Nicholas J. Allen

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

As a schoolboy I studied Latin and Greek. I then went to Oxford in 1957 to study medicine. After the premedical course I did research in neurophysiology (1960-1), before proceeding to St Mary's Hospital in London for the clinical part of the medical course. Eventually I held three six-month jobs as a junior hospital doctor. I then moved into anthropology (returning to Oxford in 1965), because I was looking for an academic job which combined or straddled my arts interests at school and my science interests at University, and one that preferably involved traveling. When I began studying anthropology as a postgraduate in 1965, I had no definite idea about where I might undertake fieldwork. However, I had a well-established interest in mountaineering and was therefore attracted towards the Himalayas, about which I had read a bit, but which I had not yet visited. I also wanted the 'classical' anthropological experience of getting to know a society that was 'tribal' in the sense of traditionally non-literate. Thirdly, I had an interest in ancient languages, and preferred an area where, in the long term, I might have occasion to study a language with a long literary history, a preference which made, for instance, Africa or Oceania less attractive than South Asia. More generally, my family had old connections with the British Raj, and my supervisor Rodney Needham, later Professor at Oxford, encouraged me to choose Nepal partly because he himself had been a Gurkha during the Second World War.

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

Professor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) had organised funding for a project on 'Social Change in Rural Nepal', and I was able to participate in this, studying

among the Thulung Rai (fieldwork during 1969-1971, details of which are described in my 2000 article). I think Fürer-Haimendorf had suggested the Rai since so little ethnography had been published on them. I chose the Thulung partly because the linguist Robert Shafer had expressed the view that their language was particularly archaic and would hence be particularly worth studying. I chose Mukli village as my main base since it was generally held to be the 'original' Thulung village.

My eventual thesis (Allen 1976) was more concerned with characterising the older stratum of the regional culture than with change as such. Professor Fürer-Haimendorf's interest in Nepal was certainly important in a practical sense, though my theoretical orientation was rather different from his. I was more interested than he was in languages, language families, history and anthropological theory.

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

My main research focus ceased to be on Nepal during the 1980s, when I became more interested in (a) the world-history of kinship terminologies, (b) the history of French anthropological thought (with special focus on Durkheim's nephew, Marcel Mauss), (c) Indo-European cultural comparativism. The changes were partly due to my teaching obligations (South Asia in general, not Himalayas as such); partly to a not very successful stint of fieldwork in the Western Himalayas early in that decade; above all to my estimate of where I could make the most significant contribution to knowledge. I do not think that either theoretical shifts in my discipline or changes in Nepal were relevant. The reason for undertaking fieldwork outside Nepal was partly that Nepalese Studies tend to be marginalised within the field of South Asian Studies, partly that at the time I saw myself as trying to build up Tibeto-Burman cultural comparativism. My work on comparative mythology within the Himalayas, mostly among Tibeto-Burman speakers, formed a good basis for my later work on comparative mythology among the Indo-European speakers. In this latter work I have been following up, and (I hope) improving on the work of Georges Dumézil. Though I visited the subcontinent a number of times, I did no further fieldwork after 1983. More details about my career can be found in an autobiographical essay (2003) that has just been published in *Ethnos* under its 'Key Informants on the History of Anthropology' forum.

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

Since 1976 I have operated from a department of Social Anthropology (later Social and Cultural Anthropology) at the University of Oxford. For much of the quarter-century I was the only social anthropologist at Oxford with interests specifically in South Asia. Later I was joined by Marcus Banks, who had worked on Jains in West India. Of course Oxford contained numerous specialists from other disciplines who worked on South Asia, and I interacted with these individuals both in the Interfaculty Committee for South Asian Studies and informally in other ways. But I regarded myself more as an anthropologist than a South Asianist.

Do you teach and if so, at what levels? What kinds of courses do you teach (or have taught in the past) and what Nepal-related content are included in those courses?
I retired in 2001, having taught mostly at post-graduate level (but also some undergraduates (a) in Archaeology and Anthropology and (b) in Human Sciences). Apart from covering Social Anthropology in general at an introductory level, I offered an optional course on South Asia. In practice this course focused on caste and Hinduism, with Nepal-related matter only accounting for quite a small part (say 10%). I also supervised some students who studied Nepal. These included Christian McDonaugh, Monica Connell, Graham Clarke, Christine Daniels, Charles Ramble, and Andrew Russell. In all cases I would have discussed their research topic, but cannot say how much influence I had on the research choices they made. I also gave tutorials to David Gellner and Casper Miller, but did not supervise their research.

Where have you published your Nepal-related books, articles and essays?
The list is given at the end of this text. Those interested in my publications on other topics, including Indo-European cultural comparativism, might consult my full bibliography available at http://www.rsl.ox.ac.uk/isca/njapub.html

Do you still converse productively with colleagues doing research related to Nepal? If so, how?
Seldom, nowadays, and mostly face-to-face in Oxford. In the 1970s and (less so) the 80s I went to a good number of conferences and corresponded a good deal with other anthropologists. After he arrived in Oxford (early '80s) my main local colleague in Nepal Studies was the Tibetologist Michael Aris. Later I also saw a good deal of David Gellner, who lives in Oxford, and of Charles Ramble. When I was active in the field I met most of the European Nepal specialists, particularly French and German (e.g., András Höfer at Heidelberg), and a certain number of Americans.

What institutional and human resources were available to you as a graduate student?
Library resources at Oxford were good, though there were no local specialists in Nepal. To study Nepali I attended classes at SOAS with Thomas Clark and a native Nepali speaker whose last name was Baral. Thulung I studied via Nepali in Nepal, analysing the phonology and grammar and compiling a dictionary. As mentioned above, my doctoral research supervisor at Oxford was Rodney Needham. My other teachers there included Professor Evans-Pritchard and David Pocock.

What kinds of funds were available for your graduate studies and for field research in Nepal as well as for the final write-up of your dissertation? What are the institutional and funding resources in the UK that made it possible for you to continue your research?
For a pre-fieldwork BLitt I was funded by the Nuffield Foundation. For fieldwork I was funded by the Social Science Research Council on the project directed by Professor Fürer-Haimendorf, as was mentioned earlier. I did not subsequently visit Nepal. Funding for research in Kinnaur (in Himachal Pradesh, India) was also from the same body, by then renamed the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), and in part also from Oxford University. I have not kept any figures.

Several people have referred to the above mentioned Fürer-Haimendorf coordinated project (in which you were a participant) as the only attempt in the history of British anthropological research related to Nepal where something like a group research effort was conceptualized and executed. Is that in fact the case?
I think Fürer-Haimendorf envisaged the project primarily as a way to increase ethnographic knowledge of Nepal. The funding was from the SSRC (Social Science Research Council). The other participants were Barbara Aziz, Patricia Caplan, Alan Macfarlane (who is still at Cambridge), and Fürer-Haimendorf himself. Being part of a project may have helped us to study Nepali: I attended language classes at SOAS together with Pat Caplan and Alan Macfarlane. There was also a post-fieldwork conference, resulting in a volume of papers (Fürer-Haimendorf 1974).

Michael Aris, Sandy Macdonald and myself applied for money from a joint Franco-British source during the 1980s, but we were not successful. I do not know of other joint projects, but they may have existed.

What was the job market like for you when you finished your DPhil? How many times did you change jobs since your first post-PhD appointment?

I was employed as University Lecturer in Anthropology for nearly four years at Durham University (in the north of England, 1972-6), before returning to Oxford. Getting a job was not difficult in 1972. British Universities were expanding at that time, and posts were not in very short supply, as they came to be only a few years later. I had only one change of job. The Oxford job was effectively tenured and as I enjoyed it I never applied elsewhere. I retired in 2001.

Is a new generation of Nepal researchers being produced in the UK? If so, how is the next generation being mentored in the field?
Yes, but others can answer this question better than I can. At Oxford the outlook is very healthy. Charles Ramble, a former student of mine, is now Lecturer in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, and David Gellner, a long-term friend and colleague, is to be my successor. Clare Harris, the specialist on Tibetan art, teaches at the Pitt Rivers Museum and Magdalen College.

Are the conditions of their recruitment different from the time when you entered the field?
One major change is that students are now put under great pressure to complete their doctoral theses within four years. I think this change of pressure came into effect in the late 1980s but such tedious administrative matters are not the sort of thing I remember well. I spent twenty-two months in Nepal and I was registered for seven years before I submitted my DPhil; I am extremely grateful not to have been hassled at that time. Pay for University teachers relative to that for comparable jobs has declined markedly over the last thirty years, and the pressures of a teaching job, if obtainable at all, are much greater than they were at the start of my career.

Did you communicate about your research with the national public at large in the UK? If so, how do you do it and how often?
I have never done this.

What is the relationship between your current or past research and discussions in the various Nepali public spheres? Do you find that there is a tension between representing Nepal to your colleagues in the UK and making your research theme and conclusions 'relevant' and accessible for discussions in Nepali society?
My work has been essentially academic, and I doubt if it has been much discussed in Nepalese public spheres. At the time when I was active I was not much aware of the tension you mention.

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

I am no longer in a good position to comment on this. The marginalisation of Nepal Studies relative to South Asian Studies continues (I think), and in India as much as in the UK.

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[1] BSOAS = Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies. JASO = Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford. JRAI = Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute. JRAS = Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society. TLS = Times Literary Supplement.

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