

# PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS

*A Reader in Cultural Anthropology*



Linda S. Walbridge

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# Preface

We designed *Personal Encounters: A Reader in Cultural Anthropology* for undergraduates in introductory cultural anthropology courses. We have each taught many introductory courses and neither of us has been wholly satisfied with the materials available. The idea for this collection came out of a discussion about a story that Linda had written about her driver in Pakistan, Riaz. Linda found Riaz to be a thoroughly enjoyable person, intriguing in his perspectives on the world, and indispensable in many ways. April pointed out that such stories are what students like and remember best. We mused how Riaz's story could be used to introduce the complexities of social status in a caste system. We decided to put together a reader filled with original short stories about individuals like Riaz, and use these stories to reveal the abstract concepts in anthropology. These stories also show how anthropologists interact with individual people in other cultural settings.

While talking our idea over with colleagues, we found that they too had stories they wished to tell. We found numerous anthropologists who wanted to participate, to share their personal encounters and fieldwork experiences in a way that would engage students while teaching about the complexities of culture. The reader consists of 31 new articles specially produced for this volume. They are written with an eye toward capturing students' interest and offering glimpses of real life in a variety of cultural settings. The memorable stories point to major topics of concern to anthropologists working in the modern world: globalization, social status and inequality, rapidly changing political situations, the spread of HIV/AIDS, medicine, and the ways in which people cope with death and dying. The geographic breadth of the articles, from Mongolia to Mexico, and the contexts, from Islam to popular music, help to show students the diversity found in the world even as globalization brings us into closer contact. These essays show how traditional anthropological concerns such as marriage remain useful in understanding broad processes like culture change, while giving students a view of the current directions in cultural anthropology. The authors also address issues of ethics in anthropological work. We hope this is an introductory text that both instructors and students will truly enjoy using and that it will encourage lively discussion.

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# Significant Others: Introduction to Personal Encounters in Cultural Anthropology

April K. Sievert

Indiana University

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## ANTHROPOLOGY AND CULTURE

How did an eight-year-old boy come to spend two years living on a bus? Why did a family leave their grandmother alone on a mountainside? Why would a woman educated in America seek medical help from shamans in Indonesia? Questions such as these can be addressed using methods of **cultural anthropology**—the field of study devoted to understanding variation in human **culture**—a set of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors shared by a group of people that distinguish them in some way from other people. Cultural anthropologists seek to understand different facets of human societies and explore how such institutions as religion, politics, and economics relate and influence each other and combine to create culture. Explanations of culture therefore do not come easily, because there are always many angles to consider. Many anthropologists view culture as **holistic**, as a complex system combining interrelated learned behaviors, within the limits set by the biological species, *Homo sapiens*.

Nosy people, anthropologists are always observing and always asking questions. Anthropologists conduct interviews and write **ethnographies**—books or articles that describe and explain the cultures or cultural contexts they are trying to understand. Once students of anthropology start to see cultural behaviors as links within complex networks of ideas and traditions, these cultures can come alive, and be seen in all their dynamic, ever-changing richness. It may make perfect sense that some people eat guinea pigs, marry their cousins, keep their hair hidden from view if they are women, or perform any number of traditional customs, once a student has an idea of how these different facets interrelate. Anthropologists pay specific attention to these interrelations. For example, an anthropologist might find that a specific group of people who herd large animals in a desert environment also

practice elaborate hospitality, restrict women's movements outside the home, have strong kinship ties, and place a high premium on family honor. Anthropologists, through intensive studies, often uncover cases where seemingly unrelated practices both form and reflect a cultural group's worldview.

## ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Early anthropologists viewed culture as a definable entity, something they could simply document. They merely had to look for certain traits, make lists, and then compare those lists. But anthropologists now recognize that there are problems with this idea of culture as a set of easily definable traits, especially since within each group there are variations in how people speak their languages, how they behave, how they view the world, and what they believe. Any group is composed of individuals. No two individuals will learn, perceive, and interpret their cultures in exactly the same way—there is always variation. There is variation within cultural contexts because differences in age, sex, gender roles, status, ethnicity, nationality, "race," or religion create different cultural worlds for different people, even within the same group. Therefore, a single individual cannot be representative of an entire cultural group. Neither can an entire "culture," if distilled to a set of traits, take into account the range of individual variation. However, as each individual develops and adopts cultural behaviors, they do become the **agents** of culture, carrying culture with them, wherever they go and whatever they do. All people learn, react to what they learn, and have some latitude in selecting attitudes and ideas that suit them. Individuals abide within cultural contexts that affect their lives, actions, and attitudes. Culture certainly molds individuals, while individuals in turn influence cultural



changes. Parents teach their children; children teach their own children. Generation upon generation learns cultural ways, yet children never become exact cultural copies of their parents.

With this dynamic view of culture in mind, what can individuals teach us about the cultures in which they live? Individuals show us the variation. Thus, anthropologists always try to collect different perspectives from different members of a society. By speaking to many individuals, anthropologists can begin to see where similarities and differences lie, and they can formulate general ideas about prevailing attitudes and beliefs. Yet anthropology starts with one person talking to another person, either in a chance meeting or in a more formal **interview**.

As anthropologists, we often cross paths with specific people who leave indelible impressions on our memories and on our lives. Whether sought out as **cultural teachers** during **fieldwork**, or encountered by happenstance during the course of research or teaching, individual people teach anthropologists. Often we sit and chat with colleagues at conferences, only to hear the words, "I met the most remarkable person . . ." What better way to introduce students to anthropology than to tell the stories of just such remarkable people? Thus, we believe that sharing the stories of such remarkable people is one way—and an excellent way—to introduce students to the field of anthropology.

For this introductory reader, we collected tales of personal encounters between anthropologists and the people they meet. Personal stories help us to engage with members of another society or culture—to join them as they deal with an array of contemporary issues. As we get to know the people whose lives are presented here, we gain some insight into how specific individuals reflect their broader cultural environments. The people introduced here are very real people, with very real emotions, reactions, and concerns. In getting to know these individuals—Riaz the driver, Paddy the Irishman, Liu Hui, the businesswoman—you get to know something about the cultural contexts in which they live, about the conditions they deal with every day, about the opportunities they find or create, about their responses to a changing world, about their families and their lives. Many of the concepts covered in an introductory course in anthropology are abstract, but culture itself is not simply a mass of abstractions.

Although the articles are all about real people, in nearly every case, their names have been fictionalized. Anthropologists' **ethics** give us the responsibility for protecting people's privacy, and therefore their identities. We assure our cultural teachers (sometimes called **informants**) that their identities will be kept confidential. In some cases, there might even be danger

for people, if their names, locations, and actions are divulged. For similar reasons, the names of smaller villages and places mentioned here are usually pseudonyms, again to protect our cultural teachers.

In some of the cases presented in this reader, the anthropologists have cultivated long-term relationships and friendships with these individuals in the context of doing fieldwork, as Kuznar did with his friend Manuel, an apprentice shaman. Others are cases of accidental anthropology, in which an anthropologist meets a person outside of the classic context of fieldwork yet learns from him or her. I certainly did not expect to find a Dakota pipemaker among the students in an introductory physical anthropology class. His presence made for a serendipitous journey into the world of Native American stone pipes, their use, and their special meaning.

## TOPICS FOR PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS

Anthropology is only a bit more than a century old. As early anthropologists such as Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead set out to collect information, they concentrated on topics such as **language**, **kinship**, **subsistence**, and **marriage**. Since these ethnographic pioneers started working, the cultural world has become more interconnected in response to global communication and interaction. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, no unknown peoples are hidden away in remote rainforests. No societies depend solely on mobile **foraging** (hunting and gathering) lifestyles. Foraging, where it still occurs, does so within a broader system that always includes access to the products of agriculture.

The world is carved into nations, and all societies, whether small or large in scale, are under the political control of nation-states. The demise of cultural isolation has accelerated **acculturation**—the blending of cultural characteristics into wider and usually more dominant cultural contexts. Economic goods such as clothes, medicines, and electronics are transported freely around the globe. An information revolution in the form of the Internet has made contact with other cultures virtually instantaneous. These changes are part of a phenomenon known as **globalization**. Migration continues to move people along with their languages, religions, and national identities across wide distances—a situation sometimes referred to as **transnationalism**. This process can be seen in the article "Tears for the Saint, Tears for Ourselves," where we follow Seyed Moustafa on a journey that has his family fleeing his native Iraq to eventually settle in the United States. In migrating, Seyed Moustafa and his family join the ever-increasing populations of immigrants, immigrants who bring language, religion, customs, and



some excellent cuisine with them as they form new communities in new places.

Because of these rapid cultural changes, the topics or themes presented here reflect the current directions taken by anthropologists. As we solicited the papers, we discovered that the most popular topics researched now by anthropologists concern economic and political change, gender roles, medical issues, belief systems, and death.

In this volume, you will find sections on fieldwork, economics and work, changing political realities, gender, social status, health and healing, religion and belief, death and dying, material culture and art, and globalization. In each section, we present articles that illustrate the theme and in most cases underscore how rapidly the cultural universe is changing. These articles show that the pace of change is not the same everywhere, nor does it equally affect every aspect of a society. In some contexts we see resistance to change, and the reasons for this resistance may be as intriguing as the reasons for its occurrence.

The articles in this reader focus on the challenges of the modern world; however, the more traditional concerns of anthropologists are deeply embedded in the articles. For example, **kinship**, a fundamental concern to anthropologists, is not the focal point of any single article, nor does it get its own section heading. However, kinship provides a context for behavior in many cultures and can be examined within many of the articles. You will see how kinship affects social and economic relations in, for example, the way that family members cope with the death of their brother in "Death of an Irishman" and in the way that a weaving cooperative is set up in "Rosa, Weaving Women into Life." As you read these articles, consider how marriages, families, and kin relations affect the lives of people whose stories are told here. We offer readers the opportunity to see the many facets of culture interacting within the context of each article.

When we solicited these articles, we told the authors that we wanted them to write in a style that students would enjoy. They weren't to use theory and jargon. They were to tell a story, usually about a single individual, and through that story reveal a snapshot of the culture within which this individual lives. We hope that you, as students, will agree that they have been successful in making peoples of other societies come alive.

### **USING PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS: A GUIDE FOR FACULTY**

Each section of articles has an introduction explaining that topic. These introductions offer the student more background on topics, introduce specific terminology,

and point out the importance of understanding how these topics contribute broadly to culture. Each individual chapter has a short introduction explaining the context for the article and giving relevant background material regarding the story's setting. We highlight the cultural themes through discussion questions that precede each article. These questions guide students toward the important issues presented in the articles.

We organized the topics in the reader in such a way to complement the structure usually found in introductory cultural anthropology textbooks—fieldwork discussed first and globalization, a topic that can relate to any facet of culture from economics to religion, last. However, the holistic nature of the discipline ensures that any one article could fit under more than one of the section headings. For example, although Strauss's article on yoga is placed under the theme of globalization, it also provides an example of attitudes about health and healing. Likewise, although Briller primarily discusses social status, the subsistence strategies of pastoralists are also referred to in her story. To make selecting articles for assignments more flexible, we include Table 1 as a guide for faculty.

Articles focus on societies from around the world, yet several countries, such as India, Mexico, Ireland, and Zambia, are represented by more than one story. These can provide information on several aspects of a single country or area so students can begin to see variation present within a single world region, thus gaining a broader view. For example, in the two articles set in Zambia, one occurs in a remote rural village, the other in the largest city of Lusaka. In a few cases, such as Pribilsky's article about a man who lives in two worlds, his village in Ecuador and New York City, the articles are relevant to more than one region or country. The breakdown of articles by region is shown in Table 2. We hope these two tables can serve as guides for faculty who may consider using articles in this book for anthropology courses that target specific topics or specific regions.

Articles were chosen for this reader on the basis of the topic covered and the readability of the work. We want these articles to be accessible to introductory students. Each article has both narrative and sufficient anthropological context and analysis to allow the student to understand what they are reading. However, there is variation in the complexity of the articles, and some may prove more challenging than others. We hope that this variability will match the diversity in student abilities and provide something for everyone.

**TABLE 1 Anthropological Topics and Relevant Articles**

Topic	Authors
Fieldwork	Derby, Koops, Kuznar, Maack, Pyburn, Sandstrom and Sandstrom
Subsistence	Briller, Cliggett, Kuznar
Economics and Work	Acheson, Behrman, Coffey, Derby, Maack, O'Brian, Pribilsky, Walbridge ( <i>Driving</i> )
Politics and Political Change	Acheson, Hegland, Quinn, Simonelli, Walbridge ( <i>Tears</i> ), Trix
Migration and Refugees	Maack, Pribilsky, Walbridge ( <i>Tears</i> )
Language and Communication	Lyons, Quinn, Spitulnik
Health and Healing	Buchanan-Aruwafu, Cartwright, Hattari, Koops, Maack, Strauss, Williamson
Gender	Behrman, Buchanan-Aruwafu, Cliggett, Coffey, Eppe, Hegland, Lamb, Kuznar, Peake, Pyburn
Kinship, Marriage, and Family	Eppe, Hattari, Hegland, Koops, Lamb, O'Brian, Pribilsky, Simonelli, Williamson
Social Status	Walbridge ( <i>Driving</i> ), Briller, Lamb, Cliggett, Coffey, Hegland
Religion and Belief	Bennett, Hattari, Kuznar, Sandstrom and Sandstrom, Sievert, Walbridge ( <i>Tears</i> ), Williamson
Death and Dying	Bennett, Hattari, Trix, Williamson
Material Culture	O'Brian, Sievert, Sandstrom and Sandstrom
Art and Popular Culture	Lyons, Sandstrom and Sandstrom, Spitulnik
Culture Change	Acheson, Behrman, Coffey, Derby, Hegland, Kuznar, Maack, Pribilsky, Sandstrom and Sandstrom, Simonelli, Strauss, Walbridge ( <i>Tears</i> )
Applied Anthropology	Cartwright, Maack, O'Brian, Pyburn, Simonelli
Globalization and Transnationalism	Coffey, Derby, Hattari, O'Brian, Pribilsky, Spitulnik, Strauss, Walbridge ( <i>Tears</i> )

**TABLE 2 Regions Covered and Relevant Authors**

Region	Authors
Africa	Cliggett (Zambia), Maack (Tanzania), Spitulnik (Zambia)
Australia and the Pacific	Buchanan-Aruwafu (Solomon Islands), Koops (Cook Islands), Peake
Middle East	Bennett (Syria), Hegland (Iran), Pyburn (Yemen), Trix (Lebanon), Walbridge ( <i>Tears</i> ) (Iraq)
Europe	Acheson (Slovakia), Quinn (Ireland), Williamson (Ireland)
South and Southeast Asia	Derby (India), Hattari (Indonesia), Lamb (India), Strauss (India), Walbridge ( <i>Driving</i> ) (Pakistan)
East Asia	Briller (Mongolia), Coffey (China)
Latin America—Mexico	Cartwright, O'Brian, Sandstrom and Sandstrom, Simonelli
Latin America—South America	Lyons (Ecuador), Kuznar (Peru), Pribilsky (Ecuador)
Native North America	Eppe, Sievert
North America/United States	Behrman, Eppe, Pribilsky, Sievert, Walbridge ( <i>Tears</i> )

# Contents

Preface xi

## INTRODUCTION

Significant Others: Introduction to Personal Encounters in Cultural Anthropology xv  
*April K. Sievert*

## PART I *Anthropology and Fieldwork* 1

- 1 The Evil Eye Is Bad for Business 4  
*Paul Derby*
- 2 Worthless Women 9  
*K. Anne Pyburn*
- 3 Eliasa and the Kwacha Video Coach 15  
*Pamela A. Maack*

## PART II *Economics and Work* 21

- 4 Rosa, Weaving Women into Life 23  
*Robin O'Brian*
- 5 A Mother's Work 27  
*Carolyn Behrman*
- 6 Sunday Dinner at Hanka's 33  
*Julianna Acheson*

## PART III *Changing Political Realities* 39

- 7 The Irish Rally for Irish 41  
*E. Moore Quinn*
- 8 The Scent of Change in Chiapas 46  
*Jeanne Simonelli*
- 9 Talking Politics: A Village Widow in Iran 53  
*Mary Elaine Hegland*

**PART IV *Gender* 61**

- 10      **Green Earrings: A Widow's Tale**      63  
          *Sarah Lamb*
- 11      **Queen for a Day**      67  
          *Carolyn Epple*
- 12      **Sitting on the "Outers" with the Girls, Watching the Boys Play**      72  
          *Susan Peake*

**PART V *Social Status* 77**

- 13      **Driving the Memsahib**      79  
          *Linda S. Walbridge*
- 14      **Vodka and Dumplings for New Year's**      85  
          *Sherylyn H. Briller*
- 15      **Ambivalence of Grandsons and Rescue by Daughters**      90  
          *Lisa Cliggett*

**PART VI *Medicine and Healing* 95**

- 16      **Little Dove**      97  
          *Elizabeth Cartwright*
- 17      **A Virgin to the Vaka**      102  
          *Vaughn Koops*
- 18      **Trae had: Kayzy's Reflections**      109  
          *Holly Buchanan-Aruwafu*

**PART VII *Religion and Belief* 115**

- 19      **Healing the Body, Healing the Soul**      117  
          *M. Ligaya Hattari*
- 20      **Manuel, Apprentice Yatiri**      122  
          *Lawrence A. Kuznar*
- 21      **Tears for the Saint, Tears for Ourselves**      127  
          *Linda S. Walbridge*

**PART VIII *Death and Dying* 133**

- 22      **Death of an Irishman**      135  
          *Kathleen G. Williamson*

- 23     **The Death of Omar**     140  
       *Frances Trix*
- 24     **Death and Hope: Syrian Stories**     145  
       *Anne Bennett*

**PART IX    *Material Culture, Art, and Identity*    151**

- 25     **Smoking Sage**     153  
       *April K. Sievert*
- 26     **Aurelio's Song**     157  
       *Barry Lyons*
- 27     **The Shaman's Art**     163  
       *Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom*

**PART X    *Globalization*    171**

- 28     **Living the *Chulla Vida***     174  
       *Jason Pribilsky*
- 29     **Swamiji: A Life in Yoga**     180  
       *Sarah Strauss*
- 30     **Behind the Microphone**     185  
       *Debra Spitulnik*
- 31     **The Model Worker Talks Back**     193  
       *Courtney Coffey*

- Index**     I-1

# PART I

## *Anthropology and Fieldwork*



*Photo by John Walbridge.*

Before a person can be enlisted into the ranks of “real” sociocultural anthropologists, he or she must go through a sort of rite of passage called “fieldwork.” This is a lengthy process involving research in another culture, generally involving the learning of another language. It may or may not involve formal questionnaires and statistical analysis, but it definitely does involve “participant observation.” The researcher lives with the people under study and participates in their everyday activities. In this way the anthropologist begins to see the culture through the eyes of the people he or she is studying, while learning to view his or her own background, and, indeed, all of humanity, in a new light.

This is a more difficult task than it may seem on the surface. Many researchers experience what is called **culture shock** when they initially enter a different setting and experience drastically new customs. Anthropological research cannot be conducted by the same rules used in physics or biology because the sociocultural anthropologist, often called an ethnographer, has the task of capturing the uniqueness of a culture that has resulted from its own creative use of symbols. Tools such as mapping an area, census taking, and administering questionnaires may also be used, but nothing takes the place of immersing oneself in the way of life of a group of people. Through participant observation, analysis, and self-reflection, anthropologists hope to rid themselves of **ethnocentrism**, that is, viewing other peoples’

beliefs and customs in terms of their own standards. The field of anthropology has usually subscribed to a belief in the concept of **cultural relativism**, which states that each way of life should be evaluated according to its own standards of right and wrong. However, there is also a realization that to carry this concept too far can lead to condoning universally unacceptable behaviors such as racism or even genocide. Anthropologists realize that they have to attempt to see things through the eyes of others while still maintaining standards about important matters having to do with fundamental human rights. Certainly one contribution anthropologists can make through their understanding of human behavior is to help reduce the degree of **stereotyping** found in societies, especially that which involves inaccurate and demeaning ways to describe others so as to support the privileged status of one group over another.

Anthropologists have paid considerable attention to their methodology and how they write about a society. Ideas about how research should be conducted have changed over the decades. During the early years of the field of anthropology, researchers believed that they could remain in the comfort of their own home or university and simply rely on reports sent home from various parts of the globe. But anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski in Europe and Franz Boas in the United States broke with this “armchair” model of studying cultures. Through their own fieldwork they shifted the focus of anthropology from hearsay to observation. Secondhand reports were considered insufficient; the ethnographer had to be there to see and experience the culture, to learn a new language and speak to people in their own tongue.

In the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, much of the world was under European colonial rule. Peoples in Asia and Africa were excluded from government and many other areas of life. Hence, to a large extent, they were not permitted to develop politically and economically. Anthropologists often saw these societies as being locked in the past and wrote about them accordingly. With the end of colonial domination, societies around the world have undergone tremendous change as they grapple with defining themselves as nations and developing governmental systems and economic bases that fit their situations. While the challenges for these countries are enormous, anthropologists also face challenges: they must find ways to understand and write about rapidly changing societies where old categories and ideas are often discarded. Also, because of the legacy of colonial rule and the lessons learned from it, anthropologists have become more reflective about the possible influences that

they might have on the people they contact. Increasingly, they are realizing that what they say and write can have an impact on the people they are studying—for better or for worse.

One of the challenges for anthropologists is that of studying societies fraught with the traumas brought about by modernity, and by marginalization on the postcolonial world stage. These traumas can take the form of civil wars in which various ethnic groups struggle for power in recently created states. Or they can be the ravages of diseases brought about by mass migrations resulting from warfare or economic turmoil. The ethnographer can find him- or herself no longer simply studying a people, but also struggling to find ways to alleviate their suffering.

Increasingly, anthropologists are called upon to use their skills as fieldworkers to address a variety of problems facing a society. While many anthropologists devote their working years to the study of one region or country, at other times they are forced by circumstances to turn an “anthropological eye” on cultures with which they have little familiarity. In other words, it is their skill as researchers that is in demand rather than their specific knowledge of a place. Increasingly, the field of **applied anthropology**—in which anthropological methodology, findings, and concepts are put to use to attain social goals—is gaining in importance in fields such as medicine, business, and law.

While fieldwork may be the hallmark of sociocultural anthropology, it is now being used by scholars in fields such as history, sociology, political science, and criminal justice. Indeed, the fieldwork techniques used by anthropologists—surveys, interviews, observations, and participation in social and cultural practices—can be applied to a wide range of research problems in a number of fields.

Whether an anthropologist studies a remote small herding village in Asia or a bustling city in the United States, fieldwork is the common denominator that links anthropologists’ perspectives the world over.

Paul Derby arrives in the bustling, crowded pilgrimage city of Banaras, India, where he is overwhelmed by new sights and sounds and by hawkers of goods. Happily he finds a cultural teacher in the form of Thomas, a money changer, seller of silks, and shop owner who appreciates the potentially dire effects of the “evil eye.”

When K. Anne Pyburn endeavors to conduct a study of women’s agricultural potential in Yemen without knowing a word of Arabic, she is taken in hand by Raja, a hospitable woman who reveals that Yemeni women may have some freedoms that Pyburn had never considered.



Pamela Maack finds Eliasa, a Tanzanian child orphaned by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Tanzania. Through Eliasa, we glimpse how crushingly devastating AIDS is for families, and through Maack, we glimpse the emotional challenges that anthropology often presents.

***Other articles with relevance to fieldwork:***

*A Virgin to the Vaka* by Vaughn Koops

*Manuel, Apprentice* Yatiri by Lawrence Kuznar

*The Shaman's Art* by Alan Sandstrom and Pamela  
Effrein Sandstrom

# The Evil Eye Is Bad for Business

Paul Derby

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Hugging the banks of the holy Ganges River, Banaras may be the oldest and most important religious site in India. Every year, millions of Hindus make pilgrimages to the city to bathe in the dirty but spiritually purifying waters of the Ganges to cleanse away their sins. Along with these religious pilgrims come thousands of foreign tourists and religious scholars seeking a glimpse of the great religious tradition of the East. But the spirit alone cannot support a great city, however holy, and the pilgrims are the industry that feeds Banaras. This article introduces Thomas, whose business is one small cog in this complex and ancient industry. This article also tells of Paul Derby's immersion into the culture of Banaras; not the culture of the pilgrims, tourists, and scholars that has so often been written about, but of the people who live and work in this bustling, old, decrepit city. This is another Banaras where about one million permanent residents are jammed into a five-mile stretch along the Ganges with hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, temples too many to count, and *sadhus* (holymen), sacred cows and monkeys, oxen carts and bicycle rickshaws, beggars and lepers.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. What can you learn about doing fieldwork from this account? Have you ever been in a situation that was so radically different than what you are used to? How might you react to such an experience?
2. How might you feel if suddenly people could not understand what you were trying to say, or if you did not understand the language being spoken to you? How do you think you would feel if strangers were making fun of the way you talked or looked or acted? How would you feel if you did not like the people you met, and how would you deal with that situation?
3. What can be said about the relationship of belief in the evil eye and the adoption of a capitalist economy in India?
4. Can you compare the evil eye to anything from your culture? Is this just superstition and magic?
5. What does this article tell you about relationships and power in Indian culture? Why are the right connections important in business? Why was Mohun forced to leave his family just because he married a woman from a different caste? Why did Thomas allow Rama to bother him?

## THE MALIK AND THE DALAL

"*Ye kya hai?*" (What is this?) I pointed up at the three chilies, one lemon, and three more chilies hanging on a string from a nail above the doorway on the outside of a little shop in the city of Banaras, India.

"*Ye ajib chiz ke bad mujhe batao?*" (Tell me after this strange thing?) I was trying out my very best Hindi, which brought peals of laughter from the shopkeeper.

"*Mujhe is ajib chiz ke bare me batao.*" (Tell me about this strange thing). So I was corrected by my friend Thomas, a businessman and owner of this small cloth and souvenir shop just around the corner and up the street from my apartment at the southern end of Banaras.

Banaras was not a pleasant place for me to live. It is crowded, dirty, and hot. There were many times in the first two months of my nine months of fieldwork that I just wanted to go home: home to a bed that didn't require mosquito netting around it to protect me from malaria and home to people who spoke the same language as me and didn't make fun of me when I made a mistake. But I stayed and I'm glad that I did, because in time I got to know the real people behind the façade. The people, my friends, who made this whole thing work. Thomas was probably the most important of these friends.

Thomas specializes in foreigners. Outside of his shop are *dalals*, or commission men, so named because, if they are successful in enticing the visitor to Thomas's