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Alfred Pach III
Thomas E. Fricke

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JOHN THAYER HITCHCOCK: 
APPRECIATION AND RETROSPECTIVE

Alfred Pach III, University of Wisconsin, Madison
Thomas E. Fricke, East-West Population Institute, Honolulu

...I have tried to convey a sense of the essence of fieldwork—that tension between sensuous reality, especially as expressed in the uniqueness of individuals and events, and those abstractions with which we try to capture it and give it order.

John T. Hitchcock (1980:1)

John Thayer Hitchcock retired from active teaching in anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1982. Some of us have had the good fortune to have attended his classes on peoples and cultures of Nepal or to have had his advice during our graduate careers. Many others have known him professionally as a colleague in anthropology or in Nepalese studies. Everyone studying the Himalayas is familiar with some aspect of his broad contributions to the study of Nepal. John was in the first generation of western anthropologists to explore the terra incognita of Nepal after its opening in the 1950's and brought his wide range of interests and unwavering humanism to his work there. From early research in Magar cultural ecology to later concerns with shamanism and symbolic systems, John's writings convey unusual sensitivity and compassion. An appreciation of the concrete reality of everyday life is the hallmark of his style. Places do not exist because of themselves; they are peopled with human actors. Social forms do not simply emerge; they result from human actions. For example, a significant portion of his portrayal of Banyan Hill is a description of the principal actors in the daily round of life (1980:5-13).

John's entire career cannot be encapsulated in this short essay. In over 30 years of anthropological endeavor, he has done fieldwork on the Uintah-Ouray Reservation in Utah, in Rankhandi Village in North India, and in several parts of the Magar territory of West Nepal. He has made important contributions across the range of anthropology, including his noted work in political anthropology from his research on Rajputs in North India. His moving essay, "Surat Singh, Head Judge" (1960), remains a classic description of the anthropologist's encounter with powerful personalities at the village level. The breadth of his interests extends beyond Nepal and North India, for some of John's doctoral students have worked in El Salvador, in Ladakh, and in Wisconsin on topics varying from the ethnography of the mentally handicapped to the adaptive strategies of Italian-Americans and the symbolic analysis of medical systems. One of John's students was the first Nepalese national to receive a doctorate in anthropology. His contributions in education also extend well beyond the University of Wisconsin; his efforts to establish a center for Nepal studies at the University of Wisconsin were instrumental in instituting regular Nepali language instruction in the United States and in attracting students to Madison from all over the country.

Faced with all of that, we can only outline a few of John's contributions and place them into context here. His work in the cultural ecology of the Magar and in shamanism are two major areas of his work in the Himalayas.

Biographical Background

John was born in Springfield, Massachusetts on the 29th of June, 1917 and spent his early years in New England. He graduated from high school in Connecticut and studied history and English literature at Amherst College, where he graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa in 1939. He also distinguished himself by winning the Ralph Waldo Price award in English literature and decided to continue studies in that field, attending the University of Chicago, where he received his M.A. in 1941.
World War II interrupted his studies and he joined the Navy as a pilot. During that time he flew anti-submarine bombers in the Caribbean, Africa and with the RAF in England, winning the Distinguished Flying Cross for his service. At the close of the war he returned to Amherst to teach English literature for two years and continued his early interest in playing the viola. He was offered and accepted a teaching post at the Putney School in Vermont, known for its progressive curriculum and stimulating teaching possibilities. A sense of dissatisfaction with teaching caused him to turn down the offer of headmaster at the school, however, and he elected to return to school himself. John was first exposed to the writings of Ruth Benedict and Melville Herskovits while living in New England. He followed up his growing interest in this field by studying archaeology at Copenhagen and Arhus universities, returning to the United States to earn a second M.A. in sociology from the University of Connecticut in 1951.

John went to Cornell University after Connecticut to work on his doctorate in rural sociology. In the 1950's Cornell was a growing center for the study of anthropology and sociology, and was attracting students to its burgeoning development studies programs. Students of Radcliffe-Brown, Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, Clyde Kluckhohn and Talcott Parsons taught there while a number of students with interests in South Asia were enrolled in the programs. Stimulated by a course with Professor Morris E. Opler, John switched his degree program to anthropology and spent a summer doing fieldwork in Utah with Gottfried Lang, while preparing to do his doctoral research with the Santals of Central India. Before John left for India, however, Professor Opler approached him and asked him to act as field director for a project in North India where he would be gathering ethnographic and development information from a Rajput village.

As field director for the project in Saharanpur District, Uttar Pradesh, John collected data on village ethnography with a focus on sociopolitical organization. During his two years of research, he completed his doctoral data collection, implemented the research and training project for Cornell, and, with Patricia Hitchcock, made a pioneering and still-popular film on the life and culture of an Indian village (1958). It was also at this time that his interests began to turn toward Nepal. Clear days revealed the snow peaks of the Himalayas to John and his family as they lived and worked in the heat of the flat Indian plain, and before leaving India they were able to make two exploratory treks into the mountains.

In 1956, after returning from India, John received his Ph.D. in anthropology. After a research fellowship at Cornell's Social Science Research Center, he went to Berkeley to fill in for David Mandelbaum, who was on leave. This led to an appointment as assistant, and later associate, professor of anthropology at UCLA, where he taught from 1958 until 1966. After discussions with Merrill Goodall, who was acting as a UNESCO consultant to Nepal, John decided to bring his family to Nepal and study cultural adaptations to the diverse terrains of the country. His original interest in the Gurung, a group he felt most appropriate to the type of analysis he had in mind, was diverted to the more dispersed Magar after discussions with Furer-Haimendorf.

John and his family left for his first major project in Nepal in 1960, a time when virtually nothing was known of the populations outside of the Kathmandu Valley. The Hitchcocks spent three months trekking in the Upper Kali Gandaki to locate an appropriate setting for research into the effects of local ecology on the adaptation of the same Magar clans in different settings. Illness plagued the family and tragically their son died in the hills. Few anthropologists have experienced research conditions as difficult in a setting where political and agrarian reforms had yet to coalesce. In spite of all this, John was able to gather important ethnographic information, examine theoretical issues (cf. 1970a, 1977, 1980), and, with Patricia Hitchcock, make the first ethnographic films of Nepal with a small, non-professional tape recorder and a borrowed camera. John also documented the little known shamanic complex of the Magar (1967b) which paved the way for much subsequent scholarship in Nepalese religion.

After teaching at UCLA for eight years, John became attracted to the Indian Studies Program at Wisconsin and decided to explore its potential for developing a Nepal Studies Program. He received an appointment to the faculty in Anthropology and South Asian Studies at Wisconsin in 1966. That same year he returned to Nepal on a NIMH grant to study the shamanic complex he had found in the Bhujel Valley southwest of Dhaulagiri.

John continued developing his ideas through the 1970's, exploring the symbolic and historical information in his material (1978a, 1978b). He put an enormous effort into his teaching at Wisconsin, and his students know him as one of the most stimulating and endearing of their professors. John felt it worthwhile and possible for undergraduate students to pursue cross-cultural studies in Nepal and
worked closely with administration and students to establish a program for this. He directed the pilot program in Nepal in 1975 and subsequently worked to set up an annual program, which began in 1980 and is now firmly established. John continues to work as a national authority on Nepal and serves on the Board of Directors of the National Anthropological Film Center at the Smithsonian and as a consultant to numerous other organizations.

Ecological Research

Ecological issues inform many of John's contributions to Nepalese ethnography. From early reports on the economy of Banyan Hill (1961c, 1963) to more overtly ecological studies, the effects of environmental constraints and opportunities loom large in his analyses. Although he has never published a programmatic statement of his theory of human/environmental interactions, the perspective implicit in his work foreshadows the current state of the field with its acknowledgment of complex relationships between historical, environmental and individual factors.

John's initial research in the Himalayas explicitly addressed the problem of environmental effects on cultural variation. By using Steward's model of the cultural core with its principal focus on production, he hoped to recreate a "natural experiment" much like Sahlins' work in Polynesia (Hitchcock 1980:112). Far from being an exercise in environmental determinism, he endeavored to isolate just how far one could go in attributing causation to purely environmental factors:

It is assumed that divergence in cultural cores will be related to four major variables: (1) cultural genesis of the group; (2) cultural features 'offered' by diffusion both in the present and during the course of the communities' history; (3) internal innovations; and (4) environment (1980:130).

John's idea was to control for the first three variables by selecting two communities composed of the same clans, or some of them, sharing the same isolated regional history and of roughly similar distance from outside diffusion, and in contact with each other.

The attempt to find two villages satisfying these controls is poignantly illustrated in the essay "Fieldwork in Gurkha Country" (1980:111-137). No other writing so carefully portrays the interweaving of personality and fortune in an attempt to carry out research programs conceived in abstraction and confronted with hard reality. And, certainly, most anthropologists working in Nepal find echoes of their own experience in his account. The Hitchcocks' frustration as they continued the search for a high altitude site with the proper characteristics, their experience of tragedy—both personal and that of others—and their recognition that the carefully thought out controls must be discarded or modified ("changes that seemed to convert 'doing science' as I then conceived it to 'doing art'" [1980:129]) are emblematic of all of us and our travails in the field. Yet, in spite of them all, John and his family remained, and John has contributed major pieces on Magar cultural ecology. His initial research program, although necessarily modified, was not entirely abandoned.

The emphasis on exploring features of production in the context of environment was motivated by Julian Steward. This led John to recognize the central importance of (1) household control over the means of production in maintaining egalitarian, unstratified societies in the Nepal hills and (2) the destabilizing effects of population increase. John may well have been the first anthropologist in Nepal to recognize the unsettling effects of population pressure in "a difficult and unproductive environment" (1961c:19). In a number of writings, he isolates demography as a significant variable in the chain of causation toward increased monetization and stratification (1973c, 1977:444, 1980:105). The earlier work (1961c, 1963, 1966) anticipates the later theoretical statements of Boserup (1968) and Cohen (1977) insofar as it directs us to examine the linkage between population, society and subsistence. Thus he discusses the Banyan Hill headman's wealth:

...the major significance of his new wealth is its link with the growing pressure on land. The disappearance of vacant, cultivable land, combined with increased population, has pushed more and more farmers below the level of marginal productivity. In Banyan Hill, land partition among sons has made an increasing number of farms too small to meet subsistence needs. The most common reason for borrowing is simply to meet the need for food. Given such a situation, great advantage lies with the person, such as the
Headman, who has the means and ability to lend money. Land and money both flow in his direction (1980:105).

Identical sequences have been recorded for a range of other societies in Nepal (Macfarlane 1976; Messerschmidt 1976; Dahal 1983) and almost any current development effort must begin with these facts.

Nevertheless, John's cultural ecology does not preclude appreciation of other factors in the organization of Nepalese hill society. His 1978 essay, "An Additional Perspective on the Nepali Caste System," makes clear that historical and often accidental conjunctions of events have their own significance in explaining social organization. Thus it is important to note that the limited resource base of the Himalayan environment figures prominently in the non-development of elaborate caste systems. But the difference in caste organization between West Nepal and the Kumaon Hill tracts is also related to the fortuitous existence of the Malla Kingdom at precisely that historical moment when the Moghuls were driving high caste Hindus from the Indian plains.

The work most nearly approaching the analysis he had in mind during his initial fieldwork in Nepal, however, was presented at the 1973 American Anthropological Association meetings in a panel on adaptation to mountain environments. There, John compared features of social organization of two communities of West Central Nepal: Monal, located just south of Dhaulagiri and exploiting environments from 6,000 to 15,000 feet, and Banyan Hill, a week's trek to the southeast and exploiting a range from 2,000 to 3,250 feet. The differences John identifies include: (1) a greater herding adaptation and consequent increase in the number of herding statuses in the higher community; (2) greater elaboration of jajmani relationships in the southern community. In addition, the high community shows (3) less stratification between households, (4) a stronger lineage role in subsistence, (5) greater reliance on mit relations in inter-ecozonal trade, and (6) a rotating credit association which is absent in the south. Finally, (7) Banyan Hill is much more tied to relations with Brahman priests (a theme elaborated in his essay "Family Adaptations in West Central Nepal"). These differences relate to necessarily variant subsistence strategies in substantially different environments as well as different immediate population pressures. John then outlines the beginnings of a typology that would relate mountain villages to their environments, systems of procurement, and the organization of production—a typology that identifies the important resource-based components of social change in the Nepalese hills and suggests the most important correlates of community economic status.

To sum up, John's important contributions to the cultural ecology of Nepal includes:

(1) A recognition that great disparities of wealth can exist between households in hill communities where others might assume a more stereotyped tribal egalitarianism.

(2) The first mention of the significance of population pressure as a driving force in social change in Nepal.

(3) The recognition that Nepal's relatively egalitarian village structure, where it still exists, is closely tied to the household's control over productive means sufficient for its survival.

(4) The beginnings of an attempt to match environment, populations, and the organization of production into a typology of mountain communities.

His point of view has been that adaptive strategies are constituted for long-term homeostasis with the environment but that adaptation must be to environmental constraints as perceived by human actors. The primary cause of disruption is population increase, creating an insufficiency of the means of production and opening doors to disparity of wealth and less community restraint on the wealthy (cf. 1977). Thus the methodological focus for this kind of research is implicitly on household requirements and procurement strategies.

It is important to realize that these insights took form prior to the era of rigorous quantitative testing of hypotheses. John's special attention to concrete behavior of real people, upon which these insights are based, is amply celebrated when we consider that no subsequent study has contradicted his earlier intuitions. To the contrary, his earlier work has been fully supported and the themes he iterated have been taken up repeatedly by others.
Research on Shamanism

As a scholar of religion in South Asia, John has described classical and local variants of Hinduism and shamanism in the lives of villagers in India (Minturn and Hitchcock 1965c) and Nepal (1980). His studies of Nepalese shamanism, in particular, have encompassed a number of approaches and laid foundations upon which later treatments have built. He has demonstrated the vital role of shamanism in the communities where he has worked and in the process discovered much about life and society in the hills of Nepal. It seems a fitting tribute to John that his work on shamanism, cultural history, symbolic and psychological analysis, and his discussion of the potential role of shamans in health-care delivery have been followed by other recent achievements in all of these areas. As landmarks, his work and the anthology he edited with Rex Jones (1976) laid the groundwork for these comparative, applied and intensive treatments of shamanism.

For many years studies of shamanism in Nepal have been influenced by John's discovery (1967b) that the major symbolic elements of Inner Asian shamanism also appear in West Central Nepal. This finding has served as a cultural reference from which various forms of spirit possession in Nepal have been compared. John's discussion of these findings has also shed light on some of the issues of the debate on definitions of shamanism (see Reinhard 1976a).

Much of the terminological problem stems from the legacy of earlier definitions formulated in terms of "primal" shamanic tradition. This tradition incorporated particular psychological trance states along with symbolic themes of flight and communion with a celestial being which, Eliade (1964) argued, were the defining characteristics of shamanism. Though John displays convincing similarities and connections between the Inner Asian and Bhujel Valley complexes he also describes variations in the psychological states and ritual themes of the novitiate and later seance experiences of many shamans (1976c:167-171). Not only flight, but also conscious mastery over possessing spirits appear as important features of their practice. Thus John's findings support more inclusive definitions (e.g. Shirokogoroff 1935) and acknowledge the complexity and variability of the phenomena which, like the concept of spirit possession, serve best as a framework not irrevocably tied to a particular cultural tradition (1976b:xiii). He agrees with Reinhard that not only items or traits of a shamanic complex are important but also the social role it plays within particular "social and psychological contexts" (Hitchcock 1974b:151). This perspective he deems necessary in order to understand the nature and meaning of actual shamanic practice.

John has examined the rich cultural information in the songs and rituals of shamans. From an analysis of this material he has discovered much about Bhujel society: their feelings about their world, how they organize social relations, and how they meet the challenges of life (1978c). His careful analyses of this material reveals a sensitivity to the motivations and inner tensions that underlie life in this society. For example, he illustrates the shaman's capacity to identify and portray the sources of tension between groups united by marriage (1974b:154). In another discussion, he demonstrates the complex ritual manipulations of a shaman in his attempt to relieve the pain and guilt of a family whose child has died (1976c:191-193). Thus, through the songs and rituals of shamans, he has discovered important meanings and central features of this Himalayan society.

John's approach to relationships between ritual, myth, and society has been inspired by structural similarities between Bhujel and Purum society and Needham's analyses (1958, 1960). However, he found shortcomings in Needham's theory when he considered Bhujel social and symbolic forms in light of "...how the Bhujels themselves perceive these phenomena" (1978b:3). John found an interplay of opposing values and themes pervading Bhujel society. Yet, these oppositions did not form separate and distinct categories of neatly opposing items and values, as Needham described among the Purum. Rather, John found opposing themes and values expressed as ambivalent and "potential" dualisms (1978c) incorporated and embodied within fundamental features of Bhujel society.

This dualism of "embodied rather than separated pairs" (1978b:4) stands out most clearly in the Bhujel system of marital exchange, where lineages are at once both wife-givers (superior status) to a lineage, and at the same time wife-receivers (inferior status) from another lineage. This configuration of "embodied dualism" appears similarly in the ambivalent attitudes of the Bhujel towards shamans and women. A shaman's powers to heal and those used in sorcery are inseparable, and as noted throughout Nepal, shamans "...are valued for the help they can give, but also feared as potential sorcerers" (1978b:7). In addition and similar to the ambiguity surrounding shamans is the theme of the "anomalous wife" in Bhujel society, for wives retain important links to their natal lineage groups, and thus are not completely assimilated into their husbands' lineages as Needham finds is the case for the Purum.
John suggests that the ambivalence associated with Bhujel wives is dramatized in a shaman's mythic song, wherein as lineage sisters, wives, mothers and potential witches, they serve as symbols:

... of ambiguity—as well as distinctness—inherent in the relations between mother and child, men and women, groups of maritally allied kinsmen, and finally, good and evil (1974b:155).

Never arguing only abstractions, John's precise descriptions and careful analyses are always grounded in the complex relationships between meaning and experience. In another context, he describes a healing ritual as a classic rite of passage (Turner 1969:94-95), but captures its dynamic qualities and its capacities to transform painful subjective experience in the vivid drama of a shaman's performance (1974b, 1976c). John brings out the effectiveness of such rituals through the structural progression of the ritual and its dramatic elements which encapsulate the experience of actors and audience (including himself) in the immediacy, the apprehensions, and the resolutions engineered by the shaman's manipulation of props, story, music and action. In both of these discussions of myth, society, and the dynamics of ritual, John's work stands solidly with and actually foreshadows many current theoretical developments (see Kapferer 1983).

Ethnographic Film

Together John and Patricia Hitchcock were pioneers in ethnographic film-making. With John doing the scripting and Pat handling the camera, they made A North Indian Village, one of the earliest ethnographic film accounts of life in a Hindu village. This film, as all their films, remains a standard for South Asianists. Filmed in 1953-1955, it appeared nearly ten years before the field of visual anthropology became well established as a legitimate endeavor. Similarly, Himalayan Farmer, an account of an individual's daily courage in pursuit of his family's survival, is seen in relation to deforestation and an eroding Himalayan environment, thus preceding by over a decade the recent treatments of this critical subject (see Nichols 1981). Their film, Fieldwork in Ghurkha Country (1968d), provides an unusual inside view of the anthropologist adjusting to a difficult environment and the process of doing fieldwork. It stands as one of the few films depicting the process of anthropological research in the field.

The Hitchcocks' article on the materials and production of an ethnographic film (1960c) marked an early step in professional ethnographic filming, and drew on their own experience to highlight the exigencies and difficulties of filmmaking in remote environments. Their achievements in ethnographic film-making are remarkable considering the poorly adapted equipment with which they had to work. In the 1960's in Nepal, they were handicapped by the need to work without lights or sound sync, and were provided with film often out of date and having widely varying emulsion speeds. Still, despite necessary concessions to the state of their equipment, they managed to make four noteworthy films. In their films on shamanism, for instance, which necessarily involved reenactments of nighttime ceremonies during the day, they achieved vivid portrayals of possession and healing, as well as testimony to the inherent acting ability of the shamans.

The Hitchcocks' films vividly blend drama with ethnographic truth and detail. Faithful to their profession, they never shot footage in a village without having lived long enough among those being filmed to have acquired cultural insight and their willing cooperation. As in John's writing, the focus on individuals and the concrete reality of daily life serve to illustrate the larger patterns of social reality.4
Program at Madison. The latter, largely due to his efforts, now includes elementary and intermediate Nepali language classes, a course in the peoples and cultures of Nepal, and the undergraduate year in Nepal program. A notable result of John's fund-raising and organizational efforts on behalf of the NSA was the First National NSA Conference at Carbondale, Illinois in 1974. This was preceded by a series of regional conferences at various Nepal Studies core campuses throughout the country. Presentations at the national conference included reports from every phase of research in Nepal and a keynote address by His Excellency Yedu Nath Khanal, Royal Nepalese Ambassador to the United States. The success of this conference and the continued self-supporting status of the NSA and The Himalayan Research Bulletin are in large part due to John and firmly establish him as one of the major early guiding spirits of Nepal studies in the United States.

What can we say by way of conclusion? Although retired from formal teaching, John continues to chair as professor emeritus the committees of his last students. He is working on the final version of his complete Magar ethnography and we can expect more from him in the future. John's legacy as a teacher and a friend has been to inspire the compassionate and humane commitment of his students. He has helped us to understand the paradox of a sturdy mountain people's continued survival in the most fragile of environments. He has anticipated in his writings nearly every major theme of current research in Nepal. His devotion to the widest ranging study of other cultural realities is reflected in the diversity of his students and their own work. John's success has been as an anthropologist, a teacher, and a friend of Nepal. We can only thank him for what he has accomplished.

NOTES

1 All citations for John Hitchcock will be found in Appendix 1.

2 In this regard see especially the work of Holmberg (1983), Shrestha and Lediard (1981), Peters (1981) and Oppitz (1980).

3 Among the many other studies, note the discussions of Michl (1976) on the Chantel, Reinhard (1976b) on the Raji, and Watters (1975) on the Kham Magar.

4 See Heider (1976:22) for a discussion of the focus of ethnographic film.
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