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The primitive as problematic

...[B]ut anthropology has ... another role, that is, to bear testimony to future generations of the ingeniousness, diversity, and imagination of our species – qualities of which evidence would otherwise soon be lost forever.

Claude Lévi-Strauss

The anthropological study of societies based on gathering, hunting and fishing has had a long and convoluted history. At times insights on foraging peoples have been central to the discipline, at times peripheral. Part of anthropology's current view of hunter-gatherer studies, however, seems to be based on a misunderstanding. In its 1960s incarnation, these studies were dominated by a concern with human evolution. While evolutionary ecology continues as a component of the field, it is not the major one; by far the greater number of acolytes over the last twenty years would find themselves more in sympathy with Lévi-Strauss's view, put forward at the original Man the Hunter Conference in 1966. To study non-state, non-literate societies as a way of bearing witness to the ingeniousness and diversity of our species has been the core subject-matter, indeed the glory, of the social and cultural anthropology not only of Lévi-Strauss, but of Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Boas, Lowie and Kroeber as well. All of them studied hunter-gatherers for part of their careers, yet none was particularly identified with evolution as an organizing principle, in fact quite the contrary.

The issue here is not evolution or anti-evolution, but something quite different: the fate of the non-state societies and the transformation of anthropology's mandate. In the last third of the twentieth century, as one after another of them has been press-ganged into the farms and factories of the New World Order, the discipline constructed around their explication has been profoundly altered. The study of whole cultures on their own turf has slipped quietly but irrevocably into the twilight zone; like Kroeber's peasants, *all* societies are now part-societies with part-cultures. Anthropological representations of the Trobriand, Kwakiutl, Swat Pathans and !Kung San live on in the pages of introductory textbooks, but the cutting edge of ethnographic enquiry has shifted elsewhere: to the complex social formations of the metropole itself, or to colonial discourse fraught with contradictions. If former non-state anthropological subjects are investigated, they are reconstituted as peasants or proletarians, struggling in the coils of merchant capital, faceless bureaucracies or the IMF.

Not that this shift is all a bad thing. Culture and the human condition remain grist for the anthropologist's mill, and anthropology has been able to survive the sea-change and even flourish, by expanding in all directions its field of vision. A favela in Rio, an electronics factory in Malaysia, an AIDS clinic in the Bronx, or a barrio in south-central Los Angeles, all form, in their way, part of the human circle. The complex modalities of culture as hegemony, culture as adaptation and culture as resistance continue to provide rich lodes of material for anthropological investigation. Lévi-Strauss's mission continues to have relevance, though perhaps not in the way he originally intended.

What then is to become of the study of the world's non-hierarchical, non-state societies – and here I include shifting cultivators and pastoralists along with foragers – as the world enters the 21st century? What is to become of the study of whole cultures *in situ* in a world increasingly dominated by the overarching power

removal services for free to ex-cons and ex-gang members who want to remove the stigma of their previous associations – Frank Klimko, 'A Surgeon Erases Gangs' Tattoos', *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, February 15, 1993.

10. And many also feel that their prison-produced tattoos impart more status than the more expensive, professional tattoos, and thus would rather continue their work in prison.

11. H. Giroux, 1992, 'Resisting Difference: Cultural Studies and the Discourse of Critical Pedagogy,' *Cultural Studies*, L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. Treichler, eds, Routledge, New York.

12. See Clinton Sanders, 1989, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*, Temple U.P., Philadelphia, for a summary of the literature on prison tattoos as coping mechanisms.

13. From Butler 1990.

once the single needle style became incorporated into mainstream tattooing, a new line had to be drawn. As I have argued, this division is based on the artistic, technological, and social factors which separate prison tattooing from professional tattooing, but is maintained for political and social purposes. The result is that convicts who attempt to publish their designs in tattoo magazines such as *Tattoo* or *Tattoo Revue* are generally rejected (even though both are published by biker magazines), and ex-convict tattooists who apply to work in professional shops are rarely hired. While some tattooists do hire ex-cons to work in their shops, they are often fired shortly thereafter for problems with drugs, stealing, etc. More often though, professional tattooists will simply not hire ex-cons, no matter how good their work, simply because they do not want to have a prison tattooist working for them.

Tattooing in prison is also about creating a common culture. This process involves marking members as belonging to the same culture as much as it involves distinguishing members of one group from another. I would argue that tattooing in prison not only expresses social divisions, as I have claimed, but helps prisoners to produce meaning in their lives. The tattoo provides the new convict a means of joining the new community to which he now belongs (once he has convinced a tattooist to tattoo him). Without a tattoo, prisoners often feel isolated, both from their friends at home as well as from other convicts. One informant told me, when discussing the choice of tattoo imagery among convicts, 'Of course there's always the guy that doesn't care what he gets as long as he is identified as one of the fellas, somebody, not some lame nobody.' The convict needs to identify with someone, as he is often abandoned by his friends and family on the outside (my primary informant had not received a visitor for five years

before I came to see him, and his wife left him for his best friend), and the tattoo is a way of establishing or re-affirming community, either with those who were left outside (via tattooed names and pictures of loved ones, tattooed *locas* or gang names, etc.), with those who are inside, or both.

At the same time, tattoos can also represent prisoners' differences from each other. Tattoos in this regard act as borders separating, not just prisoners from the outside world, but different communities within the institution, which are primarily based on ethnic differences. I consider prison, to borrow a concept from Henry Giroux¹¹, a cultural borderland, a site where multiple subordinate cultures press against the borders of dominant culture while at the same time competing among each other for power. Prison tattoos then serve to identify individuals as members of certain communities in a context where loyalty to one group is often a life or death matter.

I have argued that the process of tattooing in prison helps to define the body, creating what I call the convict body. Furthermore, I would claim that tattoos define not only the body, but an individual's identity as well. This process of identity formation is particularly important in the prison context, where the prisoner experiences his identity being stripped from him,¹² thus becoming tattooed is crucial in order for a convict to establish an identity vis a vis the prison establishment. The prison tattoo is a 'subversive bodily act'¹³ in that it re-establishes the convict's authority over his own body and challenges the system which attempts to control it. The convict body is itself counter-hegemonic in that it incorporates both the system (prison) and the challenge (tattoos): through its bold markings on the face, hands, neck and arms, it represents a wilful defiance of the Man. □

narrative

AVGAI KHAD: THEFT AND SOCIAL TRUST IN POST-COMMUNIST MONGOLIA

In the 1970s a new object of worship appeared in the steppes outside the capital city, Ulaanbaatar. This [see front cover] is a large stone, said to be shaped like a sitting human being, called *avgai khad* ('married woman rock') or *eej khad* ('mother rock'). I write 'said to be' because, for reasons shortly to be explained, I have not actually been able to see Avgai Khad. However, the events of my abortive visit to this sacred rock revealed a strange configuration of social fear and trust in a society half turned away from its recent communist past.

Sodnom-Teacher and his wife Dulma, old friends with whom I was staying in the city, had told me about the stone years ago when it was still a clandestine object of worship (Sodnom is a lecturer at the University, though he grew up in eastern Mongolia in a herding family; Dulma is a housewife with a city background). Dulma had gone to Avgai Khad to make offerings in the hope of relief from her migraines. More recently the stone

has become a publicly acknowledged shrine and enormously popular. This autumn (September 1993), the headaches still persisting, she wanted to visit again. As we made preparations for the journey my friends ran through again what they knew about the cult.

The stone had not been worshipped until, sometime in the early 1970s, a round boulder at the top was pitched off by some natural event like an earth tremor. Local people replaced the *tolgoi* ('head') and thereafter the rock began to grant boons to worshippers. After some years, the cult, though undercover, had become so popular that the district communist leader decided he must put a stop to such superstitious activities. He sent a large tractor to pull down the rock and raze the heaps of offerings. But as the tractor set out on its destructive journey something terrible happened: a child suddenly died – whether that of the leader or the tractor-driver no-one

quite knows. Thereafter worship at the stone only intensified and no leaders dared challenge it.

When seen from the south Avgai Khad looks like a mature woman sitting facing towards the rising sun. People say they can see large breasts and a rounded belly as though she is pregnant. There is a crevice between her breasts and her belly where offerings were first placed, but they reached such amounts that an altar was provided and soon the entire area around the stone was taken up with them. People offer compressed bricks of tea, and thousands of these now form a semi-circular protective enclosure around the stone. The rock itself is swathed in yards of silk, and bottles of vodka, cheese and other dairy products, fruit, cakes, toys, crutches, clothes and incense lie heaped around. People even give their jewels, gold and other valuables. 'It looks very beautiful', said Dulma. Worshippers make little rock heaps by

placing stones on the boulders which lie in the steppe nearby. Going up to the main rock they lean their foreheads against it and tell the Mother in a whisper about what is wrong and what they want. Then they should walk three times clockwise round the rock. The main offering for the past year or two has been money. In these days of inflation money is often offered in packets of thousands of *tugriks* and countless packets are said to lie untouched at the shrine [350 *tugriks* = \$1 and the average monthly pay is around 6,000 *tugriks*]. A single brick of tea is worth 800 *tugriks*. A lorry driver who once took some of the tea and sold it was punished by a calamity in his family.

It is, however, possible for desperate people to borrow from Avgai Khad. This should be done only in cases of dire need. Vodka should be taken only by alcoholics (*arkhichin*). When borrowing from Avgai Khad people must make a vow to return the item at a certain date, and if they do not do this, misfortune is certain to happen to them. Most people will not take the risk. Thus, in this country where herders are desperately poor, are paid low prices for their milk and meat, and have to struggle to get money even to obtain basic foods such as flour, rice, or sugar, Avgai Khad remains as an open treasury, her vast wealth simply waiting to be tossed by the wind or destroyed by rain and snow. Sodnom-Teacher told me that he had seen a newspaper article by some city rationalist which suggested gathering up the money and paying it into a bank to create an 'Avgai Khad Fund' to be used for orphans. Needless to say, nothing had been done about this. As it was quite uncertain whether the Mother Rock would be pleased by the idea, prudence suggested it might be better to leave the money where it was.

The day for our visit dawned bright and cold, with a first smattering of snow on the slopes of Bogd Uul, the sacred mountain to the south of the city. We were to drive the 150 or so kilometres in Luvsandorzh's jeep, with his young son as driver. We locked the two doors of Sodnom's flat to the sound of hammering from downstairs, where his neighbour was also installing a second front door to deter thieves. Our offerings for the shrine were carefully hidden in the jeep; we remembered a previous journey in the steppes when a drunken gang had galloped up, stopped the car, brandished rocks, and peering inside had shouted for vodka or any western goods. 'I'll pay any thousands, I even offer my horse', one young man had yelled.

We drove out of the city and at the first mountain pass stopped to make an offering at the sacred cairn (*oboo*) for the success of our journey. There was now a strong wind with driving snow and Sodnom frowned as I hastily laid some incense on the cairn rather than replenishing it with stones and walking round first, as custom dictates. Such wayside

oboos are important to travellers but considered less powerful than the sacrificial cairns (*takhidag oboo*) on the summits of the four high mountains which surround Ulaanbaatar. These have great annual public ceremonies with officiating lamas, though people also climb up at other times to make offerings for their own purposes. Generally, these four mountains are constantly remembered, as Mongols, wherever they happen to be, offer them the first best (*deej*) bit of any notable food or drinks, flicking tiny amounts into the air in the direction of the mountains. Many people have the idea that these mountains have, or in some way 'are' ruling spirits of the surrounding land. Each mountain has its own likes: Bayan Zurkh accepts all kinds of food and alcohol, but Chingeltei likes sweet things, Songino takes alcohol, and Bogd Uul will only accept products made of milk. Avgai Khad seems to fit in some ways with this general idea, but there are no seasonal or communal rituals at this shrine. The Mother Rock alone has amassed an open treasury of offerings and welcomes women (the *oboos* are traditionally an entirely male affair). Avgai Khad now surpasses the ancient mountain sites in the immediacy and personal nature of her attention to human problems. She grants children to the infertile, cures disease, and ensures the success of marriages, but she can also cause misfortunes to those who offend her. However, the fact that people had put crutches even on the wayside *oboo* ('laid there in gratitude at recovery', Sodnom said) suggests that there is some continuity between petitions made to the *oboo* and the new cult of Avgai Khad.

* * *

As we jolted along the tracks further into the hills the snowstorm turned into a blizzard. Visibility was reduced to a few yards. A Russian Volga lurched into view, crammed with people. We discovered with relief that they were also going to Avgai Khad and followed them lightheartedly, laughing unsympathetically as children's heads appeared one by one out of the back window to be sick. After a while it became apparent that we were going in circles. The driver of the Volga ran over to our car and said the weather was too dangerous and he was turning back. 'He's just lost his head', was the reaction in our jeep as we pressed on into the howling wind. Some miles further on a small river suddenly appeared. Here were clustered two Volgas which had not dared make the crossing and a jeep stranded in the stream. Another jeep and two lorries shortly arrived. All were going to Avgai Khad, which everyone agreed must be not far away. Several hours now passed in which a car would only be hauled out of the river for another to get bogged down in it. Several of the cars were full of officials who sat tight inside in the warm, leaving the lorry drivers, Sodnom-Teacher and Luvsandorzh struggling to fix icy ropes and wedge stones under

wheels in the driving snow. Then we looked round to see the lorries disappearing into the whiteness. There was now a heated discussion of good behaviour: the officials should have given some appreciation to the lorry-drivers, but on the other hand no-one should leave another human being stranded in a crisis. At this point two jeeps were stuck in the river, the two Volgas were beached alongside, and our jeep was the only vehicle capable of crossing the stream and pulling anyone out. It was getting late, the river had covered with ice and the storm was increasing in ferocity.

Sodnom-Teacher now told us that he had discovered the reason for this communal misfortune. In one of the jeeps was a high official with his son, whom we had seen ineffectually flapping round, tightly zipped into a modish anorak so that only his dark unhappy eyes were visible. Earlier in the summer this boy had stolen a car, got drunk, and had a road accident in which a young girl was killed. Ever since the boy had been in a deep depression, which was the reason the family was now going to Avgai Khad. 'It is the sins of the boy which are the cause of all this', Sodnom said, waving his arm at the blackening sky.

Furthermore, Avgai Khad, it seemed, had days on which 'she did not like to receive people.' This was one of these days. It was now generally decided to give up. We made our propitiation to Mother Rock, throwing generous bowls of vodka in what we guessed might be the right direction. But it was still required that we stay to help the stranded jeeps, though one of the Volgas now slipped away. We drove across the river and made numerous fruitless attempts to drag out the jeeps. I thought about freezing to death overnight. 'Why don't we take the people to the nearest settlement? At least we could save them, and the jeeps could be collected when the storm dies down.' I made this suggestion expecting it would have no effect, and sure enough, Sodnom brushed aside this Western thinking. The fact was no-one would leave their cars, even if being frozen was a distinct possibility. They could not trust the very first passer-by, let alone a rescue-team, not to steal every movable part. In the end it was decided to send the remaining Volga in search of a nearby camp which might have a tractor to pull out the jeeps.

To my surprise, since the likelihood of finding such a camp seemed remote, this plan was a sign for Luvsandorzh immediately to decide that we should leave the scene. He explained, 'If they find a tractor it will use diesel. The Volga driver will certainly tell them our jeep also runs on diesel and the tractor-driver will not come out unless we provide the fuel. Let's beat it now, otherwise we will not have enough to get back to Ulaanbaatar.' Thus assuming the hard-heartedness of the unknown tractor-driver we made an elaborate excuse and set off. 'At least we are now free of the

influence of that evil boy', said Sodnom-Teacher. But matters did not improve. After some 30 kilometres our engine failed. After a tense hour or two, and long prayers in Tibetan, the engine came haltingly to life. Soon, virtually in the dark, we came across a green Lada, almost buried in snow. The people inside were marmot-hunters and they had run out of petrol. The driver stumbled over to us, his hair covered in frost to the scalp and icicles dangling from his ears. He was shaking so hard he could barely speak. We offered a ride, but these people also refused to leave their car. They sent a young boy with us to call out a relative from the city to rescue them. Waiting even overnight and the probability of frostbite, were preferable to the *certainty*, assumed by everyone, that their car would be robbed of all removable parts and rendered useless if they left it.

As we approached the city and safety Luvsandorzhi leant out of his window to throw a bowl of vodka to the *oboo*, and he said:

Oboony ikh n' tand
Ölnzii ikh n' nadad,
Öndöriin ikh n' tand
Öglögiin ikh n' nadad

The greatest of the *oboos* to you
 The majority of the luck to me,
 The highest mountain to you
 Most of the due wealth to me.

Arriving home we discussed this ill-fated expedition and why the people so obstinately stuck to their cars. Sodnom said, 'First of all, they knew they would not actually die. All Mongolians know that if you have petrol or diesel all you have to do is find a clump of *ders* grass. With fuel you can make it burn slowly down to the root-ball; you can sit on the heated earth and survive for some hours.' I said I had not seen a bit of *ders* in the entire journey and I was very glad we had not been forced to try this method. He laughed and said, 'Well, it is true that when I was young no-one would have behaved like this. We used to leave our tents unlocked and all our property unguarded for days. The only danger was from professional horse-thieves, who made raids from a long way away. Otherwise there was complete trust.' I asked when this idyllic state of affairs had ended, expecting him to blame the new relaxation of public control brought by democracy. However, his reply was more interesting. He said, 'Oh this mistrust started with collectivization in the early 1960s. As you know, virtually all our property, all our herds, all things like buildings, cars and machinery, were taken over by the state. And that was all right to steal. It was "ownerless property" as we used to say. Even religious people somehow did not blame a person who took things from the state. In fact, almost everyone did it if they could get away with it'.

Socialist property was 'ownerless' but at the same time each bit of it was always the



Stranded jeeps, Mongolia, September 1993, photo by Caroline Humphrey

responsibility of some state-defined post or status. I began to understand that people got used both to theft and to endless precautions against theft, and to a concept of property that was depersonalized because the relation between people and things was conditional. It was refracted by an abstract idea to which people gave only partial acknowledgement. State property 'for the benefit of all' was detached; it was detached both from the producers, who rarely used their own products, and from the consumers, who had little knowledge of the source of goods.

In the pre-collectivized past there had been little factory-made or 'unmarked' property in Mongolia. Virtually all things were made by someone specific, in their own way. During the social life of things they were further marked by the patina of use, by the grime and scratches and worn patches made by particular owners. People knew who made bridles or wooden bowls or tent poles and they knew the patterns of different regions, often even those of particular makers. Even livestock was marked in a somewhat similar way, since herders recognized the characteristics of flocks bred by neighbours, and where the animals were too numerous there was a system of brands and ear-marks which both linked and differentiated the animals of each family. Theft was socially virtually impossible because all things were so closely associated with recognized owners. This is why Sodnom-Teacher stressed that the horse-rustlers had been both professional and from distant parts: they had to be specialists to be able to mount lightning raids from sufficiently far away for the brands not to be recognized. The victims had to be socially distant enough from the rustlers to be constituted as 'people from whom one could steal'.

Collectivized property and industrially produced goods were a new category, anonymous, easily appropriated and relinquished. The idea of state property for the benefit of all was always in competition

with individual desires and needs. The property that was 'in my charge and yet not mine' was always subject to filching, as officials knew well. The system was maintained by means of a massive apparatus of police and interior ministry control, which encompassed thieving as part of regular practice and sometimes severely punished it.

During 1990–92 Mongolia turned towards the market economy. The state herds were virtually all distributed among private owners or companies and to a lesser extent so were buildings, tractors, cars, and so forth. However, this has not reconstituted the pre-collectivized relation between people and property. The legitimacy of how the items were distributed, who got what and why, is still a matter of tension, though it seems to be accepted as a *fait accompli*. It is true that people do not overtly distinguish between the few private animals they owned in the collective period and those they received later, but still we cannot speak of a relation of inevitable closeness in the way that Sodnom-Teacher described for the period of his youth. In fact, theft has increased in the past few years. Like elsewhere in the ex-socialist world it is most evident in the towns and in district-centre villages where underemployed young people gather and there are plenty of migrants. But even in the countryside, where everyone knows everyone else, people are robbed and many take part in theft, and there is no-one who is not on their guard against it. If in socialist times theft from the state was part of general practice – you suddenly needed a new tyre, or a sheep to kill to welcome a guest – this has now become theft from private householders with their equivocal newly-distributed property. It is perceived as part of the fight of each man for himself (which everyone had been taught in school is intrinsic to capitalism) and it is all the easier now that the apparatus of control is no longer feared. The jealous guarding of cars epitomizes this situation. In Mongolia cars are extraordinarily expensive and almost

no-one earns enough simply to buy one from their wages. Cars come to people by other routes. They are emblems of the kind of highly desirable property that is dotted infrequently over the social landscape, no doubt unfairly, as many people must think.

People are too poor for a robbery simply to be written off as of no account. For months afterwards people will search for a stolen item, calling unexpectedly at a suspect neighbour, or going to lamas and fortune-tellers to give them a clue. On the Mongolian-Tuvan border, where cattle theft is endemic, people have captured human hostages in order to get their animals back.

In this situation of social mistrust Avgai Khad is a curious phenomenon. In England such a place would have been robbed and wrecked almost before it got going. Why has this not happened in Mongolia? The idea is just as abstract as the concept of state property. Here people are reconstituting nature, in this case the rock, whose 'head' was put back, and giving to it, with the idea that the personification of nature (the 'wife' or 'mother') will enable them to live successfully. Human misfortunes are aligned with perturbances of nature. I heard of one woman whose son had suddenly died. She went to consult a lama, who said that this tragedy was her responsibility.

'You disturbed the stones of Avgai Khad', he said.

'No, I didn't', she replied in surprise.

'Think more carefully', he replied. She thought hard and apparently remembered

that as a child she had toppled some stones to the ground in the vicinity of Avgai Khad. The lama advised her that prayer and offering at the rock would bring back calm and harmony to her life.

It was this nameless concept of nature that Luvsandorzh was addressing at the *oboo* on the way home (he refused to give it as definite an identity as a spirit of the land, *gazaryn ejin*). In this way of thinking nature must be tended so that it may tend us. I do not think that this is seen as definitely as an exchange, but rather that items are given as signs of homage to Avgai Khad, or a pledges of good faith, in the hope that this will be reciprocated by a force that is greater than human activities and encompasses them. The processes of reciprocation in nature are mysterious and unpredictable and also omnipresent (remember that our libation to Avgai Khad was made into the empty air when we had no real idea where the rock lay), but to make such an offering and a vow is to become part of these processes.

It is the idea of necessity which allows borrowing from Avgai Khad not to be considered as theft. Necessity, as I came to understand, is seen not just as a set of general conditions but also includes desires, things which may be necessary for me but not for you, if our human lives are to be lived as they should be. People I spoke to agreed that a man who borrowed a large sum from Avgai Khad to pay for his son's college course was quite justified in doing so, as a good education in this case was a

necessity. It corresponds with this attitude that the money 'paid in' to the Mother Rock is also a matter of the individual conscience. Dulma never told me, nor even Sodnom, how much she was going to offer when she made her petition to be rid of the migraines.

Perhaps there is something that is distinctively post-socialist (as well as very ancient) about the phenomenon of the Mother Rock. We could say from the outside that it has established a small area of economic mutuality in a world which is beset with lack of trust and that Avgai Khad is thus a social institution. But the people involved do not see it like this. For them it is a means of influencing the events in their own lives, a way of making wishes come true. Mother Rock, they say, has *real* power, like the power that brought about the sudden blizzard. Mongolians would absolutely refuse the idea that Avgai Khad is some kind of substitute for previous communal institutions. This is because its source is quite different. It is founded on an idea of interiorized conscience, in its own idiom of individual human relations with nature, rather than legal rules derived from an intellectualist theory about society. Avgai Khad has its place alongside the emergence of small Buddhist monasteries and nunneries, the success of evangelist missions, and the enthusiasm for all sorts of cults which is present in Mongolia these days. □

Caroline Humphrey

King's College Cambridge

comment

THE CRISIS IN RESEARCH TRAINING : RESPONSE TO ADAM KUPER

In his comment on 'the crisis in research training' (A.T., October 1993) Adam Kuper asks rhetorically: 'Who any longer believes that one can supervise doctoral students doing research on an ethnographic area in which one does not have genuine expertise?' My answer is that I do, and I trust that I am not alone in this belief.

There are, of course, both advantages and disadvantages in matching the area interests of supervisors and students, and the balance will vary, depending on individual circumstances. Kuper has stressed the advantages; as a corrective, let me indicate some of the disadvantages.

First, every doctoral research project generally begins with a conjunction of an interest in a particular region of the world, and a concern to pursue some particular theme or aspect of human social life. This latter concern will shape the kind of enquiry that the student will undertake in the selected region, and will also influence the choice of possible approaches to adopt –

both theoretical and methodological. It is surely desirable that the supervisor should be knowledgeable about the thematic area of anthropology in which the student's research is to be concentrated, and about the approaches hitherto adopted for research in this area. To take an extreme example: a scholar recognized as a leading authority in the analysis of myth and symbolism might not make a good supervisor for a student who wanted to study nutritional aspects of ecological adaptation, albeit in the same place. Our hypothetical supervisor would indeed have ample local contacts, but would probably be largely ignorant of the extensive literature in the anthropology of nutrition. For guidance on this literature, the student would have to look elsewhere.

This brings me to the second disadvantage, which is that students looking to carry out fieldwork in a particular region would be channelled into the pursuit of certain topical themes and not others, depending on the substantive interests of

those who had previously worked in the region, and who would be considered appropriate supervisors on account of their knowledge of local conditions. It is this that leads to the unfortunate tendency to identify certain regions of the world with certain ways of doing anthropology, and sometimes even with distinct 'schools'. Such identification of region and school is inimical to the anthropological project in two ways. First, it means that our ethnographic understanding of any region remains partial and lop-sided, overrepresented by studies of some topics, underrepresented by studies of others. Secondly, it means that ideas and concepts honed in one ethnographic context remain untried in other contexts. In short, both the holistic and the comparative goals of the discipline are compromised. It seems disingenuous of Kuper to associate the idea that one can study specific aspects of human life in *any* regional context either with an attitude that 'all primitives are alike' or with