Repeated returns and special friends: from mythic first encounter to endless historical change

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This is a draft of a contribution to a collection, edited by Signe Howell and Aud Talle, on long-term fieldwork among indigenous (small-scale, peripheral) societies. These kinds of community, an old mainstay of anthropology, have been particularly drastically affected in recent decades by the expansion of the state and of surrounding majority populations. Tooldest living inhabitant of the book, Terry Turner, can claim more than 40 years with the Kayapó). This gives a distinctive perspective, which my students have found revealing in unexpected ways. But one of them wondered whether I might be falling into the kind of teleological meta-narrative of modernity denounced by Leach and Englund in their CA article of 2000. I would welcome advice on this and any other points which occur to you.

The background ethnography of the two locations is given in my books "Dialogues with the dead: the discussion of mortality among the Sora of eastern India" (Cambridge UP 1993) and "The reindeer people: living with animals and spirits in Siberia" (Houghton Mifflin 2005). The most recent change among the Sora is explored in my article "Loving and forgetting: moments of inarticulacy in tribal India" (JRAI 2008: also circulated, though it is the present paper which I am mainly offering for discussion at this seminar).

The baseline moment

What can we know about societies far removed from ourselves? For many small-scale, non-literate societies, the main or only substantial source will be an ethnography written by an anthropologist. Yet ethnographies date quickly, and the educated grandchildren of the people featured may have difficulty believing or even understanding a thirty-year-old work.

Evans-Prichard's trilogy on the Nuer contains its own closure, because the fieldwork came to an end - indeed, was over before most of the writing. But Sharon Hutchinson's re-study of the Nuer (200x) does not simply offer us the same people later in time. This is not only because the Nuer's life has changed (sadly), or because anthropology has changed (no longer functionalist), but because we are meeting the people through a new experiencer.

But in this age of mass aviation, anthropologists can do what E-P's generation could not easily do: they can go back. How can we evaluate the anthropologist's own later account of how those people have changed? And how far is this account influenced by changes in the anthropologist's own self? I shall suggest that the returning anthropologist can experience more than one kind of time-jolt, and shall ask how these colour his or her understanding of those changes.

Though historical time is without beginning or end, one's own insertion into it, the intersection of time and self, creates an impression of a baseline. This baseline serves as a lifelong ethnographic present against which we measure our notions and experiences of 'change.' This is the anthropologist's original ethnographic present, which linguistically and

stylistically (Fabian) appears to refer to the people being described, but are just as much about the anthropologist and the moment of their first encountered.

For some anthropologists, the emotional intensity of their first fieldwork can tinge this baseline with a magical aura. Looking back, the irrevocable pastness of this experience combines with this magic to create something mythic, as something which happened in illo tempore (Eliade). This makes it hard to avoid a sense of this baseline as a pivotal or axial age. If ever there was a time when personal and historical baselines coincided, this was surely (by a happy coincidence) around the time of our first youthful fieldwork in the 1970s.

But what if you have worked in two very different locations, and have two widely separated baselines? How does this influence your placing of each location in a wider understanding of history?

I first reached the Sora, one of the many so-called 'tribal' peoples of central and eastern India, in 1975. I found a rugged people clad only in loincloths or wrap-around skirts living in dense jungle, their artefacts sharing the colour of the earth or dried vegetation from which they were made. These people practised the most elaborate form of communication between the living and the dead ever documented anywhere in the world. The dead would speak through female shamans in trance, and together, living and dead would spend years engaging in dialogue to articulate the unspoken emotional needs of both sides and resolve interpersonal tensions. They would then confirm this resolution by recycling the names of the dead into their new-born descendants. I analysed the narratives, metaphors and emotions of these dialogues to reveal a distinctive 'tribal' (non-Hindu) cosmology, morality and sense of the person, all of which were characterised in this non-literate society by fluid, open-ended negotiation.

My interest in shamanism later took me to Siberia, where I have worked since 1988 among the Eveny, one of the many semi-nomadic reindeer-herding peoples of the Siberian Arctic. The word 'shaman' originated from their language, and though most shamans had been exterminated by the Communists the people still lived on a landscape suffused with spirits. They moved around a huge jagged mountain range, camping along clear rushing, stony rivers, riding on the backs of their reindeer in summer and on sledges in winter. I arrived at the moment of the reform called perestroika, three to four generations after the start of the Soviet regime and in time to witness the end of this regime and the start of post-socialist attempts to 'revive' earlier religious and social forms.

Both the Sora and the Eveny were among the remotest people in their respective countries, and to reside among them felt like a triumph of diplomatic negotiation at the official level, as well as a quite magical experience on the ground. These two locations and their people have since filled my adult life. Each of these field sites began with a personal magical epoch, and had its own potential to deflect me from understanding history by dazzling me with my memory of a mythic baseline.

[footnote: I was born in 1949 and was 26 when I first reached the Sora in 1975 and 39 when I first reached the Eveny in 1988. Among the Sora I was single and a student of ambiguous official status; when I reached the Eveny I had a profession and children, and clearer official support.]

Just as evidence for the ethnographic present lies in the anthropologist's experience of that first encounter, so evidence for change lies in the experience of our return, and in how this

confirms, reinforces, develops, refines, or refutes our baseline. The return is one of the most powerful of all narrative tropes (Odysseus, Eliade). It problematises change in the world, and does so in relation to a supposed greater constancy in the traveller. In myth, the return generally deals with an original time by reinstating it, as the hero-traveller [magically] undoes or negates an undesirable change and restores an earlier desirable situation.

This is very conspicuously not what we experience anywhere in the world today if we return to the field from a baseline in the 1970s. During the first few days of every return, we catch up with gossip: who has died, who has eloped, have you heard what so-and-so did? But these are not simply repetitions of the stories one heard on the first visit, but stories of change: not only the succession of generations, but the arrival of the first road, shop, school or modern kind of crime. These are historical and moral events which change personhood, expectations, and society.

Meanwhile, the people studied have their own, initially quite separate, experiences and concepts of time. These people outnumber the anthropologist and are at all stages of life. Indeed, it is this multiplicity that the anthropologist has come to study, with its span of ancestors and descendants, forms of naming and possibly reincarnation, and cults to manipulate the experiencing of time, social continuity and the denial of death. In this sense the anthropologist is insignificant, and everything runs as it would if we had never existed. Yet we did arrive at a specific moment in the lifespan of each person we meet, and their kinship system gradually expands to include us, emphasising our relational and time-bound existence. So in relation to the current cohort of active Sora adults, I have gone from being u'bang (little brother) to jojo (grandfather).

For a few local people, who become our close informants and friends, their involvement with us may profoundly change their lives as well as our own. These individuals may themselves be exceptional personalities, with an unusually deep knowledge of their own society as well as a capacity to objectify it. For them, too, as we develop our joint quests and agendas and our mutual dependencies, there arises a certain magical, mythic founding time of the beginning of our relationship. I shall treat these friendships as exemplars, not only of how each of us has changed, but of how we have experienced these changes together while changing each other's lives. I shall argue that it is through these relationships that my understanding of historical change itself is formed.

The locations where I happen to have lived, have given me two different kinds of multiple returns. These in turn give me two very different senses of change. Change among the Sora seems sudden, among the Eveny gradual. My perception of these contrasting paces is based in the first instance on accidents of my own biography, but it is also closely reflected in the way in which local people in each place understand their own lives.

Sora of Tribal India

After an intense immersion in the 1970s and early 80s, I did not return until 1992. No Sora had ever visited me at home, nor did I receive letters from my friends, most of whom could not write. In the meantime, my account of the Sora dialogues with the dead seemed so fulfilling, both socially and psychologically, that it was even seized upon by psychoanalysts as a transparent account of the workings of an inspired and powerful bereavement therapy.

However, I failed to foresee that this cosmology was ceasing to satisfy the Sora themselves. Renewed visits during the 1990s have shown me how their young adults are becoming either fundamentalist Hindus or Baptist Christians as they are being drawn more fully into the national political space of India. Young Sora now read, though there is nothing to read except militant Christian or Hindu pamphlets. These mutually hostile positions between them leave no space for the shamanist techniques and worldview of their elders, which are being repudiated and rapidly forgotten.

With my intense focus on shamans and their clients in the 1970s, I had failed to see this process developing - or at least to acknowledge it. Among today's lorries and factory-dyed pan-Indian clothes in denuded hills, I have lost a world which no human will ever see again. As the last reverberations of shamanist drums and oboes fade from the landscape forever, a historical detective would be hard put to recreate how things had been so recently. The effect for me has been of a sudden, cataclysmic change.

The Sora themselves share this sense of rupture, through their evaluation of it is complex. Rupture is inherent in the rhetoric and experience of evangelical conversion, where it intentionally cuts across the previous steady-state, cyclical cosmology: ancestral names are abandoned and their lineage cults replaced by a homogenised repertoire of randomly distributed biblical names. For some, mostly older people, this process is distressing and heavy with loss; for others (mostly young), it feels progressive and optimistic as they adjust to a sudden influx of government 'development' (roads, schooling, literacy) (cf Ferguson). This change reaches individuals at different moments as they change religion, go to school, or cross the threshhold from subsistence agriculture to work as a road labourer, pastor or schoolteacher. It is expressed in idioms of rejection of custom and change of habitus (we've

given up rituals, palm-wine, polygyny, animal sacrifice), in which opportunity is tinged with anxiety (no more forest, wells drying up, increasing political violence).

[footnote: I have only been able to access the Baptists so far; Sora neo-Hindus remain to be studied]

In a recent article (circulated alongside this paper) I discussed two people, Paranto and Taranti (both pseudonyms), whom I have known since they were children in the 1970s. Paranto grew up as a kind of person whose emotions are articulated and moulded through dialogues with the dead, but after becoming a Baptist he now has difficulty finding a satisfying way of mourning his dead father. Taranti grew up a shaman and is trying to resist pressure from her Baptist children to abandon her spirits; she has just lost the ability to find the path to the Underworld.

[footnote: for a video of Taranti discussing her situation, see http://csproj2.colgate.edu:8080/mfmx/taranti.xhtml]

For Paranto, the struggle is to become a new kind of person; for Taranti it is to remain the kind of person she was before. These people are caught up in historical change, but they give their experience little if any historical interpretation - just as the conquest of the area by the British in 1866, extremely brutal by their own official account, serves the Sora as no more than a foundation myth for an unchallengeable system of land taxation and governance which puts them at the bottom of every pile: ethnically, economically, ecologically, cosmologically. Indeed for Taranti, the point is that she clings to a cosmology which contains no historical elements, but is framed entirely in mythic terms. I interpret the emotional distress of Taranti

and Paranto as an index of their inability to seize agency during this process. Their failure to become new, Christian persons helps me to understand the enhanced agency of other, successful converts.

Another Sora friend, by contrast, has played a more active role in historical change and also has a more reflective historical consciousness. Mogana was born around 1932. Though his father was a shaman, Mogana became one of the very few Sora Baptists in the early 1950s. He then travelled throughout India on church business, served as a linguistic advisor to the Canadian missionaries and Sora pastors translating the Bible, and served as chairman (sarpanch) of the local council. Now, in a community where most die young (of disease), he has outlived almost all his contemporaries.

In my first years I hesitated to seek him out since I assumed he would disapprove of my interest in shamans. But one day I took a chance and asked him to help me understand a tape of shamanic chants. Mogana had moved so far from his father's culture that at first he could not even work out the poetic syntax; but then he became enchanted by a tape of the young Taranti singing exquisitely in the persona of a peacock spirit. This epiphany changed Mogana's life. He begged me to bring him more tapes, and started joining me at rituals (except on Sundays, when he would go to church), his eyes opened to a world he had once shared and since forgotten.

One day, I took Mogana to see a special ritual in a remote mountain village. There, he fell in love with the daughter of my friend and eloped with her, despite being already married. I was seen as the catalyst of his affair, and was widely approved for this by non-Christian men at drinking parties. But the Sora pastors made Mogana uncomfortable in church (I got off

lightly because I was not a churchgoer) and he was dropped from the team of Bible translators. For 27 years, until his first wife died in 2005 and he ceased technically to be a bigamist, Mogana was not even invited to speak at Christian meetings.

Throughout his years in disgrace, he held firmly to his faith; but he also spent ever more time around the shamanic rituals I was studying, making perceptive parallels between Sora and biblical ritual, a liberal comparative theologian trapped in a fundamentalist world. I started to wonder what he was really doing when he started to pose questions directly to the dead, ostensibly to help me fill in gaps in my research data. His love for the songs, words, sounds and feelings of the shamanist world merged with his love for his father - and for me too, as the person he trusted to record and preserve it all. As each old shaman or ritual specialist dies with no successor, Mogana laments the loss of a great repository of the old culture, weeping and whispering to me, 'I've still got his myths and chants in my liver!' I believe that Mogana is weeping not only for the loss of an entire world, but also for his active role in precipitating this loss.

Eveny of Arctic Siberia

Unlike my return to the Sora after a long gap, I have returned to the Eveny in Siberia almost every year for twenty years, in both summer and winter, to both remote nomadic camps and the city. In between trips I have received letters and Siberian visitors in England. Even with dramatic events during the 1990s like the rouble currency crash and the attempted coup against the White House in Moscow, the effect has been of a constant, all-round topping up of current information, a perpetual ethnographic present which develops in 'real time'. To go

back little and often, monitoring the minutiae of every political shift in these eventful years, seems to match the Eveny sense of historical time. Though individual events may be shocking (the mortality rate, including many violent deaths among young men, is very high), there is little sense of historical shock.

Indeed, and in striking contrast to the Sora, the Eveny have a strong discourse of lack of change, much as the yearly adjustments of their reindeers' migration route in response to small shifts in vegetation and snow cover amount to an affirmation of their overall habitual route. A return to a herding community twenty years after my first arrival does not look or feel very different - nor is it, structurally or processually, even though they have passed through one of the greatest political shifts in modern history.

When I first arrived in 1988, things felt very different. Even the cautious, understated Eveny were nevertheless caught up in the euphoria of reform that characterised the era of perestroika throughout the Soviet Union. Perestroika offered a rhetoric of rupture, a repudiation of past policies and a redemption of their human cost. This quest for redemption, with its rupture of habitus, seems analogous to evangelical Christian conversion among the Sora - except that what the Eveny had to break was not the timeless, spirit-given inequities of a cosmology, but the cruelty of a very human history. Eveny historical consciousness is so well developed that they see themselves as bit players at the edge of the most momentous global events, from Stalin's gulags (imposed on their territory), through Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union (correctly prophesied by a local shaman, who was executed for throwing the Hitler-Stalin alliance into doubt), to American and Japanese spies (a bogeyman which encouraged the inhabitants of remote areas to police themselves) and nuclear bomb testing (with fallout

contaminating their pasture and held responsible for an epidemic of cancer among those who were children during the Cold War). Even among today's fairly educated Sora leaders, one could not find narratives positioning Sora political experience with such specific historical sensibility.

The most intimate family narratives of the Eveny are likewise very explicitly anchored in history. During the early Soviet period of the 1920s-30s the reindeer which formed the foundation of the Eveny way of life were confiscated and put into collective farms, while indigenous leaders, shamans, poets and scholars were killed. The war distracted the authorities from reforms during the 1940s and early 50s, but in the late 1950s and the 1960s they returned to complete the programme of collectivisation and break up the indigenous family. Herders' children were removed from their parents and institutionalisated in harsh and distant boarding-schools where only Russian was taught (many died of starvation and exposure trying to run away back to the bush); while their wives were moved to jobs in centralised villages, leaving the herders alone on an all-male landscape.

So it turns out that there is indeed a discourse of shocking and cataclysmic rupture - but that this was long before my baseline moment of 1988-90. Rather than being present during a big change, I now feel I arrived thirty or sixty years after the big change. Eveny discourse today is not simply about a lack of change, but about a failure to change. Even the impulse of perestroika has not proved strong enough to redeem this earlier trauma. During the 1990s there was a plunge from initial hope to great economic deprivation, with widespread non-payment of wages and withdrawal of the social welfare system. With the virtual disappearance of helicopters and biplanes on a landscape with no roads, many people no longer expected to go anywhere, ever, for the rest of their lives. Reindeer herders worked but

were not paid, and became even more isolated in their bachelorhood; the boarding schools were closed down but by now had produced two generations who did not know how to parent their own children as they had not been parented themselves; and the terrible catalogue of young people's alcoholism, accidents, murder and suicide escalated. The discourse of failure to change developed an undertone of another kind of change, that of a change for the worse: morality was declining, young people were even stealing offerings from graves, and minority peoples like the Eveny were heading for extinction, on an explicit analysis with 'endangered species.' The general revival of Russia's economy in the 2000s, riding on the back of high world energy prices, has brought little comfort to the broken families of these communities.

My closest and most complex relationship here has been with a man of my own age called Tolya, some of whose adventures are recounted in detail (with his permission) in my book. Tolya was born in a nomadic reindeer-herding camp and like all his generation fell victim to the boarding school. By the time I arrived he had become a member of the Communist Party and the elected Chairman of the local council (by a strange coincidence, the same position that Mogana held in India). Tolya has given me logistical support and valuable ethnographic commentary ever since we met on my first trip in 1988. In turn, he has used me as a practical and symbolic resource in his many battles to reform the regional administration and improve the lives of herding families. But the experience of accompanying me on my research trips around the camps stimulated a new quest of his own, to document and analyse the 'traditional' past of his people. As a result of knowing me, Tolya became an anthropologist himself, did a PhD, and is now a lecturer in the regional university.

Tolya's new profession is closely tied to his devotion to the mother from whom he had been distanced by his boarding school. Our trips round the nomadic camps took us back to her,

among many other elders. When the old lady finally died of liver cancer, he felt that he had lost one of his last living links with the generation who knew and lived the 'real' culture. The moment of her death was marked by a dream. 'I was in the city,' he told me afterwards, 'and in my dream I saw the whole sky on fire above the village back home. The sky just exploded. The next day I received a telegram saying my mother had died.' The dream echoed a childhood experience in which Tolya and some other children had been showered with fallout from one of many Soviet atomic bomb tests. The other children died, though Tolya survived, and he later blamed radiation for the cancer which eventually killed his mother. The dream felt like the end of the world in many senses - and with his mother, the end of the world which he is dedicating his life to salvaging.

I interpret Tolya's anthropological quest as a parallel to his career as a political activist. Both follow a sequence of trauma and reparation, from his anger at his childhood boarding-school abuse, through his disillusionment with the Communist Party (with which he earlier colluded in its mission to destroy the previous culture), to the death of his mother. If all of this is not to become an irreparable loss, he must salvage the memory of his mother and perpetuate it in his anthropological writings about her culture. I am the trigger of this quest and his partial collaborator (his book is illustrated on the front cover with my photo of the old lady).

Heart of rupture: missionary thrust and reconfiguration of agency

Change seems drastic among the Sora and sluggish among the Eveny. What should we make of this coincidence between their perception of the nature of change and mine? Perhaps my impressions, formed by the chance pattern of my returns, and theirs, formed by living their

lives, coincide because this really is how it was? Can I combine these two types of return to give me a deeper, stereoscopic vision of their history that I have lived through?

Though the landscapes, culture, politics and personalities are very different, there are striking parallels in the process of rupture between these two quite different settings, and it seems their time-scales can be read off from one another within an overarching colonial and post-colonial trajectory. These are not simply two spaces, or even two stages in my own life, but also two local time zones within a wider global time. It seems the Sora are two or three generations behind the Eveny in a cycle of action and reaction, trauma and reparation, which all take place within a process of tighter incorporation into the state. Broadly, the Sora in the 1990s have been going through a process which is equivalent to that undergone by the Eveny in the 1920s and 60s. As with other indigenous Siberian groups, selected Eveny were taken to a special college in Leningrad and trained to occupy administrative positions and to take part in electoral and Party politics from the 1920s, and their children were universally taken into a school system in the 1960s. I remember many equivalent moments from my own time among the Sora, though these occurred decades later: how the first child who went to school in 1976 hanged himself out of misery, or how power was not configured through political parties at all, so that in the momentous general election of 1977 when Indira Gandhi was thrown out of power, no Sora I knew voted at all. During the 1990s, every Sora child entered school, and virtually all relations of power were routed through party politics.

The outcome has been a radical reconfiguration of consciousness and agency. For the Sora, whatever ruptures there may have been in their previous history (such as 1866) were largely masked by the all-encompassing steady-state, cyclical model of their cosmology. Struggles with officials were cast in an ahistorical scenario of helpless victims persecuted by demon-

like traders and officials and protected as compensation by shamans who could summon familiar spirits who were themselves high-caste Hindu officers - an inverse of their persecutors in ordinary life. This steady-state model was the main focus of my study, and it is the final failure of this model which has now overwhelmed both them and me. The shift to Christianity (and neo-Hinduism) now appears as an entry into a more conscious kind of history, which makes their humiliation (Robbins, Sahlins) explicit and allows them to undo their sense of victimhood by becoming agents rather than patients. Though I am not in a position to demonstrate this, I suspect that the pogroms unleashed by Hindu fundamentalist groups against Christian tribals, most violently in the summer of 2008, represent a resentment at their growing assertiveness.

The Eveny had an enforced rupture earlier, of a sort which made them highly conscious of history and of the real scope and limitations of their agency. This led them to place themselves, humbly but insistently, in the greatest historical events of a wider world. Their narratives, even in the remotest nomadic camp, were often about rupture and the struggle in each generation to maintain continuity. I saw their sudden (externally introduced) opportunity to enhance their agency in the early 1990s, and the subsequent failure of this. It now appears that this period was not a great celebratory transition at all, but a bruised aftershock from three generations of enforced rupture, and a confirmation that however sophisticated their historical awareness, their agency would remain limited. If the 1970s really was an axial age among many of the world's indigenous peoples, as it may appear to a generation of their anthropologists, those communities themselves also live with an infinite regress of meta-baselines which stretch beyond any lifespan and render the anthropologist's baseline insignificant and distracting.

In both places, there has been an intensification of a colonial presence, a culturally alien ideology, which had hitherto been relatively light. Where these people were previously neglected, it now suddenly matters to someone to change them radically. The role of colonialism and the state, as well as the specific cosmologies of the Communist, Baptist and Hindu evangelisms, may be different, but the overall totalising thrust is the same. Where the local community's frame of reference is local it must be made universal, where their time is cyclical or non-destinational it must be made future-oriented, where their sense of moral validation comes from within it must be made dependent on an outside source, where they were distinct they must be assimilated to a wider national society.

The arrival of this intense missionary thrust provides a new, magnified idiom for previous local tensions and factionalism. Whereas earlier, these struggles may have taken place largely in a relatively closed realm of discourse (like disputes between litigants in the same legal universe), now competing positions are reified or legitimated through a contest between two radically conflicting worldviews. Instead of petitioning the dead to confirm their version of an inheritance, rival Sora heirs now take their dispute to court; instead of rustling each other's reindeer, Eveny in the Soviet period denounced each other to the secret police.

People whose lives are intimately bound up with each other may move in response to this new impulse in different directions, like billiard balls. Something about the missionary encounter makes some people experience a powerful rejection of old customs, of their parents and all that they stand for. Sometimes the militant combative ideology of the local converts becomes more extreme than that of the missionaries. These people often become local leaders in the new idiom - Baptist pastors in Soraland, Communist Party officials in Soviet Siberia.

Among the Sora, I have been watching the upsurge of this wave almost from the beginning; among the Eveny, I have watched the backwash as their first totalising ideological wave failed.

Unlike the violence done to the Siberians, the change among the Sora at first sight appears spontaneous: nobody has physically compelled them to convert, nobody will kill or punish them if they do not. But as well as coercion, there are also powerful forces of collusion at work. Some people are ready for the change, because the situation as a whole is cracking from within [cf Tuzin, Lattas, on tambaran in PNG]. Yet they might not have abandoned their old way if the new option had not appeared. It is hard to imagine any procedures by which the Sora or the Siberian peoples would have given up their earlier religions if the Baptist or Communist worldviews and institutional structures had not been beckoning to them.

Anthropologist and friends

The arrival and long-term residence of an anthropologist provides a rather different opportunity to see the positions, processes and contradictions in a new light. Forestry department, revenue department, Communist Party, police, administration, traders, moneylenders, missionaries - all come to change the vision or constrain the self-determination of local people. The encounter with an anthropologist is likely to be different because the anthropologist's agenda is not generally about changing local people's worldview or constraining their agency. This may make them harder to understand, but it can also turn the anthropologist into a resource of an unusual kind, including a potential advocate who has greater social mobility than anyone rooted in local relations. This mobility can give the

anthropologist a trickster-like quality, as when the Sora believed I was immune to sorcery or sent me to get a ban on forest cultivation lifted, or when an Eveny village administrator entrusted me with an emergency petition on a page torn out of an exercise book to convey personally to the President of the Sakha Republic (which I did).

Some local people become more involved with this unusual kind of outsider than others. Our lives become intertwined, and these people's stories become evidence for my construction of history precisely because my knowledge of them goes beyond historical documentation or oral testimony. There is a complicated interplay between changes in them and changes in me, and the ideology or agenda of both of us. My interpretation of history will be coloured by my emotional and political attitude to the changes that I live through after I first parachute into each site.

I still believe that my Sora baseline experience in the late 1970s was psychologically accurate, and that I understood their practice of holding dialogues with the dead. I also believe that it was a wonderful system and that its disappearance is a loss of a great human achievement. But my historical understanding was undeveloped because I resisted and denied the change that was growing around me. My research at the time tended to look back to ever more archaic and swashbuckling stories of pioneer ancestors, wild shamans and crazy sorcerers. Perhaps I was influenced by an older British style of underlining the isolation of 'tribals' from the Indian mainstream, but this also corresponded to the Soras' own mindset as they substituted for a lack of agency in the outside world with an elaborate inner psychological agency. In short, my vision was formed as it was because history was not on my side.

My Eveny baseline experience in the late 1980s was historically better positioned, and my book can be read as a micro-barometer of twenty years of political change as this reached down to each family and brought them up sharply against the shifting possibilities and limits of their agency. My historical awareness was further reinforced by my experience of frequent returns, amounting for some periods almost to a constant presence. But above all, history was (at least in those exhilarating and progressive first years) on my side.

For the people with whom I lived, my presence has sometimes revealed unsuspected gaps in their own agency and aroused a new desire to deal with those gaps. What do people want of me, besides friendship?

Over decades, with very little variation, Sora have used me to give them protection by interceding with forest officers, traders or police to block the endless catalogue of arrests, bribes and extortions which kept them intimidated and impoverished from generation to generation. All of this made me understand why their dialogues with the dead, which formed the foundation of their world, were structured to deflect attack and transform victimhood. As intercessor I believe I was assimilated to the role of a shaman's familiar spirit, the high-caste official who is somehow miraculously on their side. But I was similarly ineffectual, in the sense that the familiar spirit's protection works only until the next attack by an aggressive spirit: my intercessions too worked only for a moment, and I sometimes learned that bribes and fines had been paid anyway after my back was turned.

By contrast, the Eveny have rarely wanted me to do any specific defensive work for them. They realistically exercise agency wherever they perceive a channel, and do not bother where it is pointless. They want to discuss history, causality and strategy, and sometimes I or my

students have been involved in setting up local entrepreneurial schemes. But their most fundamental and profound use of me has been to bear witness: 'Write a book, tell the world how we live.' This is a way of building on their culturally high respect for book learning to position themselves in history: a community that has not been described by historians and anthropologists is a community that may as well never have existed. This is the gap in their agency which is called into visibility by their encounter with me – the ability to inscribe themselves in the record. Against the rhetoric of imminent extinction, they look to a future which may extend without them: 'Your little girl should write a book in 2020 saying how she nomadised here, we really were here, living like this.' In an uncanny echo of the gulag which the white man overlaid across their landscape, this recalls an urge well documented among inmates of prison-camps that even if they do not survive, their stories and their suffering must be told: the worst thing of all is to disappear without trace.

People like Mogana and Tolya are visionaries, and have suffered in their personal lives for their vision. Their lives play a special role in my interpretation of history because of their unusual historical consciousness which is linked to their exceptional roles in precipitating historical change, their exceptional personalities, and their exceptional cultural insight. This is perhaps why they were ready to form close friendships with a visiting alien.

But there is a paradox within these progressive leaders. They are also caught in an elaborate and well-informed nostalgia for the past. In sharing, even serving, this sense of nostalgia, my baseline is caught up with theirs in a shared mythicisation, even where elements of this myth predate my arrival. Mogana's nostalgia is for a recent past which he did so much to replace; Tolya's is for a distant, pre-Communist past, the ethnographic present of his mother's youth which gives him a personal baseline which predates his own lifespan. Having worked in their

youth for a new future, both men end up in later life using their community's anthropologist to seek out the last of the elders in order to reconstruct and salvage the past. But while Mogana's future vision has already accelerated beyond his control and taken over his world in a way which destroys his past, Tolya's optimistic reforms have unravelled, so that he has lost not only the past but also the future.

Now that we are all growing old (Mogana's health is quite frail), both Mogana and Tolya are very concerned to archive all possible information about their old cultures, to provide documentation for future generations who are as yet uninterested. This fits the feelings of many older people in Tolya's community and as an anthropologist, Tolya is doing much of this himself. By wanting something similar, Mogana is going against the Sora current and coming close to the witness-seeking position of many Eveny. Both men clearly expect me to create something monumental out of my decades of note-taking and tape-recording, and this is a duty which I cannot deny. On a personal level, I believe they want me to help them to provide themselves with the emotional fulfilment of closure, to scientise the (obsolete but supposedly purer) ethnographic present of their baseline nostalgia, and to reconcile this morally and logistically with their continuing programme of social reform which must remain optimistic about the future. My witnessing, documention and interpreting of changes in their communities is contained within my own ageing, and in the turnover of people within those communities. But my involvement also reveals a truth about those places: my perspective is changing not just because I am growing older, but also because in these places the nature of time itself is changing. Ultimately it is this that I am coming to grasp through having been present and made friends.

THE END