

Interview

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES F. FISHER

Gaurab KC

Western anthropologists began the systematic anthropological exploration of Nepal in the 1950s, most carrying out their fieldwork after Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah became King in 1955. Some of these explorers were established anthropologists while for others Nepal was the pristine field site for earning their Ph.D. degrees. The production of Nepal-related work significantly enhanced their academic credentials. Some Nepalis benefitted greatly by affiliating with these foreign scholars. This collaboration was a major impetus for institutionalizing the discipline in Nepal. Results of this cooperation significantly contributed not only to introducing Nepal and its culture to the world, but also to fostering the future of Nepali Anthropology.

James F. Fisher belongs to the first generation of these anthropologists. He came to Nepal first as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1962. Since then he has produced a substantial amount of anthropological scholarship on Nepal, which he claims to be his *dosro ghar* (second home).

I seized the opportunity to interview Fisher when he came to Nepal to launch his book *At Home in the World: Globalization and the Peace Corps in Nepal* (2013). I had interviewed Fisher several times in 2011 while making a documentary film jointly with Sachin Ghimire on Dor Bahadur Bista. I went through Fisher's CV carefully and read many of his publications. Drawing upon these readings, I prepared a long set of interview questions. The main interview took place on 3 November 2013 in a house near Bhatbhateni in Kathamandu. It was recorded both on a tape recorder and on a computer, and its total duration was four hours and thirty five minutes. I then transcribed the interview and sent it to Fisher. Numerous emails were sent back and forth between the two of us. Fisher devoted a significant amount of time to structuring and clarifying his responses to my questions.

I believe that many social science enthusiasts, in Nepal and elsewhere, will read with interest the life and work of an anthropologist who has contributed painstakingly to understanding Nepal. The readers will also

obtain a glimpse of Nepal in the 1960s and the following decades, a slice of the disciplinary history of anthropology in Nepal, and other fascinating details of contemporary life in these pages.



Photo provided by James F. Fisher

Gaurab (G): *To begin with, how would you like to introduce yourself?*

Fisher (F): How do I identify myself? Well, to begin with the obvious – I’m a seventy-three year old American male with children and grandchildren, but that hardly answers your question, since the same could be said of millions. My core identity is primarily tied up with my occupation which is also, fortuitously, my avocation, as an anthropologist. But I hadn’t even heard of anthropology until my senior year in college. I was majoring in philosophy at that time, but then I discovered anthropology and ended up coming to Nepal in the first Peace Corps group. I immediately became fascinated with the country and everything in it – the people, the food, music, landscape, religion, politics, education, social structure, kinship, family life, etc. Afterwards, I went to the University of Chicago for my Ph.D. in anthropology.

Since then my whole life, my working life at least, has been involved with anthropology. I taught anthropology at Carleton College for almost forty years and before that at the University of Chicago, and also in Nepal and, most recently, Bhutan. So I would say my primary identification is as an anthropologist, but as a Nepal anthropologist, or let's say the Himalayas in general and specifically Nepal, because my entire life has been spent, either physically or metaphysically, in Nepal. By that I mean I am not always physically in the country, whether because I'm at Carleton or some other university or at meetings in different places, but even then I am thinking and talking about Nepal, and writing books and articles about Nepal. I am talking to people, whether students who want to know more about Nepal or colleagues in Nepal or elsewhere – but the subject matter is mostly Nepal. So I would say those two things – anthropology and Nepal – define me professionally.

G: *Many professional anthropologists have come from different backgrounds, and instead of introducing themselves as an anthropologist (though the majority do that) some also introduce themselves as social scientists or humanists or something else. Do you feel any hesitation about describing yourself as an anthropologist, or, contrarily, do you take pride in saying you are an anthropologist?*

F: I definitely am proud of the discipline and of its history, although it has been tormented in a way. It's been accused of being a 'handmaiden of colonialism' and all that. I understand this critique but I think it is misconstrued and false, and increasingly so. I am mostly proud of anthropology. I think what it does, what it contributes to the world, just in terms of understanding all of humanity, is unique and not available from any other discipline. What other discipline (e.g., Economics or Political Science) is based on and insists so relentlessly on the views and dignity of those which it studies? The answer is none, because those disciplines are intellectually imperialistic. Anthropology's insistence on the importance of the 'native point of view' defines it. That's what anthropology is all about. But also in practical matters such as development projects in Nepal, I think anthropology has much to contribute, has contributed to them, and will continue to do so, though there is always the temptation and danger of selling out to the big governmental and corporate money of development.

I don't distinguish really among the nationalities of anthropologists. None of us care whether we are Nepalis or American or English or Sri Lankan or German or Japanese or anything else. This is true for most scholars in Nepal, not just anthropologists, as can be easily seen from the selection of the annual Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecturers who come from all over the world including, of course, Nepal. (I was hugely honored to be one of two Americans to give the lecture.) It's also true of the membership of ANHS (Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies), the first Executive Committee of which I am the only surviving founding member. Mahendra Lawoti was our recent President, and Dor Bahadur Bista served as Honorary President of ANHS for several years.

One of the great things about anthropology in Nepal is the cooperation and mutual support and respect we hold towards each other without regard to nationalities. As anthropologists, we all speak the same language and work in the same way. This is equally true of our Nepali colleagues, so many of whom now are talented and highly trained and productive scholars. Of course professionally we disagree about all sorts of things, but not personally.

G: *It seems you are deterministically advocating for the discipline and forgetting bitter instances in its past. Many accusations against the discipline have been made, even by professional anthropologists. It's being charged, for example, that during the Vietnam War anthropologists were used by the American government as spies. Do you believe these allegations are misconstrued and false? If so, why have anthropologists been so frequently charged with these things?*

F: I think it's true that in the beginning anthropology had strong imperialistic overtones (this was somewhat true in Nepal too) and you are right that more recently, as in Vietnam, anthropologists have sometimes forgotten that their primary loyalty must always be to the mostly defenseless and powerless people they study. But I also think these are aberrations and anthropologists themselves have been the harshest critics of these missteps. I don't know of any discipline as self-critical as anthropology.

G: *Can you describe your educational journey in detail? Where, when, and what did you study for your B.A., Masters and Ph.D. degrees?*

F: I went to Princeton University for my undergraduate study, which I finished in 1962. While I was there I was always somewhat interested in philosophy –

you know, questions about the meaning of life, the universe, and other such ultimately unanswerable mega-questions. I didn't have anything else particularly to major in so I majored in philosophy, but I was not entirely committed to it. I once visited my advisor's office. He was on the phone so I had to wait till he finished his phone conversation. On his desk I saw a booklet of the annual meeting of the philosophers, which listed the various papers that were being presented. I was flipping through it while he was on the phone, and I noticed one of the papers with the title "Is it now, now?" I thought, I can't contribute anything to that question. Years later, after becoming an anthropologist, I met one of my old philosophy professors again. I told him this story, and he said "Oh! No, no this is a very important philosophical question." And I can see how it is important. For instance, as soon as you say the word 'now,' it's already in the past. You can't say it about the future. So when is 'now'? Is it 'now,' now? Or is it ever 'now'? Even though I recognized that this is an intriguing question, I thought I could not resolve it, and I had better leave it to others to sort out.

Then the summer before my senior year I went to summer school at Harvard. I did this mainly because the U.S. economy was in very bad shape that year (1961), which made it difficult to find a job. Still lacking direction, I went there just to sample different courses but without any specific academic goal. I saw that they were giving an anthropology course. I had hardly heard of anthropology, although someone at Princeton had told me that they thought I would be a good anthropologist, even though I didn't have any idea what anthropology was. I enrolled in the course, taught by Douglas Oliver, (a prominent expert on Oceania who specialized in the South Pacific), and about five minutes into the first class I realized that I had found what I had been looking for all my life, but I hadn't known of its existence. Then I went back to Princeton and finished my philosophy major and applied to graduate school at the University of Chicago in anthropology, which accepted me.

At the same time President Kennedy was just starting the Peace Corps. They asked me if I wanted to work in a Peace Corps training camp, in Puerto Rico, during the summer after I graduated. I said, "Sure. That sounds like fun and I would like to do that." So I wrote them and then they wrote back and asked if I would be interested in being a Volunteer in a regular Peace Corps program? I was already accepted at Chicago so I said I didn't think I would be interested and said, no. Just as an afterthought, I added that I would be

interested if they had a program going to Nepal. I thought there was almost no chance whatsoever that that would be the case. I couldn't imagine that happening. But to my astonishment they wrote again and said, "Well, as a matter of fact, we do have a Peace Corps group going to Nepal."

Then I thought immediately that this will fulfill my dream because I had always been interested in the Himalayas after reading a novel by James Hilton called *Lost Horizon*. It's about a place called Shangri-La – that's where the English word comes from – a miraculous, enchanting, and idyllic place where everyone is kind, generous, and peaceful. The book doesn't say exactly where Shangri-La is but it seemed to be in Tibet or northern Nepal or somewhere in the Himalayas. I had always wanted to go there (the Himalayas, not Shangri-La, which was fictional), and this was my chance. So, I wrote to Chicago and they gave me a two year extension. This is how I came to Nepal in 1962 and stayed till 1965 when I entered Chicago (which had granted me an additional third year's extension).

G: *Meanwhile you submitted your B.A. thesis at Princeton entitled 'An Anthropological Approach to Ethics' (Fisher 1962). Did you have difficulties with your supervisor since instead of submitting a thesis in philosophy you wrote about anthropology?*

F: Yes, that's a very interesting question because that was my senior year, when I had discovered anthropology, but to graduate I had to finish in philosophy. So I was looking for some topic that would bridge those two disciplines. Now 'ethics' is considered to be a philosophical topic, not a subfield of anthropology. But I thought, ok, I will take ethics, a philosophical area, and try to treat it anthropologically. I did that basically by comparing two books by philosophers on the ethical systems of American Indian tribes. One book was *The Structure of a Moral Code*, on the Navajo, and the other was called *Hopi Ethics*, on the Hopi tribe. I wanted to see what the basic issues are, as anthropology has always promoted cultural relativism, the belief that every culture, and the ethical system it espouses, deserves to be understood in its own terms and not judged by the standards of other cultures. So I wanted to look at these two philosophical analyses of the ethics of those tribes. This is how I wrote my thesis. I don't think I was particularly successful, but it got me into the world of anthropology, and I enjoyed doing it. I'm not always a cultural relativist, though; taken to extremes, one could argue that female genital mutilation is the value of some cultures, and if

people want to do that, who am I to say they shouldn't do it? There are good anthropological reasons why I disagree with that argument, so relativism itself is relative. Relativism is not a 'one size fits all' proposition; it has epistemological and ethical limits.

G: *Don't you think the concept of 'culture' itself is a problematic anthropological construction? Unlike following the Boasian trend, today's anthropologists compare, contrast, and divide the cultures, evoking reductionism, divisionism, and ethnocentrism.*

F: It is a minor irony that 'culture' is both the most fundamental concept at the core of anthropology as well as the most contested. Nevertheless, there is a consensus that culture, whether defined as a way of life, or, in a more circumscribed way, as systems of meanings and symbols, is what distinguishes us from other living creatures. It is the essence of our humanity. We may argue about how to study it – humanistically or scientifically, for example – but we agree that it is of central importance in achieving an understanding of humankind. It is a healthy sign that the definition of culture has evolved and continues to evolve. The last thing a growing, vibrant discipline needs is to know exactly what it is about.

G: *Again, instead of pursuing your Ph.D. in philosophy, why did you choose anthropology? Was it personal interest, or did someone inspire you?*

F: First of all I had always been strongly interested in people; I was a 'people person,' as we sometimes say. I was just fundamentally curious about why people act, think, feel, and speak the way they do, especially acting, speaking, feeling, and thinking differently and cross-culturally. I became a total cultural determinist. Culture was the domain of anthropology, so it was a natural draw for me. Now, you can also study human affairs in philosophy, as the philosophers I wrote my thesis about did. I was talking about this issue one time with Clifford Geertz and he gave the same answer I had found. He had also studied philosophy in his undergraduate days and he said he found it unsatisfying and wanted to study real people as they live their down-to-earth daily lives, not just imaginary people philosophers sometimes create (such as might inhabit a planet we can't see because it's on the other side of the sun). I also wanted to understand real people by talking to them, living with them, sharing their lives, and getting to know why they were the way they were, and how they understood their lives. Anthropology attracted me

because it was a profession in which I could do all that. Philosophy very rarely allows such activities.

G: *Can you explain this shift from philosophy to anthropology? Also, throw some light on how your philosophical orientation aided in anthropological exploration.*

F: Well, as far as this shift is concerned, I think once I discovered anthropology I thought, ‘This is great, this is it.’ I lost some of my initial fascination with philosophy but not entirely. Even today, in retirement, I read about cosmological questions, not those posed by Physics, such as when the Big Bang occurred, but philosophical questions, such as the one Heidegger raised about the universe, when he asked, ‘Why is there something, rather than nothing?’ For me, that’s a fascinating question and I am interested in it in a very amateurish way.

Now, as far as philosophy helping anthropology, I give much credit to philosophy because I think what I learned from philosophy is how to think clearly, coherently, correctly, and critically, and to recognize ethnocentric mistakes of logic and judgment. It made me not just cautious but careful in what I am thinking about. Good anthropology requires a lot of thought and I would say philosophy helps me think about anthropological questions, whatever they are, more clearly than I would otherwise.

G: *When you submitted your thesis on an anthropological approach to ethics at Princeton, who were the dominant American anthropologists at that time?*

F: One reason I had not heard about anthropology till the summer before my senior year is that Princeton had no anthropology at that time. Oh, they had one anthropologist (Peter Kunstadter, a specialist in American Indians and Southeast Asia) in the Sociology Department, and I took some of his courses, but there was only that one person. So I was not very aware of what the total spectrum of anthropology was. I knew that Chicago was thought to be the best place but I knew of other places too, like Columbia, where Boas, Benedict, and Mead had been. Basically, I didn’t know much more than what I read in my last year in college. This was only one year after A.L. Kroeber died; he was the first person to receive a Ph.D. in anthropology in America (under Boas, in 1901) and Margaret Mead was still a popular figure. I was simply not well informed at that time.

G: *In 1965 you began your graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Chicago. What was the training regime for anthropology graduate students? Who were your teachers? What did you read specifically about South Asia and Nepal?*

F: Chicago had the typical American four-field approach, which is quite different from the English or European model. There were two main tracks we all had to learn and each track had two components. One track was archaeology and physical anthropology. The other was social (or cultural) and linguistic anthropology. At an opening reception for new students each faculty member briefly introduced himself. (I use the male gender form because there were no female members of the faculty then.) Clifford Geertz said that he was either a social or a cultural anthropologist but he wasn't sure which because he didn't know what the difference between them was. After that first year we specialized in one or the other track.

It was a large and distinguished department, so our teachers, on the socio-cultural side, included Fred Eggan, Sol Tax, Clifford Geertz, Manning Nash, Melford Spiro, Tom Fallers, Paul Friedrich, and many others. The entire approach was less on specific cultural areas, such as South Asia or Africa, and more on general theoretical approaches regardless of what part of the world you were interested in. Chicago was very strong in South Asia, represented by McKim Marriott, Milton Singer, Nur Yalman, and Barney Cohn (plus many in other departments, such as A.K. Ramanujan in Linguistics and in Social Thought). Chicago was very interdisciplinary with programs such as Social Thought that were not found elsewhere. As far as Nepal goes, I was the only one interested in it and in some ways I knew more than the faculty did, at least at the level of basic ethnography. My main influences in writing the dissertation were McKim Marriott and Manning Nash.

G: *Personally, who was your favorite anthropologist and what made you choose him/her as an inspiration?*

F: With so many talented faculty members around me it was hard to single out individuals, let alone others at other universities, or those from previous times. For example, I found much to learn from Malinowski, Boas, Radcliffe-Brown, even Tylor, although they were already dated. Among the living, I admired Eric Wolf and Fredrik Barth as well as those who taught me at Chicago, such as McKim Marriott, Manning Nash, and A.K. Ramanujan,

who is the only person I've ever personally known who I regard as an absolute genius.

The answer to your question changes over time. I would say most recently I have been influenced by Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of practice. Sometimes he is considered more sociologist than anthropologist but those labels are unimportant distractions. His idea of practice helps in the understanding of everyday questions and everyday lives which have always attracted me. Some are dazzled by Clifford Geertz's graceful literary prose, and he does write very well – perhaps *too* well since his style can overpower the reader and obscure flaws in his argument. I have always been enchanted by Lévi-Strauss but I can't say he influences me much because although I think what he writes about is fascinating, I also think it's more a product of his own brilliant mind rather than a product of the real world he supposedly is observing. But he's extremely imaginative and creative.

G: *When did you arrive in Nepal for the first time and for what purpose?*

F: I arrived in 1962 from Delhi in a DC3 twin propeller airplane, also called a Dakota. It was the only kind of plane that could land in Nepal at that time. We had flown from New York to Delhi in a four engine propeller driven plane. That was a very long trip and it took us several more days to reach Nepal from Delhi because it was near the end of the monsoons. Two or three times we took off from the Delhi airport and were flying towards Nepal when we had to return to Delhi because of the monsoons. Finally we got through to Kathmandu on September 24th. There were seventy Peace Corps Volunteers in that first Peace Corps group. Our assignments were to serve here two years.

G: *Well, you mentioned in your recently published book, At Home in The World: Globalization and the Peace Corps in Nepal (Fisher 2013), how American people felt when they were recruited to Nepal, an admixture of zeal, anxiety, and fear. In your case how did you feel before leaving for Nepal and how did you feel after you arrived here?*

F: I've already mentioned how I felt before leaving, since I had always wanted to come to this part of the world. So the fact that I had this opportunity was simply thrilling. I couldn't believe that this was happening to me. That was before I started two months of Peace Corps training at George Washington University in Washington D.C., and then one month in the mountains of

Colorado. All this time we were basically learning about Nepal. We were studying Nepali language, listening to guest speakers, including the Ambassador in Washington, M.P. Koirala, and even President Kennedy at the White House, and so on. Everything that I learned enhanced and increased my enthusiasm to come here. I was just dying to get here. In my case there was no fear or anxiety. I just wanted to get here as soon as possible.

My memory is that when we arrived here everything I experienced seemed quite wonderful. We stayed in the Royal Hotel, run by Boris, because that was the only hotel in town that could accommodate so many people. Actually, it was almost the only hotel in Kathmandu, regardless of size. We stayed there for a couple of weeks, as our classes continued. We met more Nepalis, and strolled around the bazaar and the temples. This was the first time any of us had seen these kinds of things. I can only say that my interest increased because I could actually see these temples and see the people selling fruits and vegetables, and see people carrying firewood from the hills around the valley, and I could practice a little bit of Nepali. I just had a wonderful feeling that this is the place where I had wanted to come, and here I was. So how could I be anything other than very happy?

G: *To be honest, did you really find this country, in your term, “wonderful”? Or did you find it godforsaken and boring?*

F: To some extent I was naïve. Sure, for me it was wonderful and exotic, but that can easily be construed as romanticism, which westerners need to avoid. Even on our Rs. 350/month salary, we were better off than most Nepalis. But “godforsaken and boring”? Not at all. Even now, after more than fifty years of visiting Nepal, it is an intensely exciting place not only experientially, but intellectually. Every time I come to Nepal, I discover new things – not trivial things, but important things about the culture that I should have known long ago. Intellectually, Nepal is a bottomless pit of complexity and cultural puzzles which keeps me alert and hopeful that I can contribute something to the understanding of it all.

G: *When you arrived was not long after King Mahendra seized political power by sidelining the dysfunctional Congress government and throwing some of the major political leaders into jail. Today many politicians and*

intellectuals believe that Mahendra strangled democracy. How were you oriented in the U.S. to Nepal's politics before your arrival in Nepal?

F: We started training in June, 1962, and arrived in Nepal in September. I must say that during our training program we knew that Mahendra had jailed the government; we knew that, but it wasn't presented in a very alarmist or threatening way. It wasn't emphasized. I think probably the American government didn't want to be on record as opposing the King or his government. They didn't want a lot of Americans running around Nepal who would be anti-King, even though the U.S. government was concerned that democracy had taken a step back – the American Ambassador told me that. But none of this had much effect on us. We were too busy trying to learn about how we would live in Nepal to worry about how the political system was working, or not working.

G: *Why? Because monarchy as an institution is labeled as absolutist and autocratic today.*

F: I think to a large extent we were disenchanted with American politics. Even with the charismatic and idealistic young Kennedy, we were suspicious of politics as an activity and the corruption that came with it. Also, to some extent we were inclined to think that the political world in Nepal was so different from what we were used to that we were not competent to judge it. Unthinkingly, we were practicing a form of cultural relativism.

G: *How do you evaluate the Panchayat and the Mahendra era, his support towards anthropology and anthropologists? At that time in India anthropologists were not well perceived by nationalist Indians.*

F: Yes, that's undeniable. When I came to Nepal as an anthropologist in the late '60s, access to Nepal, getting a visa to stay in Nepal for a year, for example, all those things were easy to do. I don't know if Mahendra's idea was so specific, that he thought he must have anthropologists on the northern border and therefore he would change his policy. More likely he just realized that Nepal needed to open up to the rest of the world; one way of doing that was to be receptive to foreigners or scholars who would have something to contribute to the country, as opposed to tourists, who could only contribute money. And, frankly, I think Mahendra was open to all this. It was certainly an open door policy, I would say, especially compared to India's policy. King Mahendra gave us Peace Corps Volunteers an audience at the end of our

tours of duty in Nepal, whereas later on Indira Gandhi evicted the Peace Corps altogether from India. Ironically, Nepal changed, in a few very short years, from being one of the most closed and sealed off countries in the world, to being one of the most open and accessible.

G: *When you arrived as a member of the first Peace Corps group to Nepal you taught as an English teacher. Can you explain your experience, what you did, and how you contributed to teaching English in Nepal?*

F: My first assignment was in Bhaktapur, at Sri Padma High School. I was also assigned to Bhaktapur College, which was held in the same building, where one of my students was Narayan Man, now also called Rohit, a prominent political leader. The college met from 6:00 to 10:00 in the morning, and high school from 10:30 to 2:30. So, I was doing both those jobs. I was given the syllabi they were supposed to be learning from. Now, keep in mind that I had no teaching experience. None of us did, which in retrospect seems like a scandal. They should have given us better training, but they didn't. So I took the book the students were assigned to read and tried to express it in simpler English. Some of the readings were quite difficult, for example, prose and poetry written in 18th-century English. It's not the English you hear on television or hear spoken nowadays. Whatever the assignment was, I would try to go over it line by line, and explain it in my modern American English. They would sit there, seeming to pay attention, so after a while I would ask them if they understood what I was saying, or if they wanted me to repeat anything or explain anything. They would give me the affirmative shake of the head that they did understand (although I had no idea what that shake of the head meant then). I guess no one wanted to admit that they didn't understand it, or they were shy about saying anything, and furthermore they were not used to asking questions.

You ask what I contributed, and I am not sure I contributed anything substantial. I think the Nepali teacher would have done better, because he could have explained it all in Nepali. I taught in a similar way in Pharping Boarding school. If you want to hear English spoken with a modern American accent, then I suppose they got that at least, but otherwise I don't know that I really contributed very much. Maybe I contributed more in working with Nepali colleagues later, by helping edit their scholarship, when I emphasized that good, clear, written English is no one's first language.

G: *In 1964 you were also translator and advisor for educational policy and community development to Edmund Hillary. Can you explain in detail what that was all about?*

F: I still had remnants of this kind of Shangri-La notion and everything that I had heard about the Sherpas seemed too good to be true. They were Buddhist, they were peaceful, they were generous, and they didn't fight or go to war or anything like that. They were always portrayed as generous, unselfish, hospitable people. They were also far, far away in those days, when it took two weeks walk to reach them on foot – remote, just like Shangri-La. They were mountaineers, too, and I had always loved mountains and romanticized anyone lucky enough to live among them. I thought, if I can just go live among the Sherpas, maybe that would be more like the 'Shangri-La' Hilton had described. That seems absurd now, of course, but that's the idealistic and unrealistic way I approached it then. I think fundamentally I was interested in other ways of life, thinking that some must be better than my own (note my lack of cultural relativism here), and, if so, I wanted to find them.

Hillary came to Kathmandu early in 1964. That fall he would be leading an expedition to build three schools in East Nepal, one in Junbeshi one in Chaurikharka, and one in Namche Bazaar. They needed staff, including teachers, equipment such as books, curriculum, and all those things. I wrote him a letter and said that I had two years experience in teaching and education in Nepal, spoke Nepali, and could maybe help. When he read my letter he immediately agreed; after the expedition was over he told Peace Corps staff that I had been invaluable. The more I got to know him, the more I admired him, and my developing friendship with him influenced me profoundly. You don't share a tent with someone and not get to know him better. What most impressed me about him is that he treated everyone the same. Whether the Queen of England, a poor Sherpa, or me, he treated us all with the same respect.

I was finishing the Peace Corps in early June, and the expedition was to arrive in September, but he needed somebody to go up to Khumbu before then and make arrangements to build the schools, get the villagers organized to help in that, to buy land from farmers in Lukla to build the air strip there, which was also one of our projects, and generally assess how the schools were doing. So I spent the summer going around and talking to the teachers he had hired already, got to know them, and wrote a report on how I thought things were going, and also worked with a New Zealand mountaineer in the reconnaissance of Mt. Thamserku, another expedition objective. I also

negotiated with a few local farmers in Lukla to buy some of their land and drew up the documents to make it legal. I spent four months up there.

Then in the fall the expedition arrived. Sir Ed was going to fly in a helicopter to Lukla to get the airstrip started. Meanwhile I had about 250 porter loads of materials for the school roofs, hammers, saws, nails and other things needed to build the schools, equipment to build the airstrip, and all that. So to get the other expedition members (about a dozen New Zealanders) and all those porter loads to Khumbu, he selected me to be the leader of the two-week approach march. I was in charge of the whole shebang, so that was all quite thrilling and exciting.

During my time in Solu-Khumbu my interest was in the schools primarily, and I was concerned about whether the schools would be disruptive to Sherpa life, partly because they spoke Sherpa and went to monastic schools of their own and became literate in Tibetan. They were Buddhist, and I thought if the schools we were building would represent simply Hindu culture and Nepali language, Sherpas might become disaffected from their own culture. Then I tried to work with and talk to Lamas up there, suggesting that they also attend village schools so that they too would learn English and other modern subjects. That didn't happen, but the Sherpa schools eventually became the subject of my M.A. Thesis (Fisher 1967).

I did my Ph.D. fieldwork in Dolpa, but I returned to the Sherpas about ten years later, partly just to see old friends and be back in their area, with my family this time. I wondered if the schools had been disruptive, but I found that Lukla was causing even bigger changes. It was being used mainly by tourists, not by the clinic Hillary had built in the meantime. We built the airstrip to bring in medicines and to evacuate critically ill Sherpas, but instead thousands of tourists were coming in, so then I realized it wasn't education that was being disruptive, it was tourism – not necessarily disruptive, but inducing huge changes, let's say. Anyway that's how it all came out in my book on the Sherpas (Fisher 1990). I was grateful to Ed for writing a rather generous and positive Foreword to my book which was, no doubt, instrumental in selling copies.

G: *Well, can you also describe the socio-political scenario of Kathmandu during the sixties?*

F: First of all, when we came in '62 there were virtually no tourists; there were a few but almost none. And there was a small American establishment – the

Embassy, USAID, and a handful of missionaries. Other than that there weren't any Americans so there was no kind of American social life. There was a little bit in a sense. I remember the Ambassador invited all of us for Thanksgiving dinner at his house in Kamalkunj. I remember that we had been eating nothing but *dāl-bhāt* (pulse and rice). Back then I had gotten tired of it although now I consider *dāl-bhāt* an addiction. The Ambassador served us a very traditional meal with turkey, gravy, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie for dessert – 'all the trimmings,' as we say. It was just unbelievably delicious. I wouldn't call that social life because it was only one day, but it shows how strong the ties of culture can be. I was glad to have the opportunity to reconnect with my own culture, just as Nepalis do when they celebrate *Dasāī* in the U.S.; sometimes they even kill a goat.

Regarding political life, we could see a lot of what was happening in the English press but we didn't really think about Nepali politics. We thought our job was to help the government help the nation to develop. I thought it wasn't our business really whether they should have the Panchayat system or monarchy or something else. We were just doing our jobs. We knew that there were politicians and that the King was an absolute monarch, but politically we were pretty naïve. Symptomatic of my cultural relativism of that time, I sort of liked the idea of an absolute monarch, that he was regarded by many as a deity. I thought (not very realistically) about how the system worked, and I compared it with the American system, where we had so much corruption and petty bickering among politicians (we still do). So we were kind of anti-political, or more accurately, anti-politician, I would say.

I became much more interested in politics later, when I got to know Tanka Prasad Acharya, the patriot and founder of the first democratic political party in Nepal. Conversations with him over several years, when I was writing a book, *Living Martyrs* (Fisher 1997), about him and his wife, severely challenged and changed my rather complacent and culturally relative views – naïve views, I would say now – of Nepali politics.

G: *From the very beginning of anthropology in Nepal, Nepal was portrayed as a Shangri-La, an exotic, virgin land, a land of mystery, a simple and traditional society, terra incognita, and so on. What do you say about these adjectives? Are they accurate or are they all anthropological constructions portraying mere romanticism?*

F: Well, if you said these adjectives were uttered by tourist agents I would say they just want to romanticize the whole country to attract tourists. If anthropologists say them, well – let's take 'terra incognito.' When I went to Dolpa I think I called it terra incognito because it was a valley where no outsider had stayed more than a few days. David Snellgrove had visited it once. Fürer-Haimendorf had passed through it, John Hitchcock had been there, similarly with Corneille Jest. So, I knew it existed, but no one had done extensive fieldwork there and certainly they didn't know about the relationships between that valley and Bhotias to the north and Nepali-speakers to the south that I wrote about. So I wouldn't object to calling it terra incognito in that sense.

Other phrases, like 'land of mystery,' are excessively romantic and do turn Nepal into a fantasy land. If you don't take it too seriously that's one thing, but, for example, I wouldn't mind saying that America is a land of mystery too. There are a lot of things I don't understand about my own country. Fortunately anthropologists generally steer clear of such language. I don't want to romanticize Nepal but Nepal is a very complicated place and you have to admit that there are, or were, places where very little was known. I would say Dolpa would qualify for being characterized that way. Not every place in Nepal, certainly, but I think part of my job as an anthropologist is to dispel this mystery and make it more 'terra cognito,' and that seems to me to be worthwhile for the country and for Nepalis, and for the world. I mean, we all deserve to know each other's countries, so why not Nepal?

G: *There are many places on the globe, so why did you choose Nepal as your pristine field site?*

F: As I've already said, I always wanted to see the Himalayas; seeing what life was like here for two years only whetted my appetite. I had grown up in America and I was restless and wanted to see the rest of the world. As for why Nepal rather than other places, again I suppose if there had been a Peace Corps program in Tibet I would have been interested in that too, but there wasn't. There wasn't anything in the Indian Himalayas or Pakistan, and Sikkim and Bhutan were closed to foreigners, so Nepal was really the only possibility.

G: *I don't understand why Hilton's book *Lost Horizon* dragged you towards Nepal?*

F: I don't remember exactly when I read this book but it was probably as a teenager in junior high school. The focal point is the fantasy land of Shangri-La, where life was not just good, but unimaginably (and impossibly) idyllic. Why wouldn't I, coming from a rather violent country (domestically and internationally), want to find such a serene and tranquil place? Well, I knew that Nepal lies somewhere in the Himalayas, and that was enough for me. What I didn't then realize is that the book is also full of imperialistic overtones, since the head Lama of the monastery there was a European.

G: *In terms of coming to Nepal and writing about it, if I asked you which anthropological generation you belong to, what would you say, and why?*

F: Oh! Well, I guess the answer to that question would change over time, but as of now I would have to say I was in the first generation simply because there were so many who followed me, and very few before me. At the time I didn't think much about it, but in fact Fürer-Haimendorf, Hitchcock, and Jest had been in Nepal, even in Dolpa (and Berreman in the Indian Himalayas), so I thought of myself as the new kid on the block, more like second generation. But I was mainly just consumed by my own interest in the country and I didn't think about generations or anything like that. By now it's sort of the opposite, because there are so many anthropologists these days. I can't remember them or keep up with them, even those from my own country. Anyway, nowadays my answer would have to be first generation. I don't know when the big expansion began, maybe it was more in the '80s. I lose track of the decades but at least now, in 2013, there are huge numbers of anthropologists, all of them much younger than I, and they get younger all the time! Some of them are still graduate students, some of them have recently finished their Ph.D.s, some are senior faculty members. I certainly can no longer claim to be a recent arrival here.

G: *Can you say something precisely about the early American anthropological research highway to Nepal?*

F: As I've mentioned, Berreman, near Dehra Dun, and Hitchcock in west Nepal, were probably the first. Robert Miller at Wisconsin wrote a little bit about Nepal, but not based on fieldwork. Leonhard Adam was a German but published an article on Nepal in the *American Anthropologist* in the late 1930s. Following them there were other Americans of my generation, such as Mel Goldstein, who studied Tibetans, Joe Reinhard who studied threatened

peoples like the Kusunda and Raute, Ortner on Sherpas, Messerschmidt on Gurungs, among others. After that, there were so many that it's not possible to list them.

G: *In one of your essays you write that “[t]he anthropological research there that had been hardly a trickle in the 1950s and a mere stream in the 1960s now appeared to be a roaring river threatening to overflow its banks” (Fisher 1985:104). If you look at the number of anthropologists during the period of 1960s and '70s, there are relatively more British anthropologists and more British publications, compared to the number of Americans and their publications. Why is this? Was Nepal a lower priority for Americans, or was it a higher priority in England? Or something else?*

F: I think something else accounts for the odd fact that Britain, a relatively small country, early on out-produced Americans in Nepal Studies. In the beginning the British, heirs to a couple hundred years imperial experience in South Asia, had a head start on those from other countries with little background in South Asia, including the U.S. It took a while for the Americans to catch up.

G: *How do you compare your work with that of your other American counterparts like Hitchcock, Ortner, and Messerschmidt and also with other British anthropologists?*

F: I think the type of anthropological work one does largely depends on the type of department in the particular university a student attends. I believe Hitchcock had attended Cornell. Ortner and I were Chicago products, with its distinctive stance on anthropological approaches. Messerschmidt was from the University of Oregon. Mel Goldstein was from the University of Washington, while Joe Reinhard got his doctorate in Vienna. These different academic backgrounds to some extent determine differences in anthropological approach. One commonality is that, over time, we have all pursued a variety of interests and have made our findings available in a variety of publications.

G: *When you conducted your research in Nepal, most anthropological studies were taking place in the mountain regions. You also opted for the mountains. Was that the anthropological trend of the times, something like ‘the higher the better,’ or was it because of funding, or your supervisor’s*

suggestion, or something else? Why, specifically, did you choose Dolpa as your locus of study?

F: Advisors had nothing to do with it – they knew nothing about Nepal. Funding had nothing to do with it. It's more that, in general, going back to my original interest in coming to Nepal, I can't explain why exactly, but I was always fascinated by the mountains, and mountain climbing may have been part of it. (I discovered mountains and mountain climbing at the age of thirteen – the same year Hillary and Tenzing climbed Everest – at a summer camp in Colorado.) How people lived in these mountains was something nobody knew about. Everybody knows the mountains are here, but what actually is the effect of verticality on peoples' lives? That's what I was interested in. From a personal point of view I liked the climate; that doesn't mean that it wasn't bitterly cold during the harsh winters at high altitudes, but I would rather experience that than try to survive a hot summer in the Tarai. I think most anthropologists tend to think along these lines – that is, they want to go to a place where they think it is pleasant to live, or, if not pleasant, at least not too unpleasant. They might not admit it, but that's part of their rationale for doing fieldwork where they do it. Incidentally, sometimes during the freezing Minnesota winters I thought of doing fieldwork in the South Pacific, but I never did, because I had so many friends and colleagues in Nepal. I could not abandon my '*dosro ghar*.'

When I was deciding where to do my doctoral fieldwork I knew it would be somewhere in Nepal, because I knew the language by that time. I was thinking about all this, in Chicago, and I still was interested in the Sherpas, who struck me as exceptional (even though, having lived several months with them, I no longer thought their lives were idyllic!), but I also had noticed, on the expedition, contrasts among different Sherpa villages. For example, Namche Bazaar was oriented more towards business than agriculture; people there were thought to not cooperate very much and to quarrel and bicker a lot. Khumjung, on the other hand, was a more pastoral, agricultural, social sort of place. They had an annual festival, called Dumje, when the whole village is feasted, conducted by turns, *pālo pālo*. So I thought, well, I could do a comparative study of dispute settlement in Namche and Khumjung. When people did have quarrels and arguments or fights, how would they settle or resolve them? Would there be differences in how they did this, and would such differences be tied to the economic base?

That was my idea when I left the U.S. and went to SOAS [School of Oriental and African Studies, in London]. I went mainly to learn Tibetan, because I needed that language, but I also wanted to meet Fürer-Haimendorf, get his advice, and so on. His reaction was, as he put it, “But I have already done the Sherpas. There is nothing left to say.” He told me about this place in Dolpa that had an interesting language and interesting situation, and he told me he thought that would be a good place for me to go. So, in the end, I took his advice and that’s how I ended up living for a year in Tichurong in Dolpa, instead of in Khumbu.

G: *So you became a student of Haimendorf and spent some time at SOAS. Can you tell more about it, or any unforgettable memories from SOAS?*

F: I was there for the first six months of 1968. I wasn’t getting a degree or anything like that; I just took part in general SOAS activities. In addition to Haimendorf, Snellgrove was also there, but he didn’t teach much and I learned almost no Tibetan. Do you want to hear some gossip about Haimendorf and Snellgrove?

G: *Yes, please go ahead.*

F: Well, Haimendorf and Snellgrove had a kind of competition or, more accurately, jealousy between them. This arose because they were both interested in Nepal, in Tibetan culture in general, and particularly in the Sherpas. The difference was that Haimendorf was an anthropologist while Snellgrove was a textual scholar. Haimendorf did not know Sherpa and did not know Nepali either. Snellgrove didn’t know Sherpa but he did know Tibetan – that was his main claim to fame. But he didn’t know Nepali. He found an intelligent and very talented young Sherpa monk named Pasang whom he brought back to London to help him translate things. At the same time, Haimendorf was writing his book on Sherpas, so he sat down with Pasang to go over some terms, spellings, and whatever questions he had that he couldn’t figure out. Then in his book Haimendorf gave credit to Pasang for his help. Snellgrove considered Pasang to be his personal assistant, even his personal property, and thought Haimendorf had no right to talk to him. His attitude was, “What is Haimendorf doing with my man?” He thought, “I brought him here. It’s my money. Pasang belongs to me.”

So, when Haimendorf’s book came out in 1964 (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964), Snellgrove wrote a review of it. It wasn’t just critical; I would say it was snide

and rather nasty. Now Snellgrove knew that I knew both of them, so he gave me a copy of his review and said, “Would you please pass this on to Prof. Haimendorf?” That put me in an awkward position, in the middle, between them, as I was not taking any stand for or against either one of them. I was just a graduate student and very vulnerable and quite defenseless. Of course, when Haimendorf saw the review he was very, very angry. I think in retrospect that it was highly improper for Snellgrove to involve me in his vendetta against Haimendorf. We talk about blaming the messenger not the message, but fortunately Haimendorf didn’t hold it against me, and we remained friends. It is a great pity that grownups, even academic grownups, sometimes act like children. The world of scholarship suffers because of it. Both Haimendorf and Snellgrove would have produced much better work if they had cooperated with each other. It wasn’t just the Sherpas (or Dolpalis, I later discovered) who sometimes quarreled!

Also while in London I renewed an acquaintance with Malcolm Meerendonk, who I had met earlier in Nepal. He wrote what I still regard as the best pocket dictionary of Nepali.

Even more memorable, I met Sir Ralph Turner, who invited us to tea at his country house. I had an earlier connection with him, in that my Principal at Pharping Boarding School was Dharanidhar Sharma Koirala, who was Turner’s colleague and coworker on his monumental *Dictionary of the Nepali Language* (Turner 1931). Dharanidhar had been Principal of the government high school in Darjeeling at the time. Dharanidhar told me Sir Ralph had asked him to be co-author of the *Dictionary*, but he’d declined. I don’t recall why. Perhaps it was just a matter of modesty on his part. I’ll never forget Sir Ralph’s study, with dozens of dictionaries of Indo-European languages open on long wooden stands. He was working on a massive comparative dictionary of Indo-European languages. His dedication to pure scholarship was an inspiration I’ve never forgotten. As for your question about generations, on second thought I would count Sir Ralph as the first generation (although he wasn’t an anthropologist), Haimendorf and Hitchcock as the second generation, and me and others as the third.

G: *What specifically did you learn from Haimendorf during your short SOAS stay? Was it beneficial, and how do you evaluate him now?*

F: Haimendorf wasn’t teaching any specific course while I was there, so I didn’t sign up for anything that I could give or not give him credit for. I

would say getting to know him was very pleasant and beneficial to me. We would meet socially and he would tell stories of the time he was in India, in the '30s, the time of the Raj, such as when he had dinner with the Viceroy; they ate on gold plates, and two bearers were assigned to each guest, to bring food, take away plates, etc. That world has long since disappeared. Well, as far as the Nepal side goes, you have to say he was a pioneer. He came here, and when you talk about terra incognita, I suppose that's what it was; there was not much known other than some Gurkha history. We knew that Gurungs, Rais, Magars, Limbus and others lived here, but that's about all – nothing about their daily life, nothing about the things anthropologists are interested in. He did that kind of exploratory research and deserves credit for it. If you look at his articles, they contained a lot of information. He was very productive.

Now, he did do intensive fieldwork on Sherpas, but he didn't know Sherpa (no foreigner does), or even Nepali. He needed Dor Bahadur Bista at his elbow, otherwise he would have understood nothing. So Dor Bahadur is the one who got the information and made it intelligible. Look at the literature on Sherpas since Haimendorf's 1964 book. I've counted some thirty books about Sherpas. But he always did have a European aristocratic and patrician air about him. For him, 'natives' were to be studied and I don't think he could ever understand how they might be his intellectual equal. This bothered Dor Bahadur Bista, among others (Fisher 1996). And it bothered me.

Now, those thirty books contain lots of things Haimendorf just didn't know about or didn't ask about, or maybe he thought weren't important. He was an old style ethnographer, and I don't think he realized the depth of understanding that can be achieved in anthropology. Nevertheless, the rest of us stand on his shoulders. We might say, "Oh, he got this wrong. He got that wrong," but he was starting from scratch when there was virtually nothing for him to build on. He was the first man on the ground, and I can't take that away from him.

G: *Did you meet any other Nepali there and do you remember any discussions about Nepal?*

F: It seems strange now, but I don't recall any Nepalis around SOAS at that time. I'm sure there are many now.

G: *Did you meet T.W. Clark, the linguist who was an expert on Nepali, and did you take any Nepali classes with him?*

F: I did meet Clark, but for some reason he wasn't teaching any classes on Nepali. If he had, I would certainly have taken them. My Nepali can always stand improvement.

G: *Haimendorf had already worked a lot on Sherpas and other researchers have also researched them extensively. Why did you choose to write on them, as you did in your book Sherpas: Reflections on Change in Himalayan Nepal (Fisher 1990)?*

F: As I've mentioned, I had an initial, rather naïve fascination with the Sherpas. When I went back to the Sherpas in 1974 I was astonished at all the tourist flights going in and out of Lukla, which we had never expected. We built the airstrip to service the Sherpa hospital Hillary was going to build, but instead tourists overwhelmingly dominated the flights to Lukla. Not only were the Sherpa schools bringing change, but so were tourism and mountaineering. I thought this is the big story, even bigger than the schools. So I started working on that and I wrote an article about the tourists which came out in *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, one of Tribhuvan University's (TU) journals (Fisher 1986a). By that time I already had two book chapters: one on the schools (which was my M.A. thesis) and the other was on the tourists.

In the meantime I got interested in something called ethnographic futures. That was a strange development in anthropology, and it has never amounted to much, although I thought it was interesting. The basic idea was that most people plan for the short range, maybe for next year or at most a few years, when they plan for how to get a job, repair a roof, or buy a house. By contrast, the impetus behind ethnographic futures is to get people to think not just about the short-range, but for a longer period too, something like twenty-five years into the future, which people can imagine, but not 100 years because that's too far into the future to be realistic. So I had the idea of applying this notion to the Sherpas. I talked to some Sherpas and asked them some questions. It wasn't very productive but it forced them to think about more than just climbing Mt. Everest. In twenty-five years they might not be able to climb, so then what would they do to earn money to live? They didn't think about such things much, so I asked them to think about their futures, and that became a chapter of the book. Then I needed a kind of

introductory chapter for people who didn't know about Nepal or Sherpas, and I wrote a conclusion. So that was the book.

G: *Ok, then tell me how this book is new to the reader compared to the previous work done on Sherpas by Haimendorf and others?*

F: It's different first of all because I wrote about the cultural consequences of education. That had not been done before. There were magazine articles on tourism, but, again, I was the only one who had gathered data about tourism and included it in a book. So it was different in those ways. Certainly ethnographic futures research was totally different, so different that it has never been repeated and probably never will be repeated. In these ways it was new. Except for Haimendorf's book and a few others, mine was among the first.

G: *Unlike some predecessor social scientists or academicians, you asked Edmund Hillary to write a foreword to this book. Is that because he was a very popular individual in mountaineering, or was it more a kind of marketing strategy, or a way of paying respect to someone who had really contributed so much of his life to this community?*

F: I'd say all of the above, and in a way they amount to the same thing. Because he's a famous person, that contributes to marketing (Everyone's heard of Sir Edmund Hillary, but who has heard of me?), and part of his fame comes from his post-Everest work with Sherpas. So, they all dovetail together.

G: *What was the thematic focus of your research for your Ph.D.?*

F: The thematic focus was that in the middle of Dolpa live these people, Taralis, who were, first of all, tri-lingual. They spoke Nepali and Tibetan, but they also spoke their own language, Kaike, though only in three villages, by about a thousand people altogether. This made them inter-lingual in the sense that they could talk to people on both sides of them (Nepali and Tibetan), who couldn't talk to each other. They were inter-cultural also, as they were aware of cultural systems and patterns of the Bhotas as well as of the Nepali Hindus, but they also had their own, local culture. They were inter-economic in the sense that they moved goods and services between those two polar ecological and cultural zones. They were interstitial in many ways. So, I didn't want to study them just as an isolated group, which is the way ethnicity is often studied in Nepal; I wanted to see how they were

connected to the rest of their valley, the rest of Dolpa, the rest of west Nepal, the rest of all Nepal, and even India and Tibet, because their trade took them to these borders, and over them, as far as Calcutta. So that was my theme. I summed it up in my book by saying that salt and Buddhism flow down the river, rice and Hinduism move up the river, while modernism comes over the pass.

G: *Can you throw light on some of the major grants and fellowships you received for doing research in Nepal, including your doctoral research.*

F: When I came here to Nepal to do my Ph.D. fieldwork, that was under a Fulbright grant from 1968 to 1970. Then I had other National Science Foundation funds, and a Wenner Gren grant in 1974. When I came here to work with the anthropology/sociology department at TU from 1984 to 1986, that was also Fulbright, and I had a Social Science Research Council grant in 1988, and grants from the Smithsonian Institution, Ford Foundation, East-West Center, and other grants from my own college.

G: *Did you face any hurdle or inconvenience in doing your research in Nepal? If so, what were they?*

F: First of all, getting permission to go to the areas near the northern border was a hurdle. That's always been a problem for *bideśīs*, especially then, in the middle of the Cold War. Harka Gurung, one of the giants of social science in Nepal, helped me in this, pointing out the differences between the rules for Upper and lower Dolpa. Second, you had to walk for two weeks from Pokhara to get there. I didn't really think of that as a problem at the time, though now I would, since it's a long and difficult trek. Once my wife and I were in Nepal I couldn't even discover whether I could find food in Dolpa, whether they would have enough surplus for me, or whether they didn't even have enough to feed themselves. I couldn't find anybody who knew. So what I did in Pokhara was to buy a year's supply of rice and *dāl*.

We packed that up in pony loads, and as it turned out we were both right and wrong: on the one hand, we didn't get enough in Pokhara to last for a year, but on the other, it didn't matter because as it happened we could get enough food in Dolpa to stay alive. There were no vegetables or fruit available, not to speak of little hard candies you can easily find in trailside shops elsewhere. It was not an easy place to live unless you had grown up there and were used to eating millet and buckwheat (it was too high and cold

to grow rice). Even though I was willing to do it and wanted to do it, still I thought that as far as field conditions go, it was a pretty tough place to spend a year – with no R&R [Rest and Relaxation]!

Another obstacle was linguistic. I spoke some Nepali, and I tried to learn Tibetan in London, but unsuccessfully. Snellgrove basically had no interest whatever in teaching Tibetan; he only wanted to translate Tibetan texts. I wanted to learn the spoken language, with a textbook I could work on by practicing with a tutor, or using language tapes, but there was nothing like that available at all. He was a professor at SOAS, but you know if I were an advanced Tibetan student he might have been interested in that, because I could have helped him on something he was doing, but otherwise not. So I came to Nepal without functional Tibetan.

And then Kaike of course was not known anywhere except in Tichurong, so I couldn't learn that in London or anywhere else. I faced the dilemma of whether I should take, maybe, three months or six months just to study Kaike or Tibetan, or both, or whether, since I already knew Nepali and the villagers knew Nepali (each of us was equally good, or equally bad), I should just start doing fieldwork in Nepali, getting information. I decided that since I didn't have all that much time, I thought if I just sit there learning Kaike and that's all I have to show for several months of fieldwork, and then leave, it's going to be a waste of time, since I would have no dissertation. I did end up with a two thousand word list of Kaike, so it's not that I didn't study the language, but I couldn't speak it much. So that was linguistically the problem; when the villagers were talking among themselves I couldn't understand what they were saying, which was a huge handicap, and I've always regretted not being better prepared linguistically. I would have had a much easier time of it in a Nepali-speaking village, but sometimes the most interesting option is also the most difficult.

Now, the final problem in this regard, I would say, is a problem that wasn't specifically related to Nepal, but I have always been hard of hearing, and I am completely deaf in one ear, which makes it hard even to understand English sometimes. By the way, Ruth Benedict had the same problem; she was deaf, and her deafness compromised her fieldwork to some extent. I've always been unusually sympathetic with her for that reason.

Language competence is not easily judged. On the one hand, I have passed for a native Nepali on the phone, where no one can see my alien

features. Perhaps more relevantly, I worked in Dolpa for a year with no translator, although I might have done better work if I'd had one.

But all that's deceptive. It's true that I have a good accent, and at a superficial level I can chat casually and sound like a native speaker, but if the topic becomes at all complicated (or several people are talking rapidly at the same time) I am quickly lost. I can read haltingly, but high level academic Nepali, such as that in the translation of my book, *Living Martyrs (Jyīdā Śahidharī)*, I find very difficult. Even Dor Bahadur once told me he preferred to talk anthropology in English, simply because the vocabulary is already there. I remember once at TU some of us faculty were sitting around after classes when an MA student approached us. Students could write their MA theses in either English or Nepali, and she had chosen Nepali. She asked us, how do you say 'social structure' in Nepali? We spent the rest of the afternoon debating her question.

I believe there are three levels of language competence. The first consists of virtually no knowledge of the language – this would apply especially to the earliest scholars. The second is people like me, who can sound more fluent than they really are, and whose reading skills are quite limited. I suspect this includes most foreign anthropologists. The third level is virtual native speaker proficiency, including reading ability. Virtually no foreign anthropologist (as opposed to a language specialist) ever reaches this level – perhaps one or two. I do try to keep up on relevant scholarship in Nepali, but I have to rely on help for that. I would be better off if I could read all that myself, but learning a language in your twenties makes that difficult, especially if you live in an English-speaking country, unlike Nepalis, usually upper caste and class, who often start studying English as young children and even attend English language schools, and of course they come by their Nepali naturally. It is a much easier process than what we foreigners have to go through at advanced ages. They sometimes say that foreigners have all the advantages. I wonder if they realize their good fortune? How I envy them.

You have to remember, though, that knowing the language is only part of it; you also have to know anthropology. After all, there are millions of Nepalis who speak much better Nepali than I ever will, but that doesn't make them anthropologists.

There is a paradox lurking here. Those with the least linguistic ability have been among the most productive scholars (such as Haimendorf and

Hitchcock), while those whose linguistic ability is the most advanced often seem to be the least productive. Can it be that too much knowledge is a dangerous thing? I'm reminded that Edmund Leach said he was able to write his highly original, innovative *Political Systems of Highland Burma* book only because he had lost all his field notes. And it is well known that Lévi-Strauss, perhaps the most original and creative anthropologist of the twentieth century, did fieldwork of quite a low standard, partly because of his minimal linguistic competence in Brazilian languages.

G: *How do you compare the institutional and human resources available in Nepal and the U.S., as a graduate student?*

F: In general, the anthropology department of the University of Chicago was, and perhaps still is, the world's finest – tremendous, cutting-edge faculty. The library is huge, including the South Asia library. I would say it has everything, including publications in Nepali; what doesn't it have? There was one problem at Chicago, though. They had everything one could wish for about anthropological theory, but nothing about methodology. When I came here I didn't know what to do, except to go someplace and do 'fieldwork,' whatever that was. I had a permit for this, and I had a portable typewriter, but I had no idea about how to do fieldwork.

Regarding Nepal, I would say, in terms of facilities and resources, it had almost nothing then. When I came here, besides Dor Bahadur, I knew Harka Gurung, who was always very kind and helpful. I probably wouldn't have made it to Dolpa without them. I had some kind of affiliation to get a visa, I think probably through the university, although in 1968 hardly any university existed, and certainly no Sociology/Anthropology Department. So, I was pretty much on my own. When I think about it, it's kind of amazing, going to this godforsaken place of Dolpa. It was rough country to live in. I think the only support I had was through the Peace Corps, which forwarded my mail to Dolpa. They put it into the government *hulāk* (postal) system so that was a help. That was all I had, but to get some mail every two or three months was better than nothing.

About the fieldwork, I had the impression that it is common practice to have a research assistant, so I should have one too. I advertised in the newspaper to find someone. A couple of people came by, and then this guy came who had an MA in geography. He was about my age, and I explained what I wanted to do. He sounded interested, so I said, "Ok, I'd like you to

come and we will be there for a year.” He said. “Fine,” and then a couple of days before we were going to leave, he said he had to settle some of his affairs first. I said ok, and gave him money for the plane ticket and a couple of months advance for his salary, and urged him to catch up with me as soon as he could because I needed him. I never saw him again. You asked about hurdles? That was a hurdle.

G: *It is commonly thought that any anthropologist studying outside his/her own community should learn the language of the people being studied. In your case what was your experience in learning Nepali and Kaike?*

F: I had learned basic Nepali during Peace Corps training and then while living here. That was the only language I knew. Of course, I knew Kaike existed, as well as Tibetan. I had to choose between learning all three languages and trying to get substantive information. I chose to gather information because I thought I might never get any information if I did nothing but work on Kaike. Also, I was not a linguistic anthropologist. If I was, I should definitely have learned Kaike, but I wasn't. I thought, “Well, I'll somehow manage with Nepali.” I didn't like not knowing Kaike (or Tibetan), but I thought I'll have to settle for that because I just didn't have the time, capacity, or resources to do anything more. Sure, ideally I would have learned Kaike and Tibetan, but we don't live in an ideal world. Sometimes we have to compromise, and this was one of those times.

G: *How did you travel from Kathmandu to Dolpa for your research?*

F: From Kathmandu we flew to Pokhara because there was no road then. In Pokhara we got supplies, including a year's supply of food. We needed eight Tibetan ponies to carry it there. We just started walking from the edge of Pokhara up to Baglung and from Baglung to Dhorpatan. In Dhorpatan the Tibetans in charge of the ponies said they could not go any further because we had to cross snow-covered passes. We found some other local people to carry loads the rest of the way. So, seven days to Dhorpatan and seven days to Tichurong, two weeks in all. Towards the end we had to cross two fifteen thousand foot passes and spend the night between the two passes. The problem with that was that if it snowed, we would be trapped between the passes where we were camping. We could be blocked from going either forward or backward. Luckily that didn't happen, but sometimes it does happen to the Tichurong people, who suffer from snow blindness because

of it. Obviously I didn't want to turn around and go back to Pokhara, thirteen days behind us, so we took the risk. The next day we descended from the second pass, and I saw this village, with nice-looking fields and houses, and I thought that must be Sahar Tara. When we reached it in the evening we found out that it wasn't Sahar Tara, but another village, Gumba Tara. We were so tired after our knee-jarring descent from the pass that we spent the night in Gumba Tara. The next morning we moved on to Sahar Tara, about an hour's walk away.

G: *What was your first reaction when you arrived in Dolpa, in terms of their acceptance of your research? Were you apprehensive about possible resistance, or culture shock?*

F: Not culture shock because I had been out in rural Nepal a lot and I knew to expect a different way of life. I would say at first I didn't think much about it because the people were friendly and hospitable. The first thing I needed to do was find a place to stay. There was one house that a woman had just rebuilt, because her old one had largely collapsed. She wanted five hundred rupees a month rent, and I offered her four hundred, which she accepted immediately. I also had a Sherpa with me, Changchu, who managed the horse loads, the porter loads, cooking, all those kinds of things. He did all that, and more. We couldn't have survived without him.

Then I thought the next thing to do was to make a map of the village. But the village was full of irregular, crisscrossing, trails, going up and down and around and then turning back every which way. It was a rabbit warren. I could never get an accurate sense of where I was, because if I was in front of one house, I couldn't tell if that was the same house I had been in back of before, or an entirely different house. It was so complicated that I finally asked the *saciv* (secretary) of the Panchayat to walk around with me. As we passed by each house, he would tell me the name of the householder. So, I was able to make an extremely crude and distorted sketch of the village, not very accurate, but at least I had accounted for every house, each with a name attached to it. Later, with the support of local people we made a better map that showed how the trails actually spread within the village, but it was really hard work. It took me a month just to do what I thought would be a simple afternoon's task, but it wasn't simple at all.

The next step was to find who lived in each house – a census, showing ages, clan affiliation, where they were born, basic demographic information

like that. At each house they always asked why I wanted to know whatever I was asking about. Then I would have to explain that I was a student in America, in the twenty-second grade, which they understood since a five-grade school had been started a year or two before, and they understood about grades. I explained that for me to graduate instead of fail, I had to write a book about their village. That struck them as very odd, because they didn't think there was anything at all interesting about their lives. As one man said, "We get up in the morning, go work in the fields, eat, and sleep. That's all there is to it." Anyway, after they had answered the question I had just asked, I might ask another question, and again they would say, "Why do you want to know that?" So it was pretty exasperating. No matter what I asked they didn't want to tell me anything. After some time then they began to be more trusting, and there was one guy who was kind of a political leader, and he decided that I was alright. So he spread the word in the village that, "It's ok, you can talk to him, just answer whatever he asks about and don't worry about him." After that they became more cooperative.

G: *How do you perceive your major research community, the Dolpalis, and where do you locate them in the larger cultural mosaic of Nepal?*

F: That's a complicated question which demands a complicated answer. The Tichurong Dolpalis are problematic to classify. They would be considered by mainstream Hindu Nepalis as Bhotias, but they specifically deny that and would say they are Taralis. But not that either, because if you ask, "*Tapāi ko jāt ke ho?*" they would say they are Magars. But not Magar like Hitchcock's Magars, and not Kham Magars either. They might say they are Kaike speaking, but even then Kaike is spoken in only three villages, out of the thirteen villages in the valley of Tichurong (nine are Tibetan-speaking and one is Nepali-speaking). They all claim to be Magars, but some spoke Kaike and some didn't, and they all spoke Nepali and Tibetan at least as second and third languages. To people who know about Nepal and don't know about Dolpa, I would say they are Magars, but if they really want to know, then I have to explain all these complications.

G: *And what about the place itself, the physical landscape?*

F: The landscape was very striking. Tichurong is a deep, steep valley cut by the Bheri River, flowing down from Upper Dolpa. Sahar Tara was way up on the hillside of the left bank, probably a couple of thousand feet up from the

river to the highest houses. The village was quite compact, but surrounded by fields in all directions. They had used rocks lying in the fields to build stone walls over the centuries. This is where they grew their *kodo* (millet) and *phāpar* (buckwheat) and other crops, including *cinu cāmal* (a kind of millet, but prepared like rice) and marijuana, which they use for seed oil but not for anything else (i.e., they do not use it to get high). The Himalayan peaks behind them and across the valley were covered with snow, more in winter than during the rest of the year. Their houses have flat roofs so if they have a lot of snow they have to climb up on the roofs with shovels and shovel off the roof. Otherwise snow will melt into their houses. It's high country and from my point of view it's strikingly beautiful, but from the point of view of the villagers, there was nothing special about it. It's just what they had seen all their lives. The Sherpas feel the same way about Mt. Everest.

G: *What was most striking about the Dolpalis? Is there anything that you found really amazing about their way of life?*

F: Yes, that was the main point of my study – that they were farmers, with a strong agricultural economy, all their crops and cattle, but at the same time they were also traders, and trade formed the second layer of their economy. Trading is what took them out of their valley into other parts of Nepal and, now, into the world. And that's what made them the intercultural brokers that they are. If they just stay there they wouldn't know anything else, but they also knew other languages and religions, and so on. That was the striking thing. In terms of daily life, when the women get on the rooftops and have shouting arguments with their characteristic gestures, they heap scorn on each other. That goes on every day. I don't know why their voices don't burn out because they just carry on at the top of their lungs. When I talk about it now, they laugh. They think it is so funny that I would remember that. Another thing that struck me is how hard the physical life was – plowing those fields (using only a single bullock behind the plow), carrying those loads of goods up from the Tarai – they carried them on their backs. It's a very hard life for the people there.

G: *In the field how did you maintain a regular diary or acquire any other particular records?*

F: I would scribble down notes during the day, but every night I would type them up on my little portable typewriter. Otherwise I would forget everything.

For instance, while doing census work, I would type the names of the people and their ages, gender, place of birth, how many fields they have, how many animals, and information like that.

G: *What was the most difficult part of your fieldwork?*

F: Getting people to tell me things. They lacked cultural self-confidence because they knew that in some sense they were really Bhotias, but for some purposes they wanted to be considered really Nepalis. They tried to pretend they were both, and something more (Magars). Many of them used Nepali names to disguise their identities when they were in Nepali areas, and their own village names (Tibetan) when they were in the village or in Bhotia areas. They thought they were looked down upon as just rustic, uneducated, unsophisticated people by high-caste Nepali speakers. They were a little worried about that and didn't really want me to find out about all this, which meant they were always practicing 'impression management.' They wanted me to think what they hoped other people thought of them. They tried to do this through their 'presentation of self in everyday life,' as Goffman put it.

G: *Your wife also accompanied you till the end of your research?*

F: Yes, she was there the whole time, took notes sometimes on what she could learn about women. She sat with the women often and spent a lot of time with them, and helped one of them through a very difficult childbirth. It's hard to imagine any other American woman who could have done all that she did and survived. As I've said before, it was a hard life.

G: *Can you state how long your research lasted, when you submitted your dissertation, and how long it took to publish your book?*

F: First, I spent a month or two making preparations in Kathmandu, getting permits, equipment, etc., and then, after the two-week trek, reached the village on October 30, 1968. I stayed a full year there, thus fulfilling the anthropological preference for and tradition of doing fieldwork for at least a year, in order to see the seasonal agricultural activities, movement between animal pastures, and the annual ritual cycle. So we left also on October 30, 1969. By that time we had had enough. Except for a week's trek to Jumla, and Rara Lake, we had not left Tichurong the whole year. We returned to Kathmandu for five or six months, which were devoted to archival research (and the birth of my son in Shanta Bhawan Hospital). There were *lālmohar*

documents to look at in Singha Durbar, from the 19th century, such as those concerning the salt tax. The person who helped me do that archival research was Dor Bahadur Bista's middle son, Keshar Bahadur Bista, then a high school student, later a Minister. He was invaluable.

After all that, I spent a year (1970–71) writing up at Chicago. I was teaching part time (an interdisciplinary course called Introduction to Indian Civilization) and also writing the dissertation, but the truth is that I just kept postponing the writing. I should have been writing, but I kept thinking, “Oh, I heard somebody has an article somewhere; I should look at that article. I can't start writing until I read that article.” Meanwhile, I had been offered a job at Carleton College that would begin the fall of 1971. The terms of the offer were that the salary would be eleven thousand dollars a year if I had finished the degree, but only nine thousand if I didn't. I thought, I can't possibly afford that two thousand dollar fine. I have to get it done.

So, I had to do something drastic. What I did was to change my work routine and to regard myself not as a budding scholar, but as a blue collar production line worker. I vowed that for five days a week I was going to produce five typewritten pages each day, which would add up to twenty five pages a week. If I finished that quota by noon I could take the rest of the day off. If I didn't finish my quota by midnight, I had to stay up until I had done so. No excuses, no compromises. Saturday and Sunday I could take off, as weekend holidays. Now, if you do five pages a day, in one month you would have one hundred pages, and in two months you would have two hundred pages, and that was enough, so that is what I did. To keep me focused, I had a little sign over my desk which I recommend to people with writer's block. It says ‘Don't get it right, get it written.’ I wasn't satisfied with what I produced but I got the eleven thousand dollar salary even though I hadn't officially submitted it yet (my committee told Carleton that the dissertation was accepted).

After a year at Carleton I spent a summer in Mexico completely rewriting my dissertation. With the help of my typewriter (electric this time), I finally finished it and sent it off to Chicago. I still wasn't satisfied with it but my wife insisted I send it. Now, the university had a very, very strict policy about the formatting, font size, margins, and other editing and stylistic details for dissertations. In fact what they said was that you can type your own dissertation if you insist, but they strongly suggested using a typist from a list of typists who knew exactly what the university wanted. I accepted their

suggestion, and I had to pay her for the job – I think it cost me \$300. Then there is an administrative officer in the university whose job is to do nothing but look at dissertations, not to really read them, because he doesn't know anything about anthropology, or whatever the discipline might be. But my typist had done a good job and he approved my final copy (Fisher 1972).

Now, you have to not only write a dissertation, you also have to defend it orally in front of the department faculty. In December I went back to Chicago for the defense. I officially received my degree that fall, 1972, which happened to be ten years after my B.A. During those ten years I had received my B.A., served in the Peace Corps, worked with Sir Edmund Hillary, taught Nepali to new Peace Corps Volunteers, begun graduate study, conducted fieldwork, written my dissertation, and received my Ph.D. These were all things I wanted to do and enjoyed very much doing. I counted myself lucky, even blessed, to have accomplished them all.

I knew I would have to revise the dissertation for publication, so beginning in 1973 I worked on it, and kept working on it, until finally it came out in 1986, much revised, expanded, edited, and improved, but with the same title the original dissertation had: *Trans-Himalayan Traders, Economy, Society, and Culture in Northwest Nepal* (Fisher 1986b). The revisions took thirteen years, which is much too long. I should have done it quicker and not been so perfectionistic. I thought, "I want this to be very good," but even so I thought it could have been better. I usually feel that way about something I've written – disappointed. But then in this case, as in others, when I look at that book many years later, I think, gosh, that's pretty good after all. Did I really write that?

G: *Was your research supervisor familiar with the relevant literature on Nepal?*

F: You use that term, research supervisor, as if it were a common part of graduate education, but I never really had such an advisor, not even as a Ph.D. candidate. Before I went to Nepal and while I was here I had no supervisor. I had no advice, I had no support, I had nothing other than advice from friends like Dor Bahadur Bista and Harka Gurung. When I returned to the U.S. I reported to a committee for my dissertation but they knew nothing about Nepal, so I was my own boss.

G: *So then you can write anything regarding Nepal because nobody was there as a Nepal expert? No one could critique what you wrote about Nepal?*

F: They couldn't critique me about Nepal, but what they could do is to question, generally, if I say the Dolpalis do such and such, well, what is your evidence for this? Or they might say that another of my examples sounds similar to something in Mexico or Nigeria and they might say I should consider those examples comparatively. But the main advantage of the committee is not that they know the specific literature, but that they ask whether I make a coherent, convincing, theoretical argument as a whole in the dissertation, or whether my data support my theory. If I make points that are coherent and make sense, or if they are theoretically interesting, that's what they're looking for, and that's what I needed. But if they say something I've written is wildly off the map, then I'll say, well, Dolpa is just different, you are comparing apples and oranges, or something like that.

The invaluable critique I get on my work now comes mostly from the community of scholars interested in Nepal, especially Nepalis such as you, Chaitanya Mishra, Krishna Bhattachan, and other colleagues at Tribhuvan University, as well as those in America and from countries all over the world.

G: *What did you teach at Carleton, and at what level?*

F: Carleton is what we call a liberal arts college, a kind of institution unknown elsewhere in the world. Our goal is to produce well-rounded students, educated both broadly (in a variety of disciplines, such as sciences, arts, humanities) and deeply (majoring in one discipline, such as anthropology). Such colleges are almost always small compared to large universities; in the case of Carleton, about 1,800 students. We fortunately select our students from among the most highly qualified students in the country and around the world, including Nepal. We usually admit one or two Nepali students per year. It's a four year college and the degree we offer is a B.A. I taught a variety of topics, including Introductory Anthropology, Anthropological Thought and Theory, Biography and Ethnography, Philosophy of Social Sciences, Growing Up Cross-Culturally, among others.

G: *You also taught courses like anthropology of humor and anthropology of dance. Can you briefly highlight what sort of courses these are?*

F: Well, I originated a course called anthropology of humor which considers humor and laughter as universals, found in all societies, but at the same time

highly variable in interesting ways – just as with language. Everyone laughs, but not at the same things. The question is, therefore, what makes some things funny in one culture but not in another, or why something might be funny in one culture but insulting in another – like Sardarji jokes, or, in America, so-called Polack (even the name, Polack, is an offensive term for Polish) jokes. Questions like these are related to social structure. You don't want to be rude, but people may see humor that those inside the culture being made fun of don't think is funny. Humor can be a form of ethnic warfare. And there is always the question of crossing the line between something that might be funny, but is not because it's just too grotesquely offensive, such as certain jokes (but not all) about Blacks or Jews or Punjabis. If you look cross-culturally, you find humor everywhere – Hispanic, Norwegian, Jewish, Japanese, Nepali, among many others. That's what the anthropology of humor is all about.

Dance is another typical anthropological approach to something that exists either universally, or almost universally. Why do some people dance in one way, why in couples, or in a dance line, or in ballet? What role does dance play in society? As with humor, there are many examples in the world to look at.

G: *Did you also teach Nepal related courses?*

F: Yes, but not often courses exclusively about Nepal. In my courses I always used Nepal as an example of something or other. It could be linguistic, it could be family, it could be marriage, kinship, religion – anything. Since I know Nepal better than other places, I can give examples from there much better than I can from South America or Africa, which I've only read about. In that sense Nepal was important in all my courses. When Navin Rai came as a visiting Fulbright professor, he and I gave a seminar on Nepal, but generally courses were more widespread geographically or cross-culturally. Since anthropology is a worldwide science of humanity, they have to be.

G: *Don't you think it is necessary to incorporate Nepal directly in the syllabi?*

F: Certainly Nepal is included in the syllabi, but not necessarily to the exclusion of other places. It is actively taught and discussed, but that might be done more effectively in comparative courses, such as Himalayan Buddhism, which would be about Nepal and Tibet, or village Hinduism, about Nepal and India.

Many of my students have graduated and then year's later written to tell me all the examples about Nepal that I introduced and which they still remember.

G: *How would Nepal fit into a course like 'People and Cultures of South Asia'?*

F: The South Asia course considered M. N. Srinivas and Haimendorf's tribals, as well as many examples from Nepal. Himalayan Buddhism included examples of Sherpas, Dolpalis and also the Newars of Kathmandu and Patan. So Nepal was very well represented, but the course did not deal exclusively with Nepal. I generally like to examine Nepal in its wider cultural context with Tibet and India and not think of it as an isolated island unto itself. I think that's a danger Nepali anthropologists need to watch out for.

G: *How are the new anthropology/sociology graduates and postgraduates being produced in the U.S.? How are they being mentored in the field?*

F: First of all it helps if you go to a university that has a strong South Asian department or even, as at Cornell, various faculty interested specifically in Nepal. That's where you get mentoring as a graduate student, not just at the dissertation level, but also by taking courses or studying for exams. At a graduate university, the other graduate students at your level are all struggling with the same requirements. You are all trying to master the same material. You all get similar reading lists. You should all read certain classics of Nepali anthropology or South Asian anthropology or anthropological theory.

So, in a way, in the process of talking to each other and meeting each other, you mentor each other. I remember at Chicago we first-year students would meet every Saturday morning just to go over various readings for that week. Some of us understood some things better, others understood other things better, so collectively we all benefitted and learned more. As a Philosophy major, I had a lot of catching up to do, and this helped me more than anything. The Chair of the Anthropology Department even admitted that he expected us to learn more from each other than from the faculty.

G: *You taught undergraduate students at Carleton; have you also supervised any Masters or Ph.D. students researching on Nepal?*

F: Well, a couple of my undergraduate students came with me to Nepal as research assistants. So that was a research experience for them. Another example would be when other universities ask me to sit on committees of

their Ph.D. students. For example, there is a Ph.D. student at the University of Wisconsin in Madison who is doing fieldwork in Bhutan, studying professional arts like painting and sculpture, and their relation to modernity. Madison didn't have anyone in the South Asia area, so I'm helping them out with that, as an external examiner.

G: *Apart from this did you supervise any graduate or postgraduate students who did his/her research in Nepal?*

F: I'm often asked by graduate students from different universities, who have similar interests and who have read some of my work, to discuss their research plans. Sometimes I've been asked by universities in places like Arunachal Pradesh or West Bengal, to be a reader for dissertations there, but they are not about Nepal specifically. In such cases I don't know the particular student, but they send me the dissertation, and I agreed to do that.

G: *Many people have interpreted your book Trans Himalayan Traders (THT) [Fisher 1986b] in various ways. Can you briefly summarize it in your own words?*

F: I would say a brief summation is that it is about a group of people in a remote valley of northwest Nepal who are connected with the world in fairly complicated and non-obvious ways. Relations with people beyond their valley are mediated primarily through transactions of one kind or another. They could be transactions of personality, transactions of goods, like salt, or even of impressions – different kinds of things. My problem was to analyze how those transactions inform the culture and make the people there what they are. In a significant way, if they didn't have the transactions, they wouldn't be the same people.

G: *Instead of using the actual name (Sahar Tara) of your village, why did you choose to use a pseudonym for it? Also, how did you choose the word Tarangapur, because it sounds like a place in the Tarai.*

F: That's a good and relevant question. Every anthropologist has to consider the anthropological code of ethics, which is authorized by the American Anthropological Association. The code states that our primary obligation is to the people that we study, not to the funders, not to the universities, and not to the governments (including the Nepal government) or organizations which support our research. Our primary obligation is to the people we

study. If there is a conflict between that and anything else, then the people always come first. That principle cannot be compromised.

Here's where the pseudonym comes in. If I say that the people in Sahar Tara poach *kasturi* (musk deer), I can't ignore the fact that poaching is illegal. If I write about the poaching in my book and somebody in the government reads it, that might create a problem. They might go arrest the poachers. I feel it's my obligation to prevent that from happening, to protect the people I lived and worked with, and who trusted me. I want to tell the truth about the place, but I don't want to incriminate the people who live there. One way to avoid that is to make up different names, fictitious names, for particular people. But even that won't always work because people can be identified in other ways. Another is to hide the name of the location altogether, and that's basically what I did.

But, I have to admit in retrospect that anybody who wanted to find the village I call Tarangapur could easily do so. For one thing there's a map in the book that shows all the thirteen villages of the valley of Tichurong. All except Sahar Tara are listed with their real names. Now, if you are there and you see there are thirteen villages and only one doesn't seem to be represented on the map, which also shows the name of one village which no one recognizes, anybody can figure out they are the same place, especially since I've already told the reader that I have used a pseudonym for one of the villages. I didn't think all that through at the time, but I thought this will be my solution – certainly not an ideal solution, but at least it hides the identity to some extent and protects the people.

As far as the name Tarangapur is concerned, it's called Sahar Tara in Nepali – Sahar because it is a "city" in the context of Dolpo. Although it is a small village, it is the biggest village (roughly seventy-six houses) in the entire district of Dolpa, except for Dunai, the capital. Pur is a suffix meaning city (as in Gorakhpur, Singapore); Tarang is the Kaike word for Sahar Tara, hence the pseudonym Tarangapur. Now, nobody is going to know all that. It's mainly just a kind of cute etymology. But even so it omits the Tibetan term for Sahar Tara, which is Ba.

G: *Much anthropological work is less concerned with economic life, and more about ritual, culture, etc., but your book is about economic production and exchange in highland Dolpa. Why did you decide to make this the basis of your study? In Nepali society there are several specific trading*

communities such as Newar, Thakali, and Marwari, but your book seems to establish Magars as an equally successful trading community.

F: Well, to get back to my actual fieldwork as an anthropologist, I wanted to understand as many different things as I could. So I have a lot of notes about ritual and politics and so on, which didn't end up in the book, but which I hope I'll be able to write about elsewhere. You ask why I decided to make economic life the focal point. The fact is I didn't decide it in advance: I had no preconceived notions about it. It's just that the longer I was there, the more I began to see this economic component as fundamental to understanding the rest of the culture, which was incomprehensible without it. In other words, the evidence dictated the analysis, rather than the other way around.

It's true that compared to the Thakalis and Newars, the Taralis are not as big or as successful. But the fact that they have been traders conditions them for new opportunities now, such as that given by *yārsāgumbā* [*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*], or Tibetan carpet manufacturing. They are somehow culturally ready for that. I think if they were just farmers they wouldn't have a clue about these things. Because of their transactional lives, they were culturally prepared for these other opportunities. Their experience in trading trains them somehow to recognize economic opportunities because when you are a trader you have to think, "Should I buy this? Should I sell that? And at what price? How can I maximize profits?" I think that way of thinking is helping them now. They may never be as big or as successful as Thakalis, but for becoming what they are in the process of becoming, I think trading is even more important now. In the context of the modern world, the importance of trading is even more important now than I thought it was forty-five years ago.

G: *You locate the Magars in their particular environmental setting, how they make their niche or choose their adaptive strategy. You could have grounded your study in the established theoretical approach of cultural ecology, but instead you chose Barth's transactional model. Can you explain why?*

F: Actually, I do think THT is relevant for cultural ecology. I have been considerably influenced by cultural ecology (and writers such as Roy Rappaport, Marshall Sahlins, and even Barth in some of his earlier work), and I probably should have acknowledged it more explicitly because it fits in

well with the lines of my thinking. I suppose I didn't mention it much because cultural ecology was not much in vogue in Chicago – a good example of sociology of knowledge being dictated by institutional epistemologies.

G: *Ok then, is the engagement of these Magars explainable by 'economic necessity' or by 'ecological necessity' or something else?*

F: To say it is a necessity would vastly overstate the case. It's not a necessity; they could certainly live on their agricultural production and cattle and acquire salt through the old salt trade. But to maximize the situation they're in and acquire other kinds of goods not available locally – cotton cloth, tennis shoes, cigarettes, metal, sweets, shirts – they have to be prepared to give up something they produce, other than Phapar. They need to optimize their strategy to acquire them, involving not only cash, but also bartering. They were moved to do that as a way of getting things they need or want; according to local thought, needs and wants are the same thing. I would call it a 'strategy' for dealing with what they expect from life, nothing more than that.

G: *You are planning to publish a second edition of THT entitled Forty Two Years Later: Return To Tarangapur by adding life history chapters of some of those Taralis. Some of it Hitchcock had sent to you. Can you mention what it is all about?*

F: Basically, I concluded that the modern turn for Taralis rests not on some broad, systemic cultural characteristics (such as transactions), but on idiosyncratic details of a few people who have converted local economic success into even more successful modern economic ventures. To show that's the case, I want to give a few examples of these particular Taralis. The most prominent one is Chandra Man Rokaya, whose life story, told in his own words, takes up more than half the book. Hitchcock had collected much of the material, then sent it to me many years ago, when he could no longer proceed with it. I brought it up to date with Chandra Man. It's ironic that in some ways he's been the most successful, and at the same time possessed none of the advantages of the others. That argues, counterintuitively, against my main point, but it also shows how difficult it is to generalize about situations like this.

G: *Those individuals represented in your life histories once engaged in transactional trade in Dolpa and are now established in business and*

politics in Kathmandu. How do you see the trajectory, shift and changes in their lives?

F: It's a dramatic change for them. They have become educated, at least through SLC level, established businesses, mainly in the carpet manufacturing sector as well as in *yārsāgumbā*, live mainly in Kathmandu, and a few travel to countries in Europe, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Even many of those still in the village are now literate, have cell phones, and fly back and forth to Kathmandu.

G: *Now I would like to ask about another book Living Martyrs: Individuals and Revolution in Nepal (Fisher 1997). You somehow shifted from the usual anthropological tendency to continue ethnographic work in a different community, and instead all of a sudden you came out with a book focusing on the life history of Tanka Prasad Acharya and his wife Rewanta Kumari. Why did you move in this new direction?*

F: This was back in the mid and late '80s, before the *āndolan* or anything like that came along. I remember thinking that here I was in the middle of a largely Hindu country, with a Hindu ruler and monarch. And it would be fair to say that the country was basically run by Bahuns and Chhetris. They held the top positions, and the reins of power were pretty much in their hands. I realized I didn't really know much about that part of the country, at least not compared to the more Buddhist and Tibeto-Burman speaking groups along the northern border that I'd gotten to know. I thought I ought to learn more about Hindus, maybe by studying a village somewhere.

But I also knew that there are other ways of doing anthropological research, and the study of life histories is one of them. It's nothing new; it goes back as far as Boas and his students. Lots of people do them. I wondered how Bahuns, with their high-caste and all that, might be changing in modern times, because I had lived with a Bahun family in Bijeswori in 1963. I thought of doing a life history with that traditional family, but I was more interested in a Bahun who was adapting to and becoming part of modern life, to see how that situation might look.

I don't remember the details, but while I was at TU, at one of the gatherings of Nepalis and Americans I ran into Meena Acharya, who had recently completed her Ph.D. at University of Wisconsin, and some of her brothers and sisters. They asked what I was doing, and I told them I wanted to do a study of Brahmanic culture, and Meena immediately responded, "Why don't you do

my father?” I had never thought of that, but as I thought about it, it seemed both interesting and plausible, and Tanka Prasad and his wife were both keen to have me do it. That’s how it got started. Of course they were both literate and could have written it themselves if they had wanted to. But they also knew very well that they would never do it; they just weren’t organized and disciplined enough for a task like that. They were blessed with extraordinary qualities and talents, but writing a book was not one of them.

I was glad to have the help of the family because neither Tanka Prasad nor Rewanta Kumari were very good storytellers. I mean, they told good individual stories, but I was trying to construct more of a narrative. He would start one story, then switch to something else 30 years before, then another thing ten years later, etc. So I had to record all this and enter it on the computer, and then move all the text around so that it would tell a coherent story. I had to keep doing this, every time I talked to them. I also had to figure out what the chapters would be, because neither they nor anyone else lives their lives according to chapter headings. Tanka Prasad and Rewanta Kumari lived their lives one day at a time, as we all do.

Gradually, I realized I should have a chapter on childhood for each of them, so I gathered all the childhood fragments together, but even then you have to put them in the right order, showing how one thing leads to another. And then chapters on marriage, political activism, being in prison (for him), being out of prison (for her), being released from prison, becoming prime minister, being married to a prime minister – assembling all these things was like putting together a giant jigsaw puzzle with thousands of pieces. I had to figure out which piece went where. You said the book appeared all of a sudden, but actually it took me more than ten years to finish it. It was a struggle.

I usually start writing a book because I think it’s going to be easy. I do that with everything. In this case I thought just recording their lives as they passed through time would be easy, but it wasn’t. Tanka Prasad was not only a Bahun, but he was also a political activist and a modernist. His life and persona contained everything I wanted to know, so I wanted to take his life, and hers, and make them the focus of the study rather than some community. It was a person-centered ethnography.

G: *Why Tanka Prasad when there were so many other possibilities?*

F: These things just sort of happen accidentally, not according to a finely worked out plan. You accidentally meet certain people and not others, then

move in a certain direction rather than going somewhere else. It turned out to be a lucky series of accidents that I did this project in this way, since I was able to contribute something as an anthropologist, but also contribute to our understanding of the political history of Nepal. Tanka Prasad's full story had not been known before, at least not the way he saw it.

G: *Ok, can you now please briefly summarize the book?*

F: I would say this is the story of the relation of individual human beings and action to large, macro-scale movements like democracy in Nepal, government in Nepal, distribution of power in Nepal, the modernization of Nepal, the globalization of Nepal. So it's about that, and I think many things wouldn't have happened in Nepal had Tanka Prasad not taken the leadership role he did. He was President of Praja Parishad, the first democratic political party in Nepal. That's one point. The second point is to see that there's more to being a Brahman than automatically observing a hundred different dietary rules or worrying about pollution all the time.

The Brahmanical emphasis on the importance of education was fundamental, though, since Tanka Prasad read voraciously all his life. Without that intellectual curiosity he would not have become a political radical, determined to overthrow the autocratic and despotic Ranas. He definitely wanted a modern, democratic political system from the time he was a child. So for him, part of the meaning of Brahmanism had to do with social justice, and being politically active and responsible for promoting it. He also wanted to show that there was no contradiction between being a Brahman and undertaking an active, modern political life and fighting for social justice. It was he, after all, who led untouchables into Pashupatinath.

In one sense he was very traditional in his life; he was not anti-Brahman by any means, but he did not hesitate to make changes to tradition too. In a way his wife was a better example because she was a very observant Bahun, much more so than he was, but even she made changes. Formerly, she would not eat tomatoes or onions, and other foods, but while he was in prison, she came into contact with other political wives who ate other things, so she thought, "Well, my husband is in prison and he's eating what's available, so sitting on the outside, I'm going to eat other things too," regardless of caste rules.

G: *What kind of comments and reactions did you receive on Living Martyrs, as compared to your first book?*

F: You probably know more about that than I do. On the back cover of the book there are a couple of quotes from Indian journals and newspapers, which were positive (they wouldn't put them on the book cover if they weren't positive!). There was also one which didn't quite make the book cover, by Pratyoush Onta, which dismissed my work as the product of 'kuire ignorance,' a racist slur which was unique in my experience. As far as I know, other reactions have been positive. The book has been out of print for ten years now, so lots of people don't even know about it. One development I am really proud of, though, is that the book was translated into Nepali, and published as *Jyūḍā Śahīdharū* (Fisher 2000b). It was the first Western anthropology book translated, in its entirety, into Nepali. I was very gratified with this development since it meant that millions of Nepalis could now read the story of one of the heroes of the nation. Most Nepalis recognize his name, but know little else about him. Even one of Tanka Prasad's granddaughters said she picked up the book one evening and found it so fascinating she couldn't stop reading till she had finished it at dawn. While she was familiar with some of the material in scattered fashion, she said she had never known the whole story until it was assembled this way.

G: *Why do you think Onta's short Kathmandu Post op-ed commentary titled 'Against Kuire Worship' (Onta 1997) is offensive or, in your terms, a 'racist slur'? I read this piece and I also read the one in which you reacted to it some years later in the same newspaper (Fisher 2000a). Do you find the commentary itself problematic or are you just dissatisfied with the term he used, kuire?*

F: The commentary had little to say about the book and was mostly about the praise heaped upon it (and, by implication, on me, since I was the only *kuire* on the program) by the high officials assembled for the launch, including Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, who officially released it. Onta seemed offended at the attention paid to me (i.e., a *kuire*) as opposed to the neglect accorded Nepali scholars.

I take his point, although I don't see how I can be blamed for the reception I was given – did he expect me to denounce the Prime Minister on the spot? Moreover, he seemed to undercut his own point when he mentioned that the prestigious Madan Puraskar prize was awarded to a Nepali scholar Rajesh Gautam for his book on Tanka Prasad (Gautam 2046 v.s.) – not to me for my book! As far as the word *kuire* goes, my understanding is that it's a pejorative

term used for light-skinned, blue-eyed people. Sure, it's used innocently by village urchins to refer to Western trekkers, but it doesn't seem to be the kind of terminology intended to promote mutual respect or scholarly discourse.

I admit to all sorts of ignorance, but *kuire*? Perhaps I'm spoiled, since in The Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS) we pride ourselves in our attempt to build a strong, supportive, diverse, international, active, and tolerant scholarly community (which includes many Nepalis), where we all learn from each other. Onta apparently prefers a different, more divisive and destructive form of association. Well, to each his own. In my experience, going back some fifty years, no one I've known, Nepali or *bideśī*, thinks of Himalayan scholars as divided into two groups (well...maybe Heimendorf did), as Onta seems to. Those of privileged high class, high-caste origin still wield great power. My job is to speak truth to power – his. If not me, who? If not now, when?

G: *In our daily usage we simply use kuire to refer to foreigners. As you know during the sixties, when bideśīs flocked to Nepal, Nepali people perceived them differently in terms of culture and appearance. Many foreign anthropologists accept and call themselves bideśīs or kuire in their texts. If so, how can this word, which is accepted by all, be considered a racist slur?*

F: *Bideśīs* is a neutral term that can be used for any foreigner (including, for example, Indians), and those *bideśīs* who are melanin challenged (not Indians) might use the term *kuire* humorously among themselves, the way African-Americans might use the term *nigger* among themselves, but no white person uses it publically to refer to a black person. *Kuire* is not used 'simply' to refer to foreigners, which is why in your opening statement you referred to 'foreign scholars' rather than '*kuire* scholars.' *Kuire* is offensive because it's meant to sting – Onta's article was no joke. English has a rich vocabulary of insulting terms for 'others' (e.g., wop for Italians, kike for Jews), but none, surprisingly, that I can think of for Nepalis, so I'm unable to make the neat, parallel, mirror case. This is surely one of the very few instances where Nepalis are ahead of Americans in creating and using racist terminology. I'm sure Onta has something to teach us here.

G: *Have you gone through the popular book by historian Yogesh Raj History as Mindscapes: A Memory of the Peasants' Movement of Nepal (Raj 2010)?*

F: No, I know of Raj's high reputation as a scholar (as I know of Onta's), but I don't know this particular book.

G: *This book is about the life story of the peasant leader, Kṛṣṇabhakta Caguthi, locating him in time and in the role he played in the peasant's movement in Nepal. In the introductory section of this book Raj argues that*

James Fisher's otherwise well-worked volume on life-story of the ex-premier Tanka Prasād Ācārya provides scant information on the technique used in producing the text. From the scattered references to the method he followed, we know, for example, that the author firstly handed over a set of questions to the narrator before actual interviewing (Fisher 1997: 16) and that the interview was tape recorded.... When read with the examples given for narrator's autonomy in conversation, Fisher's assessment about his own role sounds modest. Unfortunately, he fails to discuss an outline of his technique, which could have helped others to establish their own methodologies in doing life-histories. (2010:14–15)

Do you agree or have anything to say about what he says?

F: I thank you for bringing this to my attention, and I think his critique has merit. My main defense would be that he too generously attributes scientific rigor to me when he says that I fail to discuss an outline of my "technique." Truth to tell, I never thought I had anything that I would dignify with the label "technique." I was far more pragmatic. My rule is: use anything that works. I shamelessly grabbed on to any seat-of-the-pants method available to get information, including sometimes asking family members to ask Tanka Prasad or Rewanta Kumari questions I did not seem to be able to successfully pose. I would defend that tactic to the extent that in the end it enhanced and clarified the narrative. Still, he's right that it would be useful to have well described methodologies that others could use or modify. I just don't think that I'm qualified to supply them. Methodologically, I'm out of my league here.

G: *How do you evaluate Tanka Prasad compared to other political figures of Nepal?*

F: I would say two things. One is that politically he was never very successful. Yes, he was prime minister, and he accomplished much as prime minister and in his struggle against the Ranas. But he never won an election, not even in his own district. Now, BP Koirala won and Ganesh Man Singh won; compared

with them, he was never successful in a populist sense. It is also true that he had a lot of political enemies, or at least opponents. What's interesting about this, though, and this is the second point, is that even his opponents all agreed that he was absolutely, uncompromisingly, incorruptibly honest. That can rarely be said of any politician, whether in Nepal or in any other country in the world. He deserves all credit for that.

One more point is that though he might not have been successful as a practicing politician, it was he who founded the first democratic political party in Nepal. They did not successfully overthrow the Ranas, but he scared them so much that they executed his friends (the Four Martyrs; the Ranas couldn't execute him because executing a Brahman would involve them in too much *pāp*). He remained true to his principals. He refused to leave the jail when released, after ten years imprisonment, unless his fellow political prisoners were also released.

He was very nationalistic. Other political leaders, like BP, Ganesh Man, and others, were products of India politically and educationally. Tanka Prasad always said he would never flee to India, even if it meant going to jail in Nepal. Again, he was not at all anti-Indian, he just wanted to be clear that he was firmly and irrevocably a Nepali, no matter what the consequences of that stance might mean for him. Other leaders respected him for that. Before BP went to New York for cancer treatment, he went to get *tikā* from Rewanta Kumari. So BP respected Tanka Prasad as a father, or elder brother, to him and others (within the household, he was referred to by all, including me, as Bua). It was a matter of belonging to different generations, and BP acknowledged that.

G: *Well, this book was translated into Nepali also (Fisher 2000b). Was it well distributed and did it reach the wider Nepali masses? Do you know how many copies were sold?*

F: I honestly don't know, about either the English or Nepali editions. His daughter, Meena Acharya, with Arvind Rimal as translator, organized the Nepali edition, but I didn't even know they had done that till she sent me a copy in the mail. I am told that the translation is extremely good. I told her to distribute copies to every member of the parliament, but I don't know if she was able to do that. I think translating it into Nepali was a very good idea because now most Nepalis can read it, although they would have to find a copy first.

G: *Your recent book, At Home in The World (Fisher 2013), is easily available now because of the Nepali publisher. Can you briefly say what this book is all about?*

F: The Peace Corps was perhaps President Kennedy's signature accomplishment. It was he who established it. He said America has to be part of the world, including what was then called the Third World, and that to understand it we have to go and live in it. We have to be a sympathetic audience for the rest of the world. Then, he said, when we Volunteers return to America, we need to help educate the rest of the country on what we've learned in these other countries. Among the 139 countries who have hosted the Peace Corps, Nepal was one of the first, and I happened to be in the first batch to come to Nepal. It was just a lucky accident of history for me – the right person in the right place at the right time. Furthermore, I call myself a packrat, which means if somebody hands me a note or article or document, I keep it. I store it away. I kept such things I got fifty years ago, and then found them in my files. I thought the founding of the Peace Corps in Nepal was an important event for both Nepal and the U.S., and as a member of the first group, with all sorts of documents (including my own extensive diary from those times) I was uniquely qualified to talk about all that. So I did.

Now, instead of focusing on the first group, I might have talked about the Ambassador or foreign policy or the Peace Corps bureaucracy or something else. But I thought it would be interesting to let other people – Nepalis and Americans – know what it was like to come here so long ago, when we were so naïve, not much educated about the country, and then show that it turned out to be a good idea. Lots of conservative people in America thought it was a terrible idea, but even they now agree that it worked out very well. No conservative politician has any objection to the Peace Corps now. Nepalis liked it. Americans liked it. Some countries, like India, later kicked the Peace Corps out because of some diplomatic disagreements, but nothing like that ever happened in Nepal. So if people want to know what America and Nepal were like in 1962, what Americans and Nepalis did, working together at the grassroots level, and what the Americans did in the following fifty years back in the U.S. when we were double agents (telling Americans about Nepal, after having told Nepalis about Americans), they can read about it. The two-way globalization process – that's basically what the book is about.

G: *All of your books were published outside Nepal, but this time your publisher was Himal Books from Nepal. Why did you decide to do that?*

F: Yes, my other books were published in the U.S. by University of California Press, and by Oxford University Press in Delhi. *At Home in the World* was first published by Orchid Press in Bangkok, as part of their Bibliotheca Himalayica series, and then reprinted by Himal Books.

G: *If it had already been published from Bangkok, why again from Nepal?*

F: I wanted Nepalis to be able to afford to buy the book. To give you a comparative example: in the U.S. the book costs twenty five dollars in a book store, but in Nepal it's only six dollars (NRs. 590). There's a world of difference between six dollars and twenty five dollars. This way Nepalis can read it. And the great thing about it for me is the quality of the Nepal edition. It's identical to the Bangkok edition in quality – of the print, the ink, the paper, photos and binding – everything. You have world class publishing here, which is something to be very proud of, especially when you compare it to how publishing was done here only a few decades ago. It was abysmal.

G: *Are globalization and Peace Corps separate entities? Don't you think the Peace Corps itself is a manifestation of globalization, since it belongs to America?*

F: Yes, the Peace Corps is certainly a part of this worldwide globalization, but it is a two-way process, because we were globalized by Nepalis. Then, having been globalized, we helped globalize the U.S., moving it away from its provincialism. There are thousands of examples of globalization going on, not only economically, but also culturally, socially, and even individually. I also said in the book that we as Peace Corps Volunteers were unaware of any of this. First of all, nobody talked about globalization; we didn't think about it and we didn't realize it was going on, or that we were part of it. Only now, looking back, can we see that that's what was happening. This process was starting and the Peace Corps was a good example of it.

G: *Was the recruitment of volunteers, including you, based on humanitarian or political grounds?*

F: Both. I would say that from the individual point of view it was very clear that some of us were motivated by adventure, others wanted to do good by answering 'Kennedy's call,' others wanted to see the world, some just wanted

a job. From a political point of view (Kennedy's point of view), it was important in the sense that since ours is a very parochial country – for example, unlike Nepal, we are essentially a monolingual country – we needed to expand our political expertise. We live very far from any other country, other than Mexico, since Canada is almost the same, culturally, as the U.S. We are very far removed from Asian, African, and European countries. If we are going to exist in the world Americans have to learn about it, and what better way to do this than to send Peace Corps Volunteers, which cost practically nothing. So, send them out to the world, to countries like Nepal and India and even China, which has Peace Corps Volunteers now, whereas formerly we were bitter enemies. Politically it's good for Americans to be in these countries, and each country benefits. To get to know each other, learn each other's languages – only good can come from that. No one's motive was political in the modern sense of "political," involving parties; I would say motivation was political only in the special, globalization sense.

G: *Now let me ask about sociology/anthropology in Nepal. As you know the discipline was formally institutionalized in Tribhuvan University (TU) in 1981. You received a Fulbright 'Senior Lectureship' grant for two years (1984–1986) at TU. Did the university or any member of the Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology (CDSA) invite you, or did you apply for this grant personally?*

F: I had stayed in touch over the years with Nepali intellectuals and those interested in anthropology, and none more than Nepal's first anthropologist, Dor Bahadur Bista. I owe more to Dor Bahadur, both personally and professionally, than I can say. My life would not have been what it is without him. So when he was playing an instrumental role (along with Chaitanya Mishra) in the establishment of CDSA, we talked about the possibility of my coming to lend a hand to this new enterprise. I was wildly enthusiastic about doing so. The Fulbright Commission had a program to fill such needs. Dor Bahadur applied for the grant and, when he got it, asked me to take the job.

G: *How or in what way did you contribute to the recently opened department in TU? How did you see your role at CDSA then?*

F: To begin with, I was a regular lecturer teaching papers (what we call courses) there. But I was also part of discussions about the curriculum. These were not just technical questions about numbers of credits, but about

what anthropology in Nepal should be. Dor Bahadur felt strongly that anthropology in Nepal shouldn't just be a carbon copy of anthropology in the West; rather, it should be bent to the needs of Nepal. That meant that we should emphasize certain approaches, to development, for example, rather than, let's say, the cerebral, French rationalist approach of Claude Lévi-Strauss, which was all the rage then.

G: *Did you teach or develop any specific courses in the department? Who were your students? Were you happy with the way the department was functioning? Was there any kind of conflict among the faculty members? Among several, the one I have heard is that there were some members who advocated for separate departments of sociology and anthropology, whereas others were adamant that they should not be separated. Do you know about this or any other disputes?*

F: My recollection is that I taught anthropological theory and probably some sort of introductory course and also a course on Nepal. The students were just whoever had applied and been accepted. As with any student body, some were extremely interested in the material, others were quite indifferent to it and studying it only because they wanted an M.A. after their name. One problem is that for practical purposes there were no usable faculty offices, so no productive scholarship could be accomplished in Kirtipur. Instead, when we didn't have classes, we would sit outside and chat in the sun. (We called it *ghām tāpni*, because the offices were so cold and miserable no one ever used them, and most of us didn't even have one.) That was fun but it didn't build a cohesive intellectual unit. Another problem, of course, is that often classes didn't meet at all, because of holidays or, more commonly, strikes. Since my own department at Carleton is a joint one, combining anthropology and sociology, it seemed natural to me to follow a similar intellectual organization at TU. I think the two disciplines are in many ways complementary. Anthropology tends to ask big questions not very rigorously, while Sociology pursues smaller issues with more methodological precision. I think dialogue between them can result in much enhanced and broader perspectives. As for arguments about this at the time, I don't have any solid memories about it. People may have had their own views on it, but everyone seemed content to let things slide along the way they were for a while. I think we regarded ourselves as lucky to have a department at all.

G: *In a book launch of your newly released book, the sociologist Chaitanya Mishra explicitly called you the father of the journal Occasional Papers of Sociology and Anthropology, published by the CDSA. What do you say about that? What and how did you contribute to the creation of that journal?*

F: Oh! First of all, it's very flattering to be described that way, but it's an exaggeration. The CDSA had just gotten started when I was here, under Chaitanya Mishra's leadership. I remember thinking that my colleagues at the university were a little intellectually isolated after leaving graduate school, and some had not yet pursued an advanced degree. They needed to be producing some research or engaged in scholarly activity, but there weren't many opportunities to do that in Nepal. I thought, well, here we have a new institution, a Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology, in a country for which that is a novel creation, and there are trained people there, so it just seemed sensible for the Department to have some support from the University for funding or for whatever it makes sense to have, such as a journal. I don't remember the exact chain of events but I guess I suggested that, and everybody thought it was a good idea. Then they asked me to edit the first volume, and I said, "Ok, if I can help in that way, no reason not to."

G: *Are you still affiliated with the CDSA in Kirtipur?*

F: When I left in 1986 there was an organization called SASON (Sociology and Anthropology Society of Nepal). I was elected to its board at the time. I wasn't going to be here physically, so it wasn't essential that I know day-to-day details about everything. I was just an interested and concerned external observer. Whenever I come to Nepal the Department asks me to provide a guest lecture, which I've felt honored to give. Some of the senior faculty now were graduate students in the '80s when I was here. It is gratifying to see the progress that they have made. So, affiliated? No. Informally engaged? Yes.

G: *What were the debates about the future of anthropology of Nepal at CDSA then?*

F: Pretty much what they still are: joint vs. separate departments, direction and content of the curriculum, how to recruit good students, how to produce more and better scholarship. The impressive thing is that, regardless of different opinions about issues growing out of different academic and

personal backgrounds, everyone more or less got along and supported the departmental consensus, whatever that was.

G: *How do you see Nepali social science changing? Where do you think its heading?*

F: When we arrived here in 1962, I can't say there was any social science in the modern sense. There were traditional scholars, but no university. I've heard it said that Tribhuvan University was founded in 1959 but that doesn't mean that there was any physical presence in Kirtipur. There was certainly no sociology or anthropology. Gopal Singh Nepali got his Ph.D. from India and then taught in India the rest of his life, so he wasn't here either. Except for the occasional very odd example like that (since he was in absentia), there wasn't any academic social science, although there were brilliant private practitioners, like Dor Bahadur Bista and Harka Gurung.

There might have been economists. I wouldn't have known if there were or not. I can only really speak from my own experience as an anthropologist. Before 1984, several people in CDSA had been trained abroad, in India or elsewhere. Again, when I think back to 1984–86, no graduates had been produced but the department was starting, and it's been thirty years now. The CDSA is recognized as a growing concern. You have hundreds of students, the most popular department at TU, I'm told. You have turned out lots of M.A.s, M.Phil.s and even Ph.D.s. The graduates are now teaching at different colleges all over the country. It has spread remarkably fast. Now, I can't tell exactly about the quality of the students or curriculum, but at least it's there, it's a presence. As for the future, if the department continues to be popular I guess it will just keep on growing, perhaps even splitting into two separate departments.

Then you have the problem of what those students will do for jobs. Already there are alternative jobs, not necessarily as sociologists or anthropologists. There are some jobs or positions with development organizations. They will pay hugely, probably, by comparison with other possibilities, so you have to be careful not to sell your soul to the development world, because they have their own agenda. Hard core social science academicians are few in Nepal.

I think social science is going in the right direction in Nepal. Social scientists are contributing, critically, to development research within the country, both guiding it and executing it. There are many Nepali social

scientists who have made their mark on the wider world of social science, and some have emigrated to foreign countries. They represent a loss to Nepal, but they are a force to contend with in many international conferences. They help keep Nepal on the intellectual map.

G: *What is your immediate research interest? What other thematic changes have occurred in your research in the meantime? How do you explain the changes that have occurred in your research focus?*

F: My research focus at the moment is to finish a book that deals with forty plus years of change in Dolpa. For that I will rely on what I wrote before, plus what I learned two years ago when I returned to Dolpa. I also want to do something similar with the Sherpa book. Those are immediate interests. Another derives from the fact that I grew up in a southern, segregated American town where African-Americans were not even allowed to go to the movies. Our school system was not integrated until 1956, when I was a junior in high school, and the black students started coming to the white high school. By now it's been integrated for almost sixty years, but I was always fascinated to know how people adapted to that. At the time nobody objected, but I wanted to ask the people of my age if they had stories or memories from those years, or black people they knew or anything like that. I've interviewed several people with fascinating stories, and that's something I want to work on. I hope someone does something like that with Dalits in Nepal, since the situations are remarkably similar. Social science always needs to speak truth to power.

Theoretically, my Ph.D. was more concerned with the ideas of Fredrick Barth – not that I imitated him, but I was influenced by the way he thought about things. Nowadays I am more interested in Bourdieu, ideas about globalization, and I also continue to find interesting bits in Geertz and others. So I am always interested in following and participating in new developments in the theoretical world.

Some anthropological movements come like a tidal wave in the ocean and then just as quickly they're gone – like a Tsunami. People get very excited about something, and then a few years later no one has heard of it. If I read somebody who puts things in a novel way, not quite thought of before, then I make a mental note and think whether I could use that in my own work. I took the example of globalization and applied it to the Peace Corps, which

had not been systematically done before. The concept was not new, but the application was.

G: *Are you retired now?*

F: Yes, I retired from Carleton in 2009, when I was sixty-nine. Then I spent a year helping start a new college in Bhutan and retired from that when I was seventy. I don't want to pretend that Bhutan wasn't a job, since it was much harder than Carleton. For one thing I was teaching things I didn't know anything about, like demography, so I had to work very hard to master the material myself. They didn't pay me very much, but I wasn't there for the money; it was more in the spirit of the Peace Corps. (In fact, no one practices anthropology for the money; if money is your main goal, you go into business.) It was a wonderful year since I had been trying to get to Bhutan for forty-five years. I had always objected to the exorbitant prices they charged for their visas, so I took pleasure in the irony that in the end, rather than my paying anything at all, they bought my plane ticket and paid me to live there.

G: *Do you plan to do any more work related to Nepal?*

F: Yes. Now that I am retired from Carleton, I realize how demanding it was being there – intellectually stimulating, but also demanding, and now I am getting things done like *At Home in The World* and, before that, my Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture. I had been working on *At Home in the World* for a long time but I did it in little pieces which was frustrating because I wanted to get that monkey off my back. So, once I was through with Bhutan (where I edited a book on research by my students), I was able to finish *At Home in the World*. In a humbling and more than metaphorical sense, I had been working on that book for fifty years.

I'm also working on the Dolpa project. For more than forty years I wanted to go back to Dolpa, but I never did, not because I didn't want to, but because so many other interests and obligations kept cropping up – such as the Sherpas and Tanka Prasad and working at Tribhuvan University. But now I am working on a 'Forty-Two Years Later' book, which should be out in the next year, and I want to follow that with a similar effort on the Sherpas book. My interest in these subjects has not decreased at all; in fact it has increased. I've also toyed with doing some work on Nepali humor and have collected some material (extremely funny!) on that, but I haven't done anything with it yet.

G: *I think we have to finish now; would you like to add anything more?*

F: I would just say that you have interrogated me so effectively that you have drawn out of me things I have forgotten for decades and had no memory of. But now, sitting here with you, I begin to think of things lost to memory, and I appreciate your probing and sensitive questions.

G: Thank you, Professor. It's wonderful talking with you.

F: It's been a real pleasure for me too.

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Biographical Note

Gaurab KC holds a master's degree in Anthropology from Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur. He has been affiliated with Martin Chautari, Kathmandu as a researcher. His research interests include migration, media, intellectual biography, disciplinary history, and the urban informal economy. His work on migration entitled *Kamaune: The Cultural and Economic Imaginaries of Migration* (2014) has been recently published from the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM). Email: gauravdoti@gmail.com