

(People who have most influenced my life, by Alan Macfarlane)

Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1909-1995)

Many of those who most influenced my life and work did this through a combination of force of character and intellectual ambition. The distinguished Asian anthropologist, Professor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf worked in a more indirect way which is less easy to describe.

I cannot recall whether I had read any of his books when I first met him in early 1968. I might have read his *Morals and Merit*, an excellent ethnographic cum theoretical overview of the South Asian societies he had worked in, or perhaps one of his ethnographies such as the *Ape Tanis* or *Sherpas of Nepal*. When I was interviewed by him, Raymond Firth and Maurice Freedman for a London-Cornell scholarship to work in North East India, he was already aged 59.; I do not remember he said much, but he clearly agreed to be my supervisor and helped me to obtain the scholarship without which I could not have done my Ph.D.

I had approached him, or he had been appointed, because I had decided to train myself properly and take a second Ph.D. in social anthropology. And thinking of a place in which to work naturally I thought of the area where I had been born and of which I had vague memories of later visits, that is the area around Shillong in Assam, India. This was partly influenced by reading Verrier Elwin's *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*. So I chose the Khasis and Garos and their famous matrilineal kinship systems. But despite Christoph's many connections and best efforts in 1968, the whole area was closed up so I could not get in. So, instead, he suggested Nepal.

At that time I knew nothing of Nepal and did not even know where it was. Once having ascertained where it was, I asked him where I should study. And here one of his great strengths showed itself. Christoph had been one of the first western anthropologists allowed into Nepal when it opened in the mid-1950's. Since then he had travelled extensively and so had a unique knowledge of the highland peoples in the area. From this broad knowledge he was able to select an excellent field site and group to study.

He told me that he had directed a brilliant young Frenchman, Bernard Pignède, to work among a people called the Gurungs. But Pignède, after intensive fieldwork of 7 months, had tragically died young and his only book, the classic *Les Gurungs* (which I later translated and published with Sarah Harrison), had been edited and published under the direction of the French anthropologist, Louis Dumont. Christoph suggested that there was more to learn about this group. So I decided to work there, and he even suggested that I should work in the large Gurung village of Siklis where he had visited a few years earlier.

I spent only a couple of months preparing for fieldwork, along with my then wife Gill, and gained some advice from Christoph's formidable wife Betty, who had organized the logistics for all his expeditions. I think Christoph also encouraged me to record material using all the technologies which he himself had made such productive use of, tape recordings, still photographs, moving film. Most supervisors at that time

would not have stressed this. But as will emerge, Christoph was exceptional, at least in Britain, in realizing the value of photographs and especially film.

The fieldwork itself turned out to be fairly traumatic. I wrote from time to time from the field and Christoph, as I remember, replied encouragingly. His major practical contribution was to support me when I applied to be associated with the Thyssen Foundation Centre in Kathmandu. In 1969 Kathmandu was still very primitive, the hotels mosquito infested, hot, with hardly any western foods. To stay from time to time in the comparative luxury of the Thyssen Centre with European food, beds and a good research library helped enormously.

When we returned in January 1970, I started to write up my Ph.D. Christoph had arranged for a post-fieldwork research grant from the School of Oriental and African Studies, another great kindness which made a great difference. He was Professor and Head of Department and it was his backing that enabled me to live in Yorkshire in my parent's cottage to write up the thesis. To live in London would have been far less productive and more expensive.

I don't think I received a great deal of theoretical input from Christoph. Demography and economics were not his central interests and though he read my chapters and made suggestions, he was something of a disappointment after my D.Phil. supervisor Keith Thomas (q.v.) But then, anyone would have been so after Keith.

I finished the thesis in 1972 and Christoph was my internal Examiner (along with David Parkin as External) and the thesis, though grossly over-length at 150,000 words, was passed. Christoph was probably one of my referees during the next twenty years, for example for the Research Fellowship at King's and the Readership, and I'm sure was helpful in this respect.

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When I became busy with teaching at Cambridge, the Earls Colne project and other things, I lost contact with Christoph to a considerable extent. There seemed little chance of returning to Nepal while Sarah and I had small children to look after, so our interest shifted to Europe. Apart from supervising some students on Nepal (Tristram Riley-Smith, Simon Strickland and later Judith Pettigrew), I tended to lose my involvement in the area for a while.

My contact with Christoph returned in about 1984 when I decided to do one of my long ethnographic interviews with him (q.v.) in our barn. I read some of his books and articles in preparation and was greatly impressed by the width and depth of his fieldwork. The interview went well and after it Christoph suggested that it would be improved by inserting some of the photographs and films he had taken in his fieldwork.

This seemed a good idea so we arranged to visit him in his grand house near Holland Park. I had a vague knowledge that he was a good photographer from the few dozen photos reprinted in his books. But I was not prepared for the material in his study where there was a filing cabinet of colour slides, some 10,000 or so mainly

taken in Nepal. There were also many boxes of black and white negatives from his fieldwork among the Nagas in 1936-7 onwards through many years. There were at least 10,000 negatives, obviously of superb quality and well ordered. He also showed me some of his fieldwork notebooks and diaries which looked extraordinarily detailed, though many of the early ones were in German.

Most extraordinary, however, was when Betty opened some large cupboards in the spare bedroom at the top of the house to reveal dozens of round tins containing 16mm film. Betty said she had long waited to get rid of this as it was cluttering up the house. Christoph explained that it was all the original film which he had taken over the years, since about 1944 in Hyderabad, including irreplaceable footage of the Chenchus, Apa Tanis, Sherpas and others who had since disappeared or changed beyond recognition.

We were amazed at the treasure trove and agreed to take the films (in several car loads) back to Cambridge. But then came the question of how one could make this material available to others. The year was now about 1985 and we suddenly heard, from a former student of mine John Snyder, that a new medium had been discovered which would allow large numbers of photographs and also films and music to be stored and distributed on something called a 'videodisc'. Combined with an index and texts on the rapidly developing computers, this seemed an answer. So with my former student Julian Jacobs, and later Anita Herle, as well as Sarah Harrison and myself, we set up the Naga Videodisc Project, with funding from various sources (see under 'Projects').

Although this incorporated materials from a whole set of anthropologists and administrators who had worked in the Naga Hills, the strongest and core collection was Christoph's on the Konyak Naga. We had his 2000 pages of Naga diaries translated from the German, Sarah re-organized and linked his 1200 photos to his diaries, and I reduced the three or so hours of film to the 36 minutes that would fit on the videodisc. It was an intensive project which lasted from 1986 to 1991. It was our first attempt at multi-media work. It also required a proper information retrieval system, so encouraged us to work with Dr. Martin Porter on bringing MUSCAT down to the level of a PC and to document it better.

So Haimendorf's material encouraged us towards multi-media and information retrieval, as well as giving an insight into the work of a really impressive ethnographer. It began to dawn on me as I looked at Haimendorf's materials on the Nagas, and then multiplied this by all his various field sites, what a very great ethnographer he was. I have written about this elsewhere (q.v.). Suffice here to say that he was arguably the greatest multi-format ethnographer of the twentieth century.

In the early 1990's Sarah and I would go down to Christoph's house in London to help him sort out and catalogue his slides, which were being increasingly confused in their arrangements as he rifled through them. We also urged him to write an autobiography, which he did and published. But then, in his mid 70's, he suffered from Alzheimer's and became totally confused. He died in 1995.

Yet his influence on us did not end there. In about 1997, when an undergraduate with a particular interest in Nepal finished his degree, he was looking for some work

so I suggested he looked through and indexed all the Haimendorf films on Nepal, building on the rough index previously done by Patricia Bidinger. This formed the real start of my relationship with Mark Turin and later his friend Sara Schneiderman. Mark visited us in Thak and we gradually conceived the plan that we would form a joint project around the case materials of Haimendorf, which is now up and running as Digital Himalaya (www.digitalhimalaya.com).

The connection to the Gurungs and Nepal had been revived in 1986 when Sarah and I went there together for the first time. From that date we have visited almost every year and filmed over 100 hours (so far) and photographed extensively. So the methods I learnt from him have played a central part in our documentation of social change in a highland village.

Finally, I have followed in his footsteps in one further way. Haimendorf's strongest asset was insatiable curiosity and a desire to gather information. Sarah has this more than I do and acts as the detailed ethnographer on our expeditions in the same way as Christoph. Christoph's desire to explore new places and his belief that in even a few weeks one could find out a great deal brushed off on us. We have now explored several parts of India (Calcutta, the Nilgiris, Assam and the Naga Hills), Japan, South Korea, China, Australia and elsewhere. Always we have taken notes and filmed. So we have built up our file of experiences.

So this aristocratic, aesthetic, Austrian count changed my life, helping me back to Asia and launching me on a hobby of film and multi-media to complement my academic writing.