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Anthropology as Cultural Translation: Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*

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Amitav Ghosh is one of the most distinctive and influential writers to come out of India since Rushdie. Throughout his diverse and generically composite *oeuvre* one constant has been his attempt to find connections between seemingly unrelated subjects. Ghosh's fiction challenges the artificial "shadow lines" that have been erected to separate, for example, nations from their neighbours, fact from fiction, and academic disciplines from each other. His interrogation of boundaries accords with the preoccupation with hybridity, "in-between" spaces, and diasporas in postcolonial debate. Although Ghosh dislikes being categorized as "postcolonial,"[1] in his writing he frequently focuses on the ways the partitioned South Asian subject has been affected by, and yet can to some extent resist, colonialism's legacy. At the heart of Ghosh's corpus is the contention that knowledge is produced by structures of dominance, particularly the military, economic, and epistemic strategies of colonialism. His main focus is the impact that Western paradigms of knowledge have had and continue to have on India. Ghosh is also crucially concerned with highlighting filiations and connections which go beyond the (neo)colonial relationship, such as the persistence of pre-colonial trade connections between the Indian subcontinent and the Arabian peninsula, or the existence of an Indian community in Burma which was almost entirely erased by nationalism.[2] Finally, in his writing Ghosh constantly experiments with form and genre in order to adumbrate a dialogic, non-coercive method of knowledge transmission.

Nowhere are these concerns more evident than in Ghosh's third book, *In an Antique Land* (1992), a text that straddles the generic borderlines between fact, fiction, autobiography, history, anthropology, and travel book. Ghosh maps ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in the Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashawy onto his subsequent research into medieval Indian Ocean trade. In so doing he explores the connections and ruptures between two worlds, the medieval and the contemporary. As the book progresses the two seemingly disparate strands—descriptions of the Egyptian families and village communities with whom Ghosh resides in the early 1980s, and the

[1] See Silva and Tickell 171.
[2] I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this and other useful points.

narrative of his attempts to trace "the slave of MS. H.6"— increasingly dovetail, each narrative helping to shed light on the other. In this paper I extrapolate the fieldwork strand of *In an Antique Land*, in order to situate it both within and outside intellectual challenges to the discourse of anthropology that have emerged since the 1980s. My findings reinforce the prevalent hypothesis that Ghosh poses radical questions about Western "knowledge." By presenting his multidisciplinary research in a fragmentary and imaginative way, he challenges the claims to definitiveness of academic discourses. Ghosh indicates that knowledge of the Other can only ever be partial, subjective, and historically conditioned. Grand narratives are rejected in favour of "rich confusions" (*Antique* 288).

Anthropology defines itself by its fieldwork methodology. Just as the historian points to time spent in the archives analysing documentary evidence as the *sine qua non* of the historical discipline, so the anthropologist views time spent "in the field" as integral to any serious attempt to write about another culture. As Bernard S. Cohn writes, "[w]hat a document is to historians, field work is to anthropologists" (232). Yet just as history has been brought into crisis by revelations of the unreliability and partiality of textual documents, so that scholars have acknowledged that any account of history is embedded in its historical and linguistic setting,[3] so too anthropologists have increasingly questioned their discipline in the last few decades. In particular, the ethnographer's participant-observer role and his or her textual representations of oral evidence have come under scrutiny. Ethnographers have long been aware that fieldwork is subject to certain problems. For example, indigenous peoples may act in an artificial way due to the ethnographer's presence; they may present accounts of their culture that they imagine the ethnographer wishes to hear; or they may resist investigation altogether, refusing to answer questions and trying to evade examination. Furthermore, living with others is an inevitably subjective and specific experience. Anthropology tends to infer that one village or sub-community is representative of a whole society, when it is in fact contingent, representative only of a particular group of individuals at a specific moment. Even the most trenchant apologist for fieldwork is aware of these problems, but from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s a group of anthropologists began to argue that fieldwork is also complicated by its eventual presentation as a text. Even in the unlikely event that the people under study should act normally in the presence of the ethnographer, giving lucid and accurate oral testimonies, the ethnographer still has to translate their lives through the act of writing. In parallel with the work of theorists of history like Hayden White, these so-called "New Anthropologists"—who include James Clifford, Talal Asad, and Mary Louise Pratt—have sought to locate ethnography as a textualized construction.

This "literary project" within anthropology has received a great deal of attention and criticism (see, for instance, Trencher, Friedman,

[3] See, for example, White and LaCapra.

and Restrepo and Escobar). Perhaps the most glaring blind spots that have been identified within the New Anthropology are its curious disregard of anthropologies emanating from the third world, and its tendency to set up as a straw man a monolithic "Western Anthropology" in a way that ignores the variations that exist even within what have been termed the "dominant anthropologies" (Restrepo and Escobar 105; 108). Recent scholarship has accordingly moved on to realize that anthropology—as an example of disciplinary power—has played an important part in anti-colonial national projects and the establishment of postcolonial nation-states. For instance, Jomo Kenyatta studied anthropology under Bronislaw Malinowski (see Gikandi 357), while Kwame Nkrumah's uncompleted PhD thesis was in "ethnophilosophy," an area closely associated with anthropology (Gyekye xvi-xxiii). While recognizing the "epistemic violence" inherent in anthropology's history, we should thus also remain alert to its "enabling" potential (see Spivak, "Subaltern" 280-3 and *Critique* 371). Notwithstanding these intellectual limitations, a sustained account of the extent to which *In an Antique Land* is imbricated with the New Anthropology's concerns is worthwhile, and has not yet been undertaken.[4] This essay is an attempt to fill the critical gap. This is particularly necessary given the celebration of Ghosh's writing as an exemplar of the experimental ethnographies endorsed by the New Anthropologists (see Clifford, "Transit Lounge" and "Routes") and, more importantly, given the mutual interest of Ghosh and the New Anthropologists in the relationship between anthropology, language and literature. It is to this issue that I will now turn.

Talal Asad has been instrumental in pointing out a comparison between ethnography and the act of translation. In "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," he argues that the metaphor of translation is often employed by social anthropologists to elucidate their role. He cites the following statement by Godfrey Lienhardt for its recognition of the similarities between the role of translator and ethnographer: "[t]he problem of describing to others how members of a remote tribe think appear[s] largely as one of translation, of making the coherence primitive thought has in the languages it really lives in, as clear as possible in our own" (142). This comment reveals the many different types of translation that the ethnographer has to tackle in attempting to explain another culture. Most obvious is the literal translation of the other culture from "the languages it really lives in" to "our own." As Asad and John Dixon explain elsewhere, this question of language is an area of concern often neglected by ethnographic theorists. They remind us that most ethnographers have to learn another language in order to interact with the people with whom they live during their fieldwork. They then face the difficulty of translating a different language into their own, often having to explain concepts for which their language has no equivalent. Many theorists have interpreted this to be a productive, benign process,

[4] Scholars who have scrutinized other ethnographic aspects of *In an Antique Land* include Neelam Srinivasta and Javed Majeed.

in which the ethnographer's own language is altered and enriched by the encounter with foreign words and concepts. This is the ideal mode of translation that has been advocated by Walter Benjamin and A.K. Ramanujan, amongst others. Benjamin famously quotes Rudolf Pannwitz:

> Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. […] The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign tongue. (80-1)

In a similar vein, the Indian poet and translator A.K. Ramanujan writes, "[a] translator hopes not only to translate a text, but hopes (against all odds) to translate a non-native reader into a native one" (viii). Both writers argue that the translator should transform the spirit of his or her own language by sensitive interaction with the other language, yet both acknowledge the difficulty of achieving this goal.

These optimistic views of translation as a way of reworking one's language and unsettling one's cultural assumptions have been challenged by the recent translation theory of Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, and by Asad and Dixon's work on the relationship between anthropology and translation. Bassnett and Trivedi argue that translation has long been entangled in the web of imperial power. Translation, they suggest, usually takes place in a uni-directional process, with texts from non-Western countries being laid open to the authoritative scrutiny of the West. Asad and Dixon similarly emphasize the unequal statuses of languages in the colonial and post- or neocolonial worlds. They argue that the metamorphosis of language enthusiastically envisioned by such theorists as Benjamin is more likely to occur in a culturally weak language than in one as politically and economically powerful as English. "[T]here is," they write, "a prevailing trend for the language of dominated cultures to accommodate to the demands and concepts of the dominating culture. Equally, there are powerful resistances to making any comparable adjustments within the discursive practices of European scholarship" (171). In practice, then, translation tends only to remake non-Western languages, while powerful European languages remain virtually untouched by their encounter with other languages and concepts. If ethnography is viewed metaphorically as a translation of other cultures, it becomes clear that it too has tended to unsettle and alter indigenous cultures far more than it has affected the European powers doing the translation. As Anuradha Dingwaney recognizes, both linguistic and cultural translation involve violence, "especially when the culture being translated is constituted as that of the 'other'" (4). Making a similar point, this time about the anthropological enterprise specifically, Eduardo Restrepo and Arturo Escobar suggest that "anthropologists working at the 'center' learn quickly that they can

ignore what is done in peripheral sites at little or no professional cost, while any peripheral anthropologist who similarly ignores the 'center' puts his or her professional competence at issue" (115).

Linguistic issues are therefore not the only ones that arise from the comparison between the ethnographer and the translator. As indicated earlier, it is also important to be aware that the ethnographer translates oral accounts into a written text. The ethnographer records hours of dialogue with members of the studied community and then has to select what he or she considers to be relevant for "writing up." Dissenting voices or information that is not commensurate with the ethnographer's vision may be excluded from the text. The ethnographer also has to choose a narrative form in which to present her findings. Does she conform to the scientism and impersonal style of "classic" ethnography, or does she experiment with form, attempting to represent polyphony by transcribing swathes of dialogue with informants or by using a fragmentary structure? Regardless of what form the ethnographer chooses, she almost inevitably translates the other culture using certain recognizable (Western) tropes, which impose meaning onto a vast complexity. James Clifford goes so far as to argue that "the historical predicament of ethnography" is "the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures" ("Introduction" 2). Far from being a transparent reflection of how other people live, then, ethnographic writing translates, selects, and fashions its subjects. Furthermore, as the previous discussion about linguistic translation suggests, this process is never innocent, but is always embedded in existing power relations.

In an Antique Land grapples with related questions surrounding the role of the ethnographer as translator. Ghosh frequently discusses the process of translating words or concepts into another language. As an ethnographic participant-observer in the Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashawy, he is irked by the impossibility of translating certain concepts into Arabic. For example, Ghosh is interrogated by the teenaged Jabir about his country's attitude towards circumcision, and he is unable to explain himself adequately due to Arabic's linguistic nuances:

> "You mean," he said in rising disbelief, "there are people in your country who are not circumcised?"
>
> In Arabic the word "circumcise" derives from a root that means "to purify"; to say of someone that they are "uncircumcised" is more or less to call them impure.
>
> "Yes," I answered, "yes, many people in my country are 'impure'." I had no alternative; I was trapped by language. (62)

Here Ghosh alerts us to the fact that linguistic translation is a process fraught with complications, one which often violently alters the meaning of the original. The innocuous word "uncircumcised" becomes highly charged in Arabic, with connotations of impurity and therefore irreligiousness. The comment "I was trapped by language" is an important one as it makes the reader aware of the limitations of any language. Ghosh's frustration with the language barrier contrasts with the tone of traditional ethnographies, where the issue of language is

effaced and foreign concepts are explained through smooth, unproblematic translation.[5] Interestingly, in this instance Ghosh reverses the ethnographer's usual dilemma of translating indigenous concepts into his own language. It is the difficulty of explaining non-indigenous ideas to locals that confounds the ethnographer. As so often in *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh is anthropologized by locals rather than the other way round; his language, customs, and cultural practices are defamiliarized by the contempt and incredulity of his supposed subjects of study.

Like all ethnographers, Ghosh has to negotiate the tricky task of translating oral evidence given by native informants into a written text. Early ethnographies tended to rewrite local accounts of culture from a narrative distance, so informants were perceived as a somewhat homogenized "they" who were observed and understood by the detached ethnographer. More recently ethnographers have begun experimenting with dialogue as a more nuanced way of representing oral evidence, so that the Other is given a space to reply, argue, and question (Clifford, "Introduction" 14). Ghosh follows this newer dialogic model of ethnographic textualization. The modern-day sections of *In an Antique Land* brim with conversations in which ethnographic subjects joke with the narrator (who is known as "Amitab"), question him about his religion or cultural practices, and in turn inform him about their own beliefs. In interview Ghosh has acknowledged the centrality of conversations to the structure of the text. He attributes this feature not to the movement towards dialogism within anthropology but to James Boswell's *The Life of Johnson*, which he read while living in his Egyptian village and which made him realize "the absolute essentialness of conversations to any kind of narrative" (Chambers, "Essentialness" 28). Whatever his inspiration, the conversational form of *In an Antique Land* allows Ghosh gently to undermine his own narratorial authority. He chooses to include uncomfortable or even humiliating conversations, such as the row he has with the village's Imam about whether Egypt or India has the best armaments (234-6). The inclusion of the Imam's dissenting voice, questioning Ghosh's ability to explain Egyptian culture when "[h]e doesn't even write in Arabic" (234), and condemning India's death rites and religious beliefs as "primitive and backward" (235), subverts traditional ethnographic assumptions that indigenous people are illiterate and primitive.

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[5] In Ghosh's more conventional DPhil thesis Arabic words are constantly explained without apparent difficulty. For example, he describes a part of the marriage ceremony known as the *katb al kitab* ("the writing of the book") as follows:

> The *katb al kitab* is always conducted in the presence of a *ma'adhun* in every commune (*gariah*). The elders who act for the families of the bride and groom are called *wukala* (sing. *wakil*), which signifies "authorized representative or attorney." (*Kinship* 46)

Here Arabic words are given in parenthesis after the English, and language is presented as unproblematic.

The heated conversation "Amitab" has with the Imam not only provides an example of the villagers answering back within the text, questioning and challenging Ghosh's project, but also foregrounds the issue of Ghosh's position as a third-world ethnographer. As Kirin Narayan rightly argues, any anthropologist—whether "native" or foreign—may be viewed "in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations" (671). Ghosh is self-conscious about the ambiguity of his standing amongst the villagers, acknowledging his privileged position as an anthropologist from that centre of Western academe, Oxford University, as well as his low status as a Hindu in Egypt. His Indian nationality provokes particularly complex and often contradictory reactions from the community in which he lives, as he is at once seen as insider (fellow inhabitant of a third-world country) and outsider (cow-worshipping, uncircumcised infidel). As David Scott writes on the peculiar position of the third-world anthropologist, "the postcolonial intellectual stands in an ambiguous place: neither 'inside' nor 'outside,' but occupying a 'between' always open on both sides to contestation" (80-1). The Egyptians identify with Ghosh as a member of a country which, as Ustaz Sabry tells his friends, has "been ransacked by imperialists" just like Egypt has, and which is similarly trying to alleviate poverty, a deficient agricultural infrastructure, and other colonial residues (134). At times he is treated with extra respect, as when Khamees begs him to ask the Imam for medicine, arguing, "[h]e'll come if you ask him—he knows you're a foreigner. He'll listen to you" (233). But Khamees's claim that the narrator's foreignness makes him worthy of attention is undermined by the fact that in many frustrating encounters people do not listen to him at all (see, for example, 125-6; 204). At times Ghosh's foreignness even leaves him open to suspicion and aggressive interrogation, as when a taxi driver cannot understand his desire to call on Shaikh Musa (112), or when he is taken in for questioning by police about his interest in a Jewish saint (333-42).

The villagers see technology as being at least as important a marker of civilization as religion or cultural practices. In a humorous scene the narrator gains respect, even awe, for the knowledge he is assumed to have about a diesel water-pump that is manufactured in India (72-4). Yet if his country's technology occasionally causes him to be treated with deference, at other moments it is used against him as a supposed gauge of backwardness. To Ghosh's later chagrin, he ends up bitterly vying with the Imam over whose country has the better "guns and tanks and bombs" (235). He soon realizes that both men are "travelling in the West" (236), speaking the imperialist language that views the invention of violent technology as a measure of civilization.[6]

The ways in which the ethnographer, whether Western or "native," is represented in the ethnographic text have also been interrogated by the New Anthropologists. The ethnographer's experiences in the field of course provoke feelings, desires, dislikes,

[6] See Adas.

and prejudice, but these are erased from, or at least marginalized by, realist ethnographic discourse. Mary Louise Pratt reminds us that all ethnographies contain elements of the personal, but in stylized ways. An informal, personal tone is permitted to intrude into conventional ethnographies, but only when it is confined to prefaces or afterwords. Pratt argues that these set-pieces—usually describing the ethnographer's arrival, first impressions, and departure—"play the crucial role of anchoring [the ethnographic text] in the intense and authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork" (32). Yet from the 1960s on ethnographers have become more willing to allow the self to overspill into the main body of the narrative, showing that fieldwork can only be a partial account, highly influenced by the personality and approach of its orchestrator.

Ghosh parodies and subverts the traditional ethnographic trope of confining personal commentary to prefaces or afterwords. He chooses to omit the conventional arrival scene, and his description of the Egyptian village begins with the narrator already settled, somewhat unhappily, at the house of Abu-'Ali. Whereas many classic ethnographies begin with an introduction describing the sense of strangeness felt by the ethnographer on arrival at the field site, and then banish personal observation from the main body of the text,[7] Ghosh makes no mention of his arrival, though his feelings of alienation and the curiosity his presence provokes are emphasized throughout. Ghosh too sandwiches his text between a "Prologue" and an "Epilogue," but it is worth noting that these are more novelistic terms than the scholarly "Preface" or "Afterword," immediately indicating the text's imaginative purchase on anthropology. Yet in a curious reversal of anthropological convention, the Prologue is one of

[7] Perhaps the most famous example of the personalized "arrival trope" is the opening to Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*:

> Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. Since you take up your abode in the compound of some neighbouring white man, trader or missionary, you have nothing to do, but to start at once on your ethnographic work. Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. For the white man is temporarily absent, or else unable or unwilling to waste any of his time on you. This exactly describes my first initiation into field work on the south coast of New Guinea. I well remember the long visits I paid to the villages during the first weeks; the feeling of hopelessness and despair after many obstinate but futile attempts had entirely failed to bring me into real touch with the natives, or supply me with any material. (4)

Here, by his unusual use of the second-person narrative voice, Malinowski invites the reader to share his feelings of disorientation. He is candid about his inexperience as an ethnographer and his inability to get "into real touch" with his research subjects. And yet this personal account of Malinowski's initial uncertainty in the field soon gives way to a more confident, generalizing tone. As Pratt suggests (31-2), the display of modesty and inexperience revealed in the arrival trope is really a device, a way of asserting the ethnography's authenticity by depicting the hardships of fieldwork.

the most straightforwardly academic passages of Ghosh's text, loaded as it is with historical detail, dates, and footnotes. Only in the last two paragraphs does Ghosh situate his interest in the Slave in a subjective space and connect it with his experiences in modern-day Egypt. The Epilogue is more personal, interweaving descriptions of the exodus of Egyptian workers from Iraq at the beginning of the Gulf War with an account of the last reference to Bomma in an ancient manuscript kept in a hi-tech Philadelphia library. In between the bookends of the Epilogue and Prologue, Ghosh's text continues to intertwine personal details and seemingly irrelevant information with more academic commentary, where conventional ethnographies would limit themselves to a discussion of scholarly topics such as kinship or ritual.

However unconventional its form, the text nonetheless conveys a wealth of detail about the cultural practices of Egyptian villagers. Consider the following passage in which we learn about the Arabic tradition of blood feuds:

> And now, Jabir said, drawing himself up to his full height, there would be a blood feud. That was the law of the Arabs: "Me and my brother against my cousin; me and my cousin against the stranger." This was a serious matter: if a man killed someone, then he and all his male kin on the paternal side could be killed in revenge by the dead man's family. They would have to go and hide with their maternal relatives until their uncles and the shaikhs of the land could talk to the dead man's family and persuade them to come to a council of reconciliation. Then, when the grief of the dead man's family had eased a little, an amnesty would be declared. The two lineages would meet in some safe central place, and in the presence of their elders they would negotiate a blood-money payment. That was thâr, the law of feud; damm, the law of blood; the ancient, immutable law of the Arabs.
>
> "All that for pushing a man off a swing?" I asked, bleary-eyed.
>
> Jabir paused to think. "Well, maybe a little one," he said wistfully. "Just a small feud." (70-1)

In this passage, the complicated process of the blood feud is unravelled in detail, and new technical terms (*thâr* and *damm*) are introduced and explained. This ethnographic information is communicated in an unobtrusive way, slotted as it is into a collage of direct and indirect speech, personal details and irony. The section begins with Jabir making a simple statement (reported through indirect speech) that there would be a blood feud. The assertion is instantly undercut by the authorial comment that he is "drawing himself up to his full height" while saying it, which indicates his truculent pride in the custom. The narrator goes on to explain the usual sequence of events in a feud, culminating in the declamation (presumably attributable to Jabir) that this is an inevitable, unchanging practice, "the ancient, immutable law of the Arabs." The narrative then returns to the dialogic form, with the narrator's bathetic reminder that the feud in question is only in response to a man being pushed off a swing. Jabir's rejoinder is at once humorous and telling: he hopes there will be "[j]ust a small feud," the "wistfulness" of his voice suggesting that he has never in fact witnessed this supposedly "ancient, immutable" custom. Ghosh manages concisely and indirectly to convey that what was once

common practice in the Arabic world is today a rare event, regarded nostalgically by the villagers as part of a now superseded heritage. Soon this interpretation is confirmed by neighbouring villagers' reports that the alleged feud had not transpired, as a "token payment" (79) had sufficed to persuade the wronged family to drop their grievance. Jabir's self-conscious portrayal of the Arabs as a warrior-like, intransigent people is therefore revealed to be a distortion of practices that today usually manifest themselves through ritualized imitation of the past.

It is worth comparing this personal, even playful account of feuding with the more conventional discussions to be found both in Ghosh's own DPhil thesis and in A.P. Stirling's essay "A Death and a Youth Club: Feuding in a Turkish Village." In the former, Ghosh briefly explains the concepts of *thâr* and *damm*, before going on to explain:

> While the fieldwork for this thesis was being done a man from Nashawy was killed by a man from a neighbouring village. On that instance the men of the killer's lineage did not leave the area, for his lineage was the "dominant lineage" (*asl al balad*) of the village and very powerful, while the dead man's relatives were poor and few. They presented no real threat to the killer's lineage who saw no reason to leave the area. (*Kinship* 178)

Here the tradition of blood feuds is described entirely from the outside via a third-person narrative voice, while class is perhaps emphasized as more of a contributing factor to the non-occurrence of the feud than in Ghosh's later text. Stirling's essay provides an even more telling contrast with the dialogic description in *In an Antique Land*. A traditional anthropologist writing in 1970, Stirling provides several charts and diagrams to explain the genealogy of the village under discussion, and his writing style is more authoritative and monophonic than Ghosh's. The following passage illustrates well the differences between Ghosh's writing and a more mainstream anthropological approach:

> If a man is in trouble with his neighbours, his patrikin will come to his aid, and in doing so, will be acting together as a group. But it is not only at times of open fighting that this situation occurs. Quiescent hostility is normal in the villages. For this, the villagers use a word "küs," by which they mean a sort of mutual sulking. It implies the state of mind of Achilles in his tent,—one has been wronged or insulted, and broken off normal social relationships. The negative of *küs* is "to speak to each other"; to say "We are speaking to each other" (*konuşuyoruz*) may sometimes mean "We have been reconciled." Any self-respecting lineage is more than likely to be *küs* with at least one other similar group. (172)

Here Stirling makes several generalizations from the specific feud he has already described, using the universalizing nouns "a man," "patrikin," "the villagers," and "any self-respecting lineage" to suggest that these practices are typical of a wider community than just the village under study. His use of what Johannes Fabian has termed the "ethnographic present" is also striking, as it essentializes the villagers'

actions as part of a general unchanging culture.[8] The narrator writes in the third person about the anonymous "villagers" he describes, employing an omniscient voice that seems able to judge what is "normal" in the village, and to translate concepts with confident ease. Not without humour, Stirling describes *küs* as "a sort of mutual sulking," but there is no hesitation in his tone when he explains foreign words. He uses the unequivocal verb "mean" to indicate his knowledge of the Turkish language. He also uses a classical analogy of "Achilles in his tent" to vivify his description of *küs*. Turkish customs are thus rendered comprehensible by allusion to a familiar Western story, rather than being described in such a way that *Western* culture is defamiliarized and challenged in comparison. Ghosh's recording of the direct speech of a named individual and his reluctance to draw definitive conclusions from an isolated instance of feuding stand in marked contrast to the scientism and generalizations of Stirling's approach.

In *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh's narrator is rarely to be seen working on the collection of ethnographic data. In one of the few moments in which we are reminded of his academic project, a studious villager gives him unsolicited information while he is trying to have a conversation with someone else:

> "Women use their forefingers to push corn down the throats of their geese," added Shaikh Musa's son Ahmed, an earnest young man, who was a great deal more heedful of my duties as a gatherer of information than I. "Corn, as you ought to know, is harvested just before winter, towards the start of the Coptic year which begins in the month of Tût…" (26; ellipsis in original)

This passage is revealing because it indicates that Ahmed is familiar with the kind of evidence required for ethnographic study: he tells the narrator about agricultural affairs and the locals' conception of time. The subtext here is that informants are not innocent, but that they are subjects self-consciously shaping an identity for the ethnographer to record. This sensitive portrayal unsettles ethnographic assumptions that indigenous communities are unaware of how they are perceived from the outside, and that the Other believes his or her cultural practices to be normative. Cultural assumptions are intertextual, with people judging their own and others' cultures according to standards derived from ethnographies, films, and journalism. As James Clifford remarks, "[s]uddenly cultural data cease to move smoothly from oral performance into descriptive writing. Now data also move from text to text, inscription becomes transcription" ("Ethnographic Allegory" 116). Furthermore, in the cited passage the ethnographer and the local's roles are reversed, as the "earnest" Ahmed is at pains to steer the narrator back towards his research topics, whereas the latter is more interested in anecdotes and gossip.

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[8] Fabian defines the "ethnographic present" as "the practice of giving accounts of other cultures and societies in the present tense. A custom, a ritual, even an entire system of exchange or a world view are thus predicated on a group or tribe, or whatever unit the ethnographer happens to choose" (80).

Many questions surrounding the ethnographer's role and persona are posed by the New Anthropologists. Does he or she have authority (benign or otherwise), or is he or she a simpleton, the dupe of wily locals? How much does his or her voice intrude into the narrative, through the use of the first person and the expression of personal opinions? The example given above suggests that Ghosh's narrative persona is presented in a modest, self-deprecating light as one who has little authority and who has to be taught even the community's most basic customs. The "I" figure is omnipresent in the narrative, but his position is constantly shifting. Renato Rosaldo has drawn attention to the "tripartite author functions" that he argues exist in most ethnographies: "(a) the individual who wrote the work, (b) the textualized persona of the narrator, and (c) the textualized persona of the field investigator" (88). This is a useful division for understanding Ghosh's "I" narrator, as it draws attention to the fact that "the individual who wrote the work" is largely absent from *In an Antique Land*. We do learn certain autobiographical details about this individual, such as his educational history and his involvement in a communalist riot in Dhaka in 1964, but about his life at the time of writing we are told very little. His sexual and romantic life, for example, is entirely erased from the narrative, which is perhaps indicative of conformity to ethnography's taboo against admitting that desire or sexual attachments exist during fieldwork.

Ghosh's "I" narrator tends to slide between "the textualized persona of the narrator," a thoughtful, perceptive scholar who muses on his experiences in the village and offsets them against his knowledge of Mediterranean history, and "the textualized persona of the field investigator," who is a more comic character. The "I" figure is therefore highly multiplex: he is both the academic—at once ethnographer, historian, and linguist—and the *naïf*, a childlike being who is supposed not to know even basic information about sex and nature. Sometimes this naïveté is portrayed as being a result of incomplete knowledge of Arabic, as when he causes consternation by his admission that he has never heard the word for "sex" before (61). At other times Ghosh plays along with the idea of himself as a simpleton out of what appears to be sheer exasperation. After young men laugh at him for not understanding the Arabic for "sex" or "masturbation," the narrator willfully decides to exaggerate their stereotypes of him, claiming that he believes the reflection of the moon in a pond is the light from Ahmed's torch (64).

These examples of the narrator's misunderstandings lead to their surprise if he shares any attitudes or cultural practices with them. Thus when Ghosh congratulates Khamees on a boy he takes to be his son, Khamees is pleased but astonished that "[h]e understands that people are happy when they have children," concluding, "he's not as upside down as we thought" (172). The language Khamees uses here recalls the cautionary tale about the upside-down house that Tha'mma tells her sister in Ghosh's previous novel, *The Shadow Lines*. Many of the villagers thus view Ghosh in a quasi-Orientalist way as an Other, a topsy-turvy being who does everything differently. This is why Ghosh

is touched when Nabeel tries to put himself in the Indian's situation, commenting that he must miss people at home when he puts the kettle on with just enough water for one. In response to this compassion Ghosh writes:

> The conversation quickly turned to something else, but Nabeel's comment stayed in my mind; I was never able to forget it, for it was the first time that anyone in Lataifa or Nashawy had attempted an enterprise similar to mine—to enter my imagination and look at my situation as it might appear to me. (152)

Here Ghosh aligns Nabeel's moment of insight with his own ethnographic "enterprise," arguing that both are attempts to look at the world from another's point of view. Ghosh's equation of anthropology with the attempt "to enter my imagination and look at my situation as it might appear to me" suggests that he believes the ethnographer's most important quality should be empathy, the ability to put him- or herself in someone else's shoes. He is not alone in arguing this. In his by now classic anthropological manifesto, Malinowski writes that the ethnographer should seek to "grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world" (25).

And yet, the work of the New Anthropologists, *inter alia*, has also shown that the concept of a stable, monolithic "Other" has splintered into a proliferation of "others." Malinowski's use of the emphasized word "*his*" in the statement above indicates that the worldview of orthodox ethnographers tends to exclude at least half of the population, as women's experiences are often not taken into consideration. Recent ethnographies are more sensitive to the fact that every subject has a unique identity constituted by factors such as gender, race, age, sex, class, and religion. Thus, in order to "enter the imagination" of the villagers Ghosh has to put himself in the position of a variety of different "others." He is quite successful in bringing out the tensions between different social classes within the village. For example, he explains that the village was founded by two men, whose descendents, the Badawy and Abu-Kanaka lineages, took on the roles of landowners and Imams respectively (117-19). Below these two important groups is a sub-class, the Jammâl lineage. Despite the financial gains the Jammâl have made since the 1952 Revolution, this group is considered "outside the boundaries of respectability" (164) by many of the Badawy and Abu-Kanaka. By detailing village hierarchies Ghosh makes us aware that some individuals, such as Khamees the Rat (a Jammâl), are restricted by prejudice and class.

His treatment of gender is arguably somewhat less perceptive, with few women appearing in the narrative in any depth. James Clifford writes of Ghosh's short story "The Imam and the Indian," that "[w]e hear little from women except a few, usually giddy, exclamations" ("Transit Lounge" 8). There is little more insight into women's lives in the longer text. One of the few women we are introduced to is Khamees's sister, Busaina, who has left her husband and moved back to her parents' house with her small child. The story is intriguing, and yet Busaina's predicament is little more than a sketch.

We see her cheerful resourcefulness when she is trying to sell inferior vegetables at the Thursday *souk* (186-7), but this vignette is not developed to examine her situation as a single mother. Whether the lack of women's voices in *In an Antique Land* is due to Ghosh's restricted access to women's stories[9] or to his greater interest in men's affairs is hard to say, but the female sex is an Other whose story is not greatly illuminated here.

One final problem of the "dominant anthropologies" that has been highlighted by their critics is their tendency to erase historical and environmental factors that may affect the people under study. Arjun Appadurai points out that place is only sketchily delineated in most ethnographical works. He writes, "[t]he circumstances in which […] [ethnographic] evidence is gathered (those of fieldwork) and the circumstances of the writing up of fieldwork have been much discussed […]. But [...] the spatial dimension of this circumstantiality has not been thought about very much" (16). Ghosh refuses to abstract his ethnographic subjects from their physical environment in the way that Appadurai suggests many ethnographers do. Instead he draws our attention to the tangible nature of the space in which he finds himself, describing many different settings, such as open fields, interiors of houses, and the marketplace. In a memorable passage he describes how he got lost in a warren of lanes when trying to find Ustaz Sabry's house:

> I set off for his house a little before the sunset prayers, and in my eagerness to get there I forgot to find out exactly where he lived. As a result I was soon lost, for Nashawy was much larger than Lataifa, with its houses squeezed close together around a labyrinth of tunnel-like lanes, some of which came to unexpected dead ends while others circled back upon themselves. [...] After I had passed through the square a second time I swallowed my pride and turning to the long train of children who had attached themselves to me, I asked the tallest among them to lead me to Ustaz Sabry's door. (123)

While most ethnographers describe space—where they discuss it at all—in a confident, factual manner,[10] here Ghosh describes his

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[9] This seems unlikely, since Ghosh acknowledges in his thesis that in Nashawy women "are not very closely segregated; they are never veiled, they sit with men, and talk with and meet with them quite freely, certainly without any embarrassment" (*Kinship* 197). In the thesis Ghosh provides the kind of information about women's kinship duties, marriage rituals, and work patterns that is absent from *In an Antique Land*. However he still focuses more closely on men and their concerns. For example, he claims that "[p]eople in Nashawy [...] shake hands constantly. To shake hands and 'to greet' are expressed by the same verb, *yisallim*, and everyone in the village is expected to great everyone else with a hand shake whenever they meet" (*Kinship* 217). He later acknowledges that these universalizing nouns "people" and "everyone" are actually used to denote only the male sex: "the collective exercise of hand shaking is entirely the monopoly of men" (*Kinship* 243).

[10] For instance, here is Malinowski describing the geographical location of his fieldwork:

> Orangerie Bay is closed, on its Eastern side, by a headland, the first of a series of hills, rising directly out of the sea. As we approach the land, we can see distinctly the steep, folded slopes, covered with dense, rank jungle,

location as a puzzle or "labyrinth" in which he is soon utterly bewildered. Similarly, whereas some ethnographers construct maps of the areas in which they reside,[11] suggesting that they have cartographical skills to represent the land which locals do not possess, Ghosh is reduced to asking local children directions. This passage may be read as an allegorical account of Ghosh's entire ethnographic project. Rejecting the lofty vantage point and third-person omniscience of much ethnographic writing, here we see the narrator admitting his disorientation in the village.

Furthermore, historical factors, such as the impact of colonialism on indigenous societies, are particularly difficult for ethnographies to acknowledge (Pratt 42). Imperial domination has of course been one of the main factors allowing ethnographers easy access to "primitive" field sites. As David Scott observes, "[t]he very possibility of the anthropological journey has been linked to the historical occasion of Western European expansion" (78). And yet this facilitating bond between colonialism and anthropology is written out of most ethnographic texts. Traditionally ethnographers have striven to recover a precolonial mindset, unsullied by the West or by contemporary political tensions. For example, in Margaret Mead's classic text *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), the reverberations of colonialism on the culture under study are largely erased from the narrative, and the Samoans are represented as a simple people, uncorrupted by Western influence.[12] Ghosh firmly rejects the ethnographic attempt to extricate

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> brightened here and there by bold patches of lalang grass. The coast is broken first by a series of small, land-locked bays or lagoons, with a flat, alluvial foreshore, and then from South Cape the coast stretches in an almost unbroken line, for several miles, to the end of the mainland. (33)

The limited human gaze is rejected here in favour of a panoramic vision that functions like a cinematic camera panning over the landscape. Malinowski's use of the first-person plural invites us to share his panoptical view of the New Guinea landscape, in a device similar to that used at the beginning of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Space, then, is depicted as posing no problems of representation for the ethnographer. His roving eye follows the contours of the land without impediment, over hills, sea, and jungle. Narratorial perspective is elevated far above the prosaic realities of life "on the ground" in the field site, in stark contrast to Ghosh's depiction of himself hopelessly lost in the Egyptian township.

[11] E.E. Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer*, for example, contains fifteen maps and "text-figures," which include maps depicting "Approximate area occupied by the Nuer" and "The Nuer and neighbouring peoples." Sarah Lloyd's *An Indian Attachment*, which is a mixture of travel account, autobiography, and ethnography that is still fairly Eurocentric in its approach, also contains several maps of the village in which Lloyd resides.

[12] Consider the way in which Mead represents Samoan culture as entirely devoid of political, religious, and legal institutions compared with the more "developed" society of the West:

> In complicated civilizations like those of Europe, or the higher civilizations of the East, years of study are necessary before the student can begin to understand the forces at work within them. A study of the French family alone would involve a preliminary study of French history, of French law, of the Catholic and Protestant attitudes towards sex and personal relations. A primitive people without a written language present a

the "primitive mind" undamaged from the wreckage of colonialism. He is constantly at pains to show imperialism's legacy, whether through the account of his ugly argument with the Imam about weaponry, or of the villagers' feelings of inferiority because of their adobe huts and basic agricultural tools. Furthermore, Ghosh is aware that a new manifestation of imperialism is emerging from the "oil encounter" in the Gulf states.[13] He depicts a village of people who may have wildly distorted views about both India and the West, but they have intimate knowledge of life in the Gulf states, especially Iraq.[14] He explores the advantages and disadvantages that arise from villagers' migration to Iraq, showing both the great material wealth that villagers accrue from work "outside," and the hatred and prejudice they provoke in that country. In a stark scene near the end of the text he indicates how caught up the waves of migrants in Iraq are in the modern-day neocolonial system. Because of the Western Allies' attack on Iraq, thousands of Egyptian men are forced to flee the country in a Biblical scene of deprivation and despair. In the text's final paragraph Ghosh describes watching the "epic exodus" on the television news, desperately scanning the images for a glimpse of his friend Nabeel, but with no success as he has "vanished into the anonymity of History" (353). Unlike more insular ethnographies, then, Ghosh is always at pains to set his village community against the international historical context. The "anonymity of History" is constantly counterbalanced by his imaginative reconstructions of historical and contemporary characters.

In sum, in *In an Antique Land* Ghosh grapples with the problem of representing the Other. He rejects any single historical or

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> much less elaborate problem, and a trained student can master the fundamental structure of a primitive society in a few months. (14)

Here Mead suggests that the oral nature of "primitive" societies engenders their structural simplicity. She dismisses the very idea of Samoan social and political organizations, in contrast with France's intricate "history, [...] law, [...] [and] attitudes towards sex." She also ignores the upheavals that imperialism have caused within the structure of Samoan society, depicting it as an ancient, unchanging system. Refuting her ahistorical approach to Samoan culture, Derek Freeman has shown that the decade in which Mead was writing, the 1920s, was a period of great unrest and change, with the different Samoan islands in revolt against their American and New Zealand colonizers (118). He also demonstrates that far from being a simple system that can be learnt "in a few months," Samoan society is made up of complex political organizations and social classes (121-30).

[13] See Chambers, "Oil."

[14] Examples of the villagers' ignorance about India and the West include Ustaz Mustafa's gross simplification of India as a place in which "[t]here is a lot of chilli in the food and when a man dies his wife is dragged away and burnt alive" (46) and the Imam's belief that there is no cremation in the West (235). In contrast, even such villagers as Jabir, who never get the opportunity to go abroad, have detailed knowledge about wages, living conditions, and jobs in Iraq because of the great number of men from the village who have worked in that country.

anthropological account's claim to provide an authentic and complete version of the Other. His discussion of anthropology suggests that its fieldwork methodology is based on concealed relations of dominance. The Other's specificity tends to be elided in ethnographic research, as generalizations about the community are made at the expense of discussion about gender, class, age, and historical circumstances. In place of the epistemically coercive discourses of history and anthropology, Ghosh offers a deliberately partial and dialogic narrative. He suggests that to provide a non-coercive translation of alterity, the text should be multi-faceted, imaginative, and open-ended.

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