

## **A Covenant with Nepal? Ethics and ethnography during the People's War**

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During my undergraduate education a professor asked our unsuspecting class what would we do if informants asked us to take up arms and help fight their enemies. Never having thought of the possibility, and certainly not having seen mention of such things in our texts, and being naïve and unimaginative, we stared blankly. "Well," he said, "then you've not asked yourselves the big questions." Most of us can avoid such questions in our careers, and may easily avoid the issues, frequently with much approval from our colleagues.

In 1993, as I prepared to leave Nepal after three years, some acquaintances asked me to help prepare for armed resistance to the Nepali state, outlining a plan that closely follows how the People's War has unfolded (although "Maoism" as such was not mentioned). I declined their request. Discussing this with colleagues led to mixed reactions: although no-one thought I should have helped, or at least no-one said so openly, there were differences of opinion about what to do with that information.

As I plan to travel to Nepal right now, my colleagues (at the university where I teach in Canada) respond to knowledge of the Nepal situation in a more consistent way and ask "Isn't it dangerous?", "Aren't you putting yourself in harm's way?", and "Couldn't you just hold off and do your project (on children and tourism) a bit later, when this mess has all blown over?"

Though separated by nine years I face much the same intellectual and ethical questions in both cases. How do we answer "the big questions" in all their variations and forms? How do we deal with the bits of information we all surely have from our time in "Shangri-la" or "the Zone of Peace"? How do we plan and publish our research in a way that does justice to the realities of life as we find it in Nepal? And what are our obligations to the people we write about and how do those complement or conflict with the professional demands of our disciplines? In part we make decisions based on our own conscience; in part we make them according to the norms of our disciplines and professions. In this paper I make one suggestion to be considered when we ask such questions, as we all might today, as Nepal sits on the edge of an uncertain future in these times of rapid change.

As a way of shifting our perspective we might consider the relationship we have with Nepal and Nepalis as a form of covenant. The word "covenant" might ward off many readers as it harkens to biblical covenant and implies a moral bond and obligation that is, for those happy to abide by more secular-sounding codes, foreign to their conceptions of professional life. For all the recent talk in anthropology (to take as an example the discipline I work in) about representation, dialogue, "paying

back your informants”, sharing authorship, and acknowledging who “owns” knowledge, it should be noted that these modern discourses within western academic institutions draw from parallels with current, more secular, “politically correct” issues such as the evils of colonialism, imperialism, and hierarchical views of humanity; they also function within the demands of highly professionalized and institutionalized vocations, as academic careers are these days, where people are generally praised for taking these stances.

The mention of the word “covenant” also evokes its antithesis, the contract, and it is between these views of human/professional relationships that we all sit, at different distances from the two extremes. The nature of the particular contracts we implicitly hold, and covenants we might conceive of, will of course be diverse, and clearly quite different for foreign scholars and for Nepali scholars. Nonetheless, the suggestion I make here is that we consider where we sit between these extremes and think about what to do today as scholars of Nepal, by recognizing where we sit and perhaps sliding a little towards the end of covenant, and away from contracts (in the various forms we hold them) .

In *The Physician’s Covenant* William May questions how the medical profession got to where it is today, with the ideals of the Hippocratic oath being displaced by the emergence of medical corporations and changing professional demands, leaving a situation that might often just as well be served by a “Hippocritical” oath. In this world, the situation between patient and doctor is ruled by contract: payment for services received. May presents an alternative and advocates that physicians see themselves as indebted. His ideal physician is not a benefactor, or philanthropist: he is paying back a debt formed in a covenant. The doctor learns his trade through “practice”: although fully accredited physicians continue to say they “practice” medicine, they learnt the skills that led to accreditation through – quite literally – *practicing* on sick people. Having learnt through practice on some, a physician is then, in May’s view, bound in covenant to help others in order to repay a diffuse and enduring debt.

So considering the possibility of a covenant with Nepal, what of the two situations in my research that I describe above? The first, in which I was asked to help people attain the material and training for home-made explosives for the People’s War, was – to say the least – tricky. While many of us justifiably talked about “writing ethnography in the Janajati-yug” (Des Chenes 1996) there was in fact in the background the question of how long this “yug” with its dominant concern would last for those feeling frustration from injustices of the past. Mikesell (1993) and Nickson (1992) suggested Nepal might have a Shining Path in the making and some of us – myself and any other foreigners who were surely asked to help, and very possibly some Nepali scholars – knew that plans were already solidifying and recruits were signing up. Some of us – by chance or interest – knew enough about the people and situation to write about it, and possibly redirect the focus of public (and academic) debate about the emerging situation which at that point many thought

unlikely. But there were of course the concerns of the ethical injunction we share with physicians to “do no harm” to the people we work with and for. For published scholarship to be meaningful there would have had to be enough detail to make the people in it uncomfortably recognizable. There was also the concern to “do no harm” to myself: it had been made clear that I was not to cross these people requesting my help. “Should I write about this?”, I asked an anthropologist colleague in Nepal: he questioned my concern and reassured me that their dreams of resistance would go nowhere, and that if I did write about it, they certainly wouldn’t track me down to Ithaca, New York, where I was soon heading. Still asking this question in November 2001, with my article providing the context of the request by the proto-Maobadi finally written, numerous colleagues – themselves very concerned about the developing situation in Nepal agreed that the time was so long passed and the situation so changed that I could write without endangering the people involved who were now, in any case, possibly some place else, possibly fighting – and perhaps dying – for the People’s War. Then things changed with the State of Emergency and the anti-terrorist ordinance: who was I to write anything that pointed in any way to anyone who by current law could be arrested and held, and “questioned for intelligence” on the mere suspicion that they might sympathize with the Maoist cause?

As I prepare to leave for Nepal now, with – finally – funds to support a project that I’ve been wanting to do for at least a decade, new questions loom about ethnography in the Post-State of Emergency-Yug. Nepalis, Nepali scholars, and foreign scholars in touch with Nepalis who talk about the present state of their lives, talk of widespread fear, generalized distrust, a societal closing in, and a very uncertain future. The human rights organization INSEC (Informal Sector Service Centre) and Amnesty International (AI) publish highly disturbing reports of killings and violations of human rights. And the suggestions come quickly from others, and from myself: “Why don’t you wait a while?”, “Why not do some other work somewhere else?”, and “Why not move your fieldsite altogether..Nepal might be no good for “normal” research for quite awhile yet?”

In the background of my questioning what to do both with the 1993 material/situation and with my current plans, looms the persistent shadow of self-interest. I am in a profession the norms of which put a very high premium on publishing and on publishing new material: offering a viewpoint off-center from the current focus, yet well documented (as was my information about the situation in 1993) would be approved of. I work in a world of contracts: contracts with the organizations (and taxpayers) who supported my research and have given me the funds to do a project beginning this month; I have a contract with my employer that requires that I publish (or perish). The impetus now is very much to “go somewhere else” or “wait till this all blows over... then go do it, or relocate the project.” Or I could, I tell myself, go to Nepal and do something really benign (but very interesting to me): the

granting agency will certainly understand, and it can all be explained in terms of ethics, by the standards of any official ethical code that I know of in my profession.

Or I could do what I suggest in this paper and that is to slide over even just a little on the scale between “contract” and “covenant”. Like a physician who needs to train, most of us have “practiced” in Nepal, although in different ways: different kinds of research require different kinds of skills, and the situation of Nepali scholars is clearly different from that of foreign scholars. Nonetheless, many theses and books thank people for their patience with ineptness, folly, and other perhaps tiresome shortcomings. Practice has by no means made perfect – certainly not in my case anyway – but I have my accreditation, my Ph.D., my professional qualification that lets me practice without supervision (aside from ever-present ethical standards). I could now even charge people who have offered to hire me – on contract – for my skills: I could be working now – being paid – to work on projects to help *bikās* along a bit in Nepal.

But thinking of my relationship with Nepal and Nepalis as based even in some small degree on covenant, the situation looks a bit different. In this light I have a debt. Perhaps the demands of my career, and the norms of my profession which demand a certain amount of “profit” from salary and grants (in the form of a fairly quick supply of articles and “results”) and, for which I am given credit (tenure, promotion, further grants), are to some degree incommensurate with my covenant, and must be compromised (if only to a modest degree).

We have choices and this is what I suggest we all consider more broadly. Who knows what is really happening throughout Nepal today? Yet, despite the news blackout we have the reports of AI and INSEC. We know that people who see themselves as supporters of democracy (of the Congress Party sort) are targeted by Maoists for their convictions. We have a pretty clear indication of the real possibility of human right violations of the most grievous kind being perpetuated by the army and the Maoists. Villagers’ (and most of us know quite a few of these) lives are often governed these days by concerns that go well beyond most of our research interests. Most of us can see that “both sides have a point” and “the average Nepali is caught in the middle,” sometimes by a bullet, and sometimes simply for joining a movement in order to “eat rice” when there were few if any alternatives. With the war in Afghanistan, the ongoing threat of (perhaps even nuclear) war in Pakistan and India, and escalating violence in the middle east, Nepal is virtually forgotten as Prime Minister Deuba makes deals for “non-combat military aid” with George Bush and Tony Blair. For some of us, the questions and trajectory of our research might directly take us to considering the Maoist situation. Those inspired by the Frankfurt school would have the rest of us change our research to address the situation (as they advocated with the growth of Nazism in Europe). But the rest of us, whatever our specialty, have another option and that is to honour a covenant bound in debt by using our credentials and/or status – which gives us voice which most Nepalis (whether they are the citizens of the country we do research in, or are our fellow-

citizens) don't have – to let their situation and concerns be known. This can be through our scholarly work (for example, Pettigrew (forthcoming), and in her present work on medical care during the People's War), letting the complexities of the situation be known beyond Nepal (especially if our government is offering military support to Nepal). Or we can simply say, as we plan our new projects, "Nepal isn't like it was anymore" and frame our questions in terms that reflect the present context of peoples' lives. To do this we might – like the physician May praises – have to go without "pay": to effectively speak for those who can't – without endangering them, or ourselves (particularly if we are Nepali) – we may have to write anonymously, and devote "research" time to organizations like AI, and helping the refugees that surely will soon be coming to many of our countries.

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