

Christopher Gregory

Fieldwork at WIKO



Born in 1947 in Griffith, Australia. Studied Commerce at Wollongong and Economics at the University of New South Wales and the Australian National University; doctoral studies in Economic Anthropology in Cambridge, England. Lecturer in Economics at the University of Papua New Guinea (1973-75), Research Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge (1979-81), Senior Research Fellow in Anthropology, London School of Economics (1982-83), Lecturer/Reader in Anthropology (1984-present). Publications include *Gifts and Commodities* (1982) and *Observing the Economy* (with J. Altman) (1989) as well as numerous articles on Papua New Guinea, India, and the theory of exchange. Address: Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, 0200, Australia.

I came here with the intention of writing a book based on anthropological fieldwork done in India, of reading up on recent theoretical developments in anthropology and related disciplines, of getting acquainted with German colleagues in my field, of learning German, and of learning something about life in Berlin. My program turned out to be far too ambitious. However, I did have a very productive and intellectually rewarding year; I even ended up accomplishing some projects that were totally unplanned.

My current project dates back to 1982 when I first went to India for 13 months to conduct fieldwork on the "tribal" marketing system of Bastar District in Central India. Towards the end of my fieldwork I began working with a group of aboriginal artisans on their material culture and mythology, a study that I was able to pursue periodically over the years by means of short fieldwork trips. When I began fieldwork the theoretical debate about matters concerning "tribes", "castes" and mythological thought was dominated by two French thinkers: Louis Dumont and Claude Lévi-Strauss. However, in 1982 the first volume of *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* was published. The editor of this series, Ranajit Guha, sought to change the terms of the debate by claiming that all previous history and anthropol-

ogy on India was "from above" and that things look different "from below" (the subaltern's perspective). The theoretical and ethnographic literature on this subject is vast and complex and my aim was to try to make some sense of it using the fieldwork materials I had collected over the past decade.

No sooner had I started writing when Ram Guha (no relation to Ranajit Guha) moved into the office next door to mine and we began a dialogue that was carried on informally in the corridor, more formally with colleagues in the history and anthropology discussion group (which included a memorable day-trip to a conference in Göttingen, organised by Hans Medick, that enabled Hans Medick, Ram Guha, Mamadou Diawara and myself to converse non-stop for almost 20 hours thanks to a problem with the otherwise reliable *Deutsche Bahn*), and publically in two forums — one at Wolf Lepenies' graduate seminar for FU students, the other at the *Altfellow-Treffen*. I enjoyed these discussions immensely and learned much from them. Ram is an "early" Subalternist who has rather strong views about the post-modern turn of some of the "late" Subalternists and this was the basis of many productive discussions about the problems of getting the view "from below". Colleagues in the history and anthropology discussion group have also introduced me to a wide range of literature and new ideas that have caused me to rethink some of mine. These discussions have also confirmed my faith in some of my old ideas and have led to some constructive disagreements which will, hopefully, continue via post and e-mail. The year came to an end just as many fruitful discussions were emerging around the distinction between anthropological history and historical anthropology. I learned much from Hans Medick about micro-history, his journal *Historische Anthropologie* (note the order), and the merits of Chayanov's theories of the peasantry; from Mamadou Diawara about new approaches to African history and anthropology; and from Karl Meyer about Hobsbawm and the Russian peasantry. Then there were the cultural encounters with colleagues from the Arab world: Aziz Al-Azmeh kept me supplied with an endless source of new books to read and alerted me to the dangers of "culturalism"; Fatema Mernissi got me thinking again about the role of the *harem* and the joint family; Salma Jayyusi gently corrected my misunderstandings about Arabic language and culture; and Rushdi Said's thought-provoking work on the ecological history of the Nile from a geologist's perspective led me to rethink my notion of time. I also had many productive lunchtime encounters of an anthropological kind with other colleagues which seem to cover almost every field of human endeavour: choice, logic, Chinese mathematics, architecture, trust, memory, passions, ethics, nature, culture, violence, miracles,

disembodied voices, male mothers, etc. Where else could an anthropologist find such a fascinating tribe to learn from?

In spite of these enjoyable and thought-provoking "distractions" I managed to get quite a bit of writing done. I finished a draft of a long essay on the politics of myth-making in Central India which will eventually become a book; I also wrote two other long essays on the "Modes of Thought" debate in anthropology. In May I put these manuscripts in my bottom drawer and took out one that had been sitting there for some time on village markets and merchants in India. A contract from Harwood Academic Publishers prompted this move and I hope to finish this book before I start teaching again in March 1996 (the beginning of the antipodean academic year). This study lies on the boundaries of economics and anthropology and it develops an argument in my first book, *Gifts and Commodities*, by moving the ethnographic focus from Papua-New Guinea to India and by extending the theoretical argument to include peasant economies. The book tries to situate the case study I did in India in a broader historical and comparative context. It contains chapters on land tenure and kinship, the family relations of merchants, village money-lending, cowrie-shell money and the state, and a final chapter that examines the implications of the declining value of the US dollar for people in the Third World. Amit Bhaduri has worked on many of these questions — if from a somewhat different methodological perspective — and I enjoyed the benefits of his critical comments over many hours of conversations of the type that the daily common meal allows. Amit and I have been asked to contribute to the *Festschrift* of a common friend: my essay on "Household Economy, Political Economy and the Price of Land" was written just before the year ended.

I have also revised an article on "Cowries and Conquest", which was accepted for publication by *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, wrote an article on "Learning from Ethnographic Film" for *Canberra Anthropology* and a conference paper which I presented at the *Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften*. This conference was organised by Georg Elwert, Professor of Anthropology at the Free University of Berlin and it gave me a chance to renew contact with him and his colleagues from Berlin, and other parts of Germany and Western Europe. The theme of the conference was "Umgang mit dem Fremden in vor- and randindustriellen Gesellschaften" and it included ethnographically informed papers from various parts of the world by graduate students and established scholars. The quality of the papers was impressive and it confirmed my suspicion that European anthropology is emerging as a major intellectual force to be reckoned with. I also attended a conference on the filmic representation of the Australian

Aborigines at the *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*. I helped Dr. Bernd Scherer of the *Haus* organise the academic side of this conference (ethnographic film is another interest of mine). The conference went for three days and involved a productive discussion with film-makers, anthropologists, and philosophers from Germany, England, and Australia. We hope to build on this collaboration in the future.

My family, too, have gained much from their stay in Berlin. My daughters Polly (12) and Melanie (8) have learned much about German and American language, society and culture from the John F. Kennedy School. They are now avid bead-makers having learned the craft from Fatema's bead-making group. My wife, Judith, has managed to learn more German than I. She and I were absolute beginners when we arrived here and my big disappointment this year is that I was unable to make more progress with German than I did. My experience confirmed something that Jim Scott (Class of 1990/91) told me before I arrived: you can either learn German from scratch or you can write a book but you cannot do both. George Loewenstein and I tried to prove him wrong. We signed up for extra courses and were determined to conduct "fieldwork" in Berlin's bars and cafes to improve our conversational German, but come January and we had abandoned the project in favour of the non-repeatable pleasure of doing fieldwork in the English-speaking environment of Wiko. Eva Hund managed to provide us with the key to crack the grammatical code of the German language and this will be useful if I ever decide to return to Berlin to do fieldwork in a place other than Grunewald. Her job is made very difficult by the excellent English of the superb multi-lingual staff at Wiko who do everything humanly possible to create one of the best intellectual environments that one could hope to work in.