pursuing this possibility. I'm also rewriting revised versions of certain chapters for publication as separate papers, as I want to develop the arguments that I initiate at certain points

in the thesis. In particular, I want to look again at some of the implications that my research in Nepal has for the anthropological study of media in general. I'm also applying for various fellowships that would both allow me to do this work more intensively (balancing writing with teaching and family life isn't easy!). I'm hoping that this would also give me the time and financial resources to do fieldwork to update my knowledge and look at how political events since 1996 have affected the Nepali mediascape.

Another writing project that is in its very early stages is a possible book on the anthropology of Palpa, which has been the site for several ethnographers' work in the past decade. I'm working as a co-editor with Dr Ian Harper (lecturer in medical anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, SOAS, London), who did his fieldwork on medical provision in Palpa shortly after my own fieldwork. We hope to organise a series of papers around the theme of globalisation's effect on different facets of life in Palpa, such as media, medicine, ethnicity, development, etc. This project is in its infancy, but we think that, apart from providing an introduction to the ethnography of Palpa, such a volume would form an interesting contribution to the understanding of globalisation in Nepal as a whole.

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

I've always felt myself to be in quite a marginal institutional position as a Nepal researcher. Having developed my PhD research proposal, I was turned down several times by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Not being able to afford to pay tuition fees as an internal research student in a university, I registered for my degree as an external student with the University of London in 1994 (something that only alumni of the university were eligible to do and the programme has now been discontinued). I got funding for my fieldwork in Nepal from the University of London and the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI). I've worked as a part-time tutor at UCL and with the Open University (OU) to contribute to my living expenses. So, whilst I've been associated with one of the biggest anthropology departments in the UK (and undertaken language tuition at SOAS), I've never been either a full-time postgraduate research student or full-time member of the teaching staff.

Reflecting on this, I wonder whether the multi-disciplinary character of my research (I deliberately chose one examiner with a media studies back-ground [David Morley] and one with a back-ground in the anthropology of Nepal [David Gellner]) hindered my grant applications or whether it subsequently grew out of the intellectual freedom that I got from being

rather marginal. I don't feel that I've come under any sustained pressure to develop my research in particular theoretical directions.

Do you teach? If so, at what levels? What kinds of courses do you teach (or have taught in the past) and what Nepal-related content are included in those courses?
My teaching up to now has been as a tutor or teaching assistant, so I've never had full control over the syllabus for any course. Nevertheless, I do use examples from either my own fieldwork or the anthropology of Nepal when teaching. For example, the OU course I teach (foundation level social sciences) has a section on globalisation and I use RCTV and Nepal in general as a case study. The one course I have taught as a lecturer with control over the syllabus is the introduction to research methods for undergraduate students at UCL. Doing research in the UK so soon after returning from Nepal caused me to reflect on my fieldwork in each location in a way that I don't think I would have otherwise done (see Wilmore 2001b). I seldom mentioned Nepal whilst teaching this course, but the contrast between my two research experiences was seldom far from my mind.

Where have you published your Nepal-related books, articles and essays?
My articles have been published in *E@TM Journal: Anthropology from Below*, *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, and *Himal South Asia*. They and the seminar papers I have given are listed at the end of this text.

Do you converse productively with colleagues doing research and other works related to Nepal in the UK, other parts of the world and Nepal? If so, how?
I've found the contact and discussions with people such as Ian Harper and David Gellner invaluable (face-to-face, phone and email). As I mentioned previously, Ian did his fieldwork on medical anthropology in Palpa, so his comments on my own work have been particularly insightful. I actually met his wife, Radha, whose family live in Palpa, before meeting Ian. We were introduced by a mutual Nepali friend during my time in Tansen. I think Ian would be the first to admit that his and my own research and writing styles are very different, but we often find that we have many anthropological interests in common. That makes for productive dialogue. I was quite surprised when David Gellner agreed so readily to be one of the examiners of my thesis. I also thought that it might be a bit of a risk, as he was likely to spot any important flaws in my ethnography. But I thought, if I've spent so long writing the thing, it might as well be examined properly. I think his main influence on my work up to now has been as a presence at

the back of my mind. Having asked him to examine my work, I felt I had to be scrupulous when writing it. He still managed to find an impressive list of typos and words I'd spelt wrong, which had to be corrected before final submission!

Another anthropologist who has helped me a lot is Damian Walter, who was carrying out research into shamanism in the Khumbu region whilst I was in Palpa. We met regularly in Kathmandu and subsequently in the UK. Although his areas of interest, anthropologically speaking, are totally different to mine, he offered the sort of support that only someone else doing fieldwork can. I've had contact with many other academics, not least through the Britain-Nepal Academic Council meetings, when I've been able to attend. They say you can't have too much of a good thing, so I'd always wish to have more frequent opportunities to discuss things. This interview has been great – a chance to think things through, although I know that a lot more thought may be required to sort out some of the issues and problems that I raise in my answers.

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

I was lucky that I was studying and working in London, because SOAS was just around the corner from UCL. I think SOAS probably has the best holding of literature related to Nepal in the UK. There wasn't anything published in English about Nepal in either book form or in academic journals that I couldn't find at SOAS or obtain through their library. Having said that, once I'd lived in Nepal I became aware of the large amount of published and unpublished material relating to my research interests that I was completely unaware of. I spent quite a lot of time at the library of Tribhuvan University and the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) reading through unpublished research papers, newspapers and journals.

As I said above, not having full funding for my PhD seemed like quite a blow at first, but I was able to get funding from the RAI and University of London to pay for fieldwork costs and the cost of producing my thesis. Working as a tutor helped to pay for the rest of the costs incurred during my studies, although this (along with doing my other research project and raising a family) meant that my PhD took about 4 years (!) longer than I originally anticipated. It had to be done very much as a part-time project. My PhD advisor, Dr Allen Abramson (Department of Anthropology, UCL), isn't a Nepal specialist, but he was a tireless reader of draft versions of my thesis. Talking to other PhD students, I know that this isn't always the

case! He offered lots of useful comments about the text and in some respects I think his lack of familiarity with both the ethnography and literature on Nepal helped, because he always asked for clarification of things that weren't clearly explained. Someone with greater knowledge of the anthropology of Nepal might have passed over this without comment.

What are the institutional and funding resources in the UK (outside of UK as well) that you could tap into as a recent PhD?
I'm only just into my post-doctoral career. Ask me this question in 6 months time, after I've heard from the various fellowships I'm applying for. It seems that funding from UK-based institutions appears on a regular basis, but I wouldn't describe it as plentiful. The details of each grant or fellowship come with 'health warnings' about the number of applicants that are expected, so I've been applying in hope rather than expectation. I'm aware that there are many post-doctoral researchers out there, all of whom have reasons that are just as valid as mine to be supported in their work. Whether the Nepal focus of my work is a factor in deciding whether I receive funding is something that I don't think I could answer. Most of the post-doctoral grants and fellowships I've applied for up to this point haven't had a specific fieldwork element built into them. If I am successful the emphasis is on publishing existing material and developing future programmes for research. I've mentioned something about this above. Depending on the duration of the award (they range from 1 to 3 years in length), I would tailor my fieldwork plans to the circumstances. But I certainly would like to return to Nepal to follow-up events in Palpa's media and Nepali media in general at first hand. I'm well aware that the ethnographic present of my research recedes daily. In terms of the wider relevance of my research to the anthropology of media, I don't think this matters. But in terms of its relevance to current events in Nepal and to a Nepali audience this may create more problems.

What is the academic job market like for a recent PhD like you?
Again, highly competitive. The demands of the average job prospectus for UK universities are very great with most wanting a PhD, teaching experience, administration experience, extensive publications, and evidence that one can attract grants and funding. Publication seems to be the key here (isn't it everywhere?) as this is what counts when departments are assessed by the government bodies in charge of allocating funding to university departments. At the same time, levels of pay in British universities have remained at virtually the same rate in real terms for 20 years. Nevertheless, each vacancy again attracts many applicants, so it's a bit like existing in a state of economic

depression in terms of searching for jobs. The only thing that stops this from turning into a state of psychological depression is the fact that, clichéd though it may sound, most PhD students and post-doctoral researchers do, I think, view their work in vocational terms. The level of commitment to the research and teaching they do is staggering. Personally, I couldn't do what I do without this incentive. In addition, involvement in academic networks and support from colleagues within the academic community in general (who are all facing the same problems) are instrumental in maintaining morale. I also find that my part-time teaching work with the Open University is immensely rewarding, whilst also enabling me to improve my teaching skills and devote time to maintaining my research profile.

Again, I don't think the Nepal focus of my research creates problems itself when it comes to making job applications to anthropology departments. There are, of course, only a limited number of anthropology departments in the UK, but jobs still seem to be coming up quite frequently (a couple per month on average, more at this time of year [January to April] when people are moving around or retiring). Applying to departments based in other disciplines, such as sociology, media studies or cultural studies, may be different, and I think that a lot may depend on the attitude of individuals to 'non-mainstream' research in the departments one applies to.

As a post-script to this answer, I was told recently by a lecturer in a UK anthropology department that the only way to improve ones job prospects was to become as widely known in person as possible. So, no matter how good ones CV is, it amounts to nothing if you're in competition with other candidates who have an existing link to a department. This is the downside of existing in a close-knit academic world.

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 can't really answer this question. Speaking as a member of the new generation (if now mostly over 30 years of age), I'd say that every 'senior' member of the Nepal-related academic community that I've had contact with has been very friendly and supportive towards my work. People seem genuinely interested, although people's capacity to offer material support is obviously limited. What help people can give (suggesting source material, invitations to lectures, references, etc.) are normally given freely. But see the end of my reply to the above question.

What is the attraction for this new generation to study Nepal?
Having attracted more than its fair share of orientalist-style searchers for exoticism, I'd say the main attraction should be to understand the lives of

normal Nepali people. As with any place in the world, Nepal has unique cultures and ways of life existing within its borders. The challenge is to see how these particular characteristics are an inflection within the universal grammars of everyday life. For example, to use my own research focus, to understand how the Nepali (or Palpali) invention of television compares to that found in other places. At the same time, I would strongly advocate multi-disciplinary research that ignores the constraints of academic boundaries to fully explore the extraordinary complexity of 'ordinary' lives. I don't think any individual researcher can cope with this task alone, so research must be collaborative or at least take place within an academic community that's willing to interact regularly. One attraction of working as a Nepal researcher in the UK is that you very rapidly become a member of the academic community to some extent, because it is a small world. It would be possible to fit almost every person with an interest in Nepal Studies from any academic discipline in a decent sized lecture theatre. One could personally know all these people fairly easily and word gets around as soon as someone enters the field. I'm always surprised, for example, by the number of unsolicited emails I get from post-graduate students, both in the UK and abroad, who request advice about their own research having heard about mine.

Since most UK researchers on Nepal work on their own, how can collaborative research that you speak of be realized?
The community of Nepal researchers is quite geographically diffuse in the UK. I guess that SOAS is about as close as it comes to an acknowledged centre for Nepali Studies. Having recently moved out of London, I'm aware how much this matters and have come to rely even more heavily than in the past on the Internet and email to keep in touch with colleagues. I agree with you that the individualistic nature of much research on Nepal makes collaborative work somewhat difficult to achieve. In my own case, it is really only by chance that I happened to be working in an area (Palpa) where another researcher (Ian) was active and this chance will hopefully lead to a closer collaboration in the future (see above).

The roots of this problem do, however, lie deep within the structures of social science research in the UK. Unlike the natural sciences, where collaborative research is the norm at post-graduate level, PhD students are explicitly banned from submitting work done in collaboration as part of their thesis. Also, all grant applications are done on an individual basis; university departments obviously play a big part when students apply for PhD funding, but ultimately it is the individual student who is assessed for a grant. The effects that the institutional structure of academia

has on collaborative research is a focus of my other research interest, an ethnographic account of an archaeological project in the UK. Despite the best efforts of the members of this project to work in collaboration towards a commonly held set of theoretical and intellectual goals, schisms developed within the project along fault lines predicated on the different position of individuals within the structures of funding, publication and authority that exist in British academic life. Until some of these fundamental issues within UK social science research are changed, I think any collaborative research in Nepal Studies will remain ad hoc and fail to be properly institutionalised within the academic sphere. Other areas within the social sciences and some institutions do have a stronger record in collaborative research, but I fear that the marginal character of Nepal Studies in UK universities hasn't encouraged such research up to now. Maybe the existence of bodies such as the Britain-Nepal Academic Council may help, but it remains to be seen how this organisation will develop in the future.

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?

Maybe this is the flip-side of my answer to the previous question. Speaking as a post-graduate researcher, I'd say the pressure to complete my thesis and teach has often over-ridden many other considerations. The academic community in the UK is obviously the source of much of this pressure, both officially [e.g. from grant awarding bodies] and un-officially [e.g. when people constantly ask, albeit in a friendly way, whether you've submitted your thesis yet], as well as being a source of support. I think it's easy to succumb to these pressures and loose sight of what should be one of your primary audiences as a researcher studying a 'foreign' country, i.e., the people who are the subjects of your research. Whilst I didn't conceive of my research as 'applied anthropology' in any way, when I chose to study developments in local media in Nepal, one intention I did have was to look at an obviously modern aspect of life.

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?

I've given talks to non-academic audiences (e.g. The Britain-Nepal Society and church groups in my hometown [although I'm not a Christian]). But this is pretty infrequent. Beyond that, not much else other than teaching.

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?
I said above that the Internet and email have been invaluable in keeping up to date and in touch with events in Nepal and academic colleagues. When I started my research, if I wanted to get an up-to-date account of events in Nepal I had to use the Nepal Press Digest and BBC World Service Digest that were held at the SOAS library. Hardly convenient, even for those living in London. So purely for accessing information, it is fantastic. I am also interested in the future (possibly as part of research during a fellowship) to investigate the presence of Nepal and Nepalis within Internet and Web-based media more systematically using an ethnographic approach. Daniel Miller and Don Slater have recently published (2000) an account of how Trinidadians have made use of and made their presence felt through the Internet, and I think Nepal could provide an interesting comparative case. It is important to bear in mind, when doing Internet-based research, that the characteristics of Internet content and use are as dependent upon the social and cultural context from which they originate as are any other media. We're only just beginning to develop the skills and knowledge through which these contexts can be properly evaluated and understood in relation to the Internet. There's still a lot of work to be done not the least in relation to Nepal. Anybody fancy collaborating on this?

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?
Put it this way, they teach a course in South Asian ethnography at UCL that doesn't have a single item about Nepal on the reading list (out of about 200 sources). Sometimes even other anthropologists will come out with the classic line 'Oh, you're studying Nepal; well I've just read a book/seen a film/recently heard a lecture about Tibet'. Maybe I would have said the same thing 10 years ago. I guess that the legacy of our imperial history has a hand in this, but I don't think that only non-Commonwealth states like Nepal are marginalised in South Asian studies. Colleagues who are studying places other than India and Pakistan face the same problem.

Can anything be done to arrest or reverse the declining support for social science research including research on Nepal in the UK? If so what?
I think that I've mentioned several points that are relevant to this in my replies above. In terms of Nepal Studies, we need to work to turn the

existing informal and ad hoc networks of association and collaboration into more formal networks. Perhaps the best way to achieve this would be to ensure that our work on the people and places of Nepal should always consciously address issues and debates that have relevance to those who are working in other spheres. If Nepal Studies have been marginalised in the UK, then Nepal researchers have some complicity in this through their own actions. I'm not excluding myself from this criticism. We need to move away from the idea that we're studying Nepal per se, to a situation where we study subjects with a contemporary theoretical, scientific, or political relevance (to name only a few possible areas) that happens for whatever reason to be grounded in the empirical reality of life in Nepal. So many things drive researchers to become 'area' specialists, but I don't think this serves either the researchers best interests or the interests of the peoples being researched. I think area studies are academic ghettos – the reasons why we are attracted to such disciplinary boundary making are touched on above. I want to resist the lure of becoming a 'Nepal researcher' but I'm conscious that this isn't possible. After all, I'm answering this questionnaire and proposing a book about Palpa!

This is a massive area for debate, and I'm conscious that I'm running out of time in this interview. You and the readers might want to take issue or need clarification of some of the above (polemical) comments. This is a debate that will have to extend beyond the framework of this email-based exchange.

References

Michaels, E. 1994. *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media, and Technological Horizons*. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press.

Miller, D. and D. Slater. 2000. *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. London: Berg.

Ortner, Sherry. 1989. *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Wilmore, M. 2002. Indigenous Media and the Anthropology of Development in Nepal: A Case Study of Local Media Use in Tansen, Palpa District, Nepal. PhD Dissertation. University of London.

Publications

2001 Local Media and Development Culture in Nepal: A Case Study of *Ratna Cable Television* and *Communication for Development Palpa* in Tansen. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 6(2): 347-87.

2001 Far Away, So Close: Some Notes on Participant Observation during Fieldwork in Nepal and England. In *E@TM Journal: Anthropology From Below* 3.

1996 Indigenous Media: Bold is Beautiful. *Himal South Asia* 9(4): 26-7.

Seminar and conference papers

2003 The Gatekeepers of Cultural Memory: Televising Religious Rituals in Tansen, Nepal. South Asian Culture and Society Seminar, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS.

1998 Changing Technologies of Enchantment: The Historical Context of Local Television in Tansen, Nepal. Mediating Modernities Workshop, Department of Anthropology, UCL.

1997 Local Television and the Development of a Town in Nepal. Britain-Nepal Society Lecture, London.

1997 Trading on Images of Tradition: Local Media and the Merchant Class of a Town in Nepal. Association of Social Anthropologists Conference ('Religion in a Changing World'), Edinburgh; Department of Anthropology Seminar, University of Kent, Canterbury; Himalayan Research Forum, SOAS, London.

1996 Local and Global Media in Nepal: A Preliminary Research Report. Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University.

1994 Ethnographic Television Research: A Qualitative Approach to Sampling Strategy and Data Collection. ESRC Postgraduate Seminar, Department of Anthropology, UCL.