

In the Event of an Anthropological Thought

Anand Pandian
Johns Hopkins University
February 2012

Forthcoming in *Generations and Genres: Conversations with Veena Das*, edited by Roma Chatterjee, Fordham University Press

Perhaps the most striking thing about Veena Das' moving essay on her childhood in Delhi is its concluding question: "With such a history, what else could I have become...but an anthropologist?"¹ On the face of it, this is a history that would not seem to have insisted on the becoming of any one mode of being at all. The story she tells is one of endless accidents of circumstance, composed as a series of shadowy impressions and enduring puzzles. Something of these impressions and puzzles remains as the essay floats from instance to instance, recollected event to recollected event. And yet, taken together, they do not exactly explain the genesis for which they are held responsible—at least, that is, if such an account might be assumed to proceed in the manner of bricks laid down one by one to form a path toward a given destination, like the brick paths that lead through the university campus I share now with Das. What picture, then, of anthropological becoming is this?

It may be helpful to reverse the presumed orientation of the question itself, taking it to involve more of a looking forward than a looking backward—or, more precisely, a looking forward that does not depend for its surety upon the footing gained with a certain kind of backward glance. What if Das' question, in other words, was less concerned with the known elements that might be taken to compose a known outcome – anthropologist – than with the uncertain character of a life in the present whose nature could be approached only by lingering among those experiences that have divested this life of its certitudes? What kind of anthropology could be taken to express such a life and history?

Here, the essay is very suggestive. We find an immersion in poverty and its difficult lessons. We find an attention to the vicissitudes of a world in upheaval. We find an awareness of both the necessity and the frailty of social relations. We find a tendency to notice things you are not supposed to see. We see an attachment to what is meant by these fleeting forms of experience. We see a willingness to linger with what is strange. We see an acknowledgment of what remains unknown. And we cannot help but see, in all of this, a measure of faith in the fearsome potential of time. For as we traverse the myriad moments and events that compose the essay, we eventually find ourselves in the company of a deeply anthropological question, posed once to Das by her late brother: "You want to be the kind of person who is looked at by others or who looks out at the world?" This is a distinction, a way of thinking, of enduring value for Das, but it is one whose clarity and endurance cannot be extricated from the complex circumstances of its emergence.

The question with which Das closes this particular essay – "What else could I have become...but an anthropologist? – therefore seems to be less concerned with the becoming of an anthropologist than with a picture of anthropology itself as a mode of opening oneself to becoming. That is to say, we have here an image of anthropological practice in which the development of concepts cannot be extricated from the flux of experience through which such figures of thought arise. What is it to think with the world in which we find ourselves, when we

begin to look and think? In this essay, I seek to explore this picture of anthropology by considering the relationship between thought and event in anthropology—more specifically, what we might take as the “eventedness” of anthropological thought.

One among anthropology’s many peculiarities is its commitment to experience as a matter of method: how could something as elusive and capricious as experience in a living world – some world, any world – yield concepts of enduring significance and value? To put things this way is already to oppose implicitly a pair of terms that are often contrasted in our analytical vocabulary: structure and event. To be sure, anthropology is concerned with both happenings in the world and the forms and relations we abstract from them. Everything turns, however, on how we construe the relation between these domains: between events in the world and emergent forms of anthropological thought.

The turn in contemporary anthropology toward questions of history and power is often understood as a shift of attention from structures *to* events. Such is the way, for example, that Sherry Ortner describes the critiques of structuralism that began to surface in the 1970s, concerned with “the denial of any significant impact of history or ‘event’ upon structure.”² But as a counterpoint to this idea, consider the following passage from an interview with Claude Levi-Strauss in 1972—

I would say that I began as a structuralist without knowing it. I remember in particular a Sunday in May 1940, during the ‘Phony War.’ I was somewhere near the Maginot line, lying on the grass musing over a dandelion puff. I was suddenly struck in the most vivid way by the feeling that the wonderfully regular structure of this object was not and could not be the work of a succession of independent causes, but that some kind of organizing principle was necessary... I didn’t go beyond a set of confused ideas... [but] I was ‘ripe.’³

At first glance, this passage might appear to concern the occurrence of one non-event in the midst of another: the idle contemplation of a flower in an unexpected moment of wartime leisure.⁴ But we may take this minor event of structure itself as a means of broaching the subtle intimacy between structure and event in anthropology, a kinship whose articulation has long depended upon the temporal openness of experience. As Levi-Strauss writes in *The Savage Mind* – or what could be translated more faithfully as “Pansies for Thought” – “the principle underlying a classification can never be postulated in advance. It can only be discovered *a posteriori* by ethnographic investigation, that is, by experience.”⁵ Levi-Strauss took this method to involve an immersion of the mind in a perceptual environment, Boris Wiseman observes, out of which was expressed not only the abstract structures of human thought, but also the texts through which these structures could be rendered sensible and perceptible.⁶ How else are we to grasp the wistfulness with which he describes his hope that a reading of *The Raw and the Cooked* might possibly convey “the sensation of listening to a musical work”?⁷

In what follows, I explore the idea that it is in the event of experience, in all its uncertain promise, that structures find their purchase in anthropological thought. I do so by examining the articulation of this idea in the work of Veena Das, and by considering the emergence of a similar notion in some of my own ethnographic fieldwork in south India. The work of Das has long shown, in myriad ways, how anthropological concepts may be taken to grow out of particular circumstances, as a conceptual expression of their empirical complexity. As I seek to suggest in the first half of this essay, this quality of her work has much to do with her commitment to think

with the traditions, situations, and predicaments of others. Taking a cue from this mode of anthropological thought, I turn in the second half of the essay to a time of drought and a few tales concerning rain in Tamil Nadu, seeking here to identify both a structure of thought at work, and an image of how thought might be understood to work within and beyond a world.

Cognition as Structure, Structure as Event

Throughout the span of her work, Veena Das has attended to the occurrence of events on the threshold of perception. To address oneself to such events is to radically upturn our customary ways of conceiving what it is that makes an event in the world. We find this to be the case in Das' most recent monograph, *Life and Words*, where above all it is the "eventfulness" of the everyday that is at issue: the ways in which daily acts of work, care, and conversation might be seen to express – at times suddenly, but often in the very rhythms of their continuous exercise – enduring histories of violence. This is a work suffused with the difficulty of picturing and acknowledging such ordinary eventfulness, and here lies much of its challenge for contemporary anthropology. Yet, we find similar concerns already expressed – albeit, perhaps, in an incipient form – in a book published thirty years prior, *Structure and Cognition*.

This first book invites us to see "Hindu social life" anew, by refracting our understanding of this domain through the prismatic structure of a pair of Sanskrit literary texts. Working in and against the tradition of social anthropology, Das challenges a prevailing emphasis on fieldwork as the basis of anthropology. Her problem is not with ethnography as such, but instead with a form of empiricism that neglects the insight that "to think is to think conceptually."⁸ Paradoxically, to insist naively on the importance of fieldwork alone is to commit oneself to a world in which nothing actually happens: "The relative neglect of these problems has led to a conception of the external world in anthropological writings, as a pre-existing model."⁹ With our necessary and inevitable reliance upon structures of thought, Das implies, it is difficult to grasp the happening of things. It is this difficulty to which *Structure and Cognition* is addressed. Though it might appear at first glance to be a book about enduring structures of social life, we may take it instead as a work most concerned with the emergence of conceptual events.

Take, for example, the picture of the "conceptual order of Hinduism" that Das develops through her reading of the *Dharmaranya Purana*, a medieval account of the Modh Brahmins in what is now Gujarat. She is concerned here with "the structure of a text in its entirety," but this is a model that "does not lie at the surface of the text."¹⁰ Her approach instead tracks the "alchemical" operation by which observed social reality is reconstituted here as a "mythical reality."¹¹ Das first presents a series of myths from the Dharmaranya Purana, concerning the creation of the world, and the creation and fate of those who inhabit this part of it. She analyzes these myths individually to find them structured by a series of distinctions and displacements, and then as a whole to reveal a "total universe of discourse" structured around three categories in particular: Brahman, king, and *sanyasi* or renouncer. These categories become visible only through a manipulation of the temporality of the stories from which they are abstracted: "by restating the sequence of incidents in the myth in a contracted form, in a new arrangement."¹² We have at work here, in other words, a complex relationship between the time of narrative, that of social life, and that of anthropological understanding.

What do we come to see by juxtaposing and intertwining these times? In a pursuit of structural and conceptual order, we are led to acknowledge a more variegated picture of Hindu

social life. The category of the Brahman is revealed as anomalous and equivocal in its character, a mediating term that shuttles between the social and the asocial and thereby unsettles any firm distinction that might be drawn between these domains.¹³ Differences of *jati* or "caste" are shown to express not just degrees of purity along a hierarchical line but instead deeper distinctions of "quality."¹⁴ The play of such differences within a conceptual order also brings into sharper focus its tension with the fluxes of empirical life. Heterodox sects such as the Jains and Buddhists, for example, are seen to pose more radical challenges to Hinduism than might seem to be the case, undertaking not a rebellion against its hierarchies but a complete confusion and negation of its "grammar" of relations.¹⁵ And in more general terms, we find that meaning keeps shifting with context, as is the case with that of the word "Shudra," which "changes in accordance with whether the reference is to the conceptual order of Hinduism or to the empirical order."¹⁶

Let us keep in mind that the primary text that Das has chosen here for analysis is an account of the history of a regional caste in western India. The forms of difference that Das excavates from this text encourage us to see Hinduism itself differently: not as a "random juxtaposition of traits," but instead as a serial development of "variants."¹⁷ The procedure of analysis, in other words, returns time to the object of its examination, confounding any ready opposition between structure and event, synchrony and diachrony, for structural categories are "continuously redefined and manipulated in different social contexts."¹⁸ What might at first appear to be a symptom of the "blurred and indistinct" nature of Hindu structural categories – to borrow a phrase from Louis Dumont that Das subjects to criticism – is presented instead as a fault of anthropological perspective.¹⁹ It is not that Hinduism is something vague whose nature can therefore only be approximated, but instead that this apparent vagueness derives from our own tendencies to fix into place a field of life that is itself constantly moving and changing. The event most essentially at stake for Das here, in other words, is an event of anthropological perception.

This fault may be rectified, *Structure and Cognition* implies, only by confronting the temporal quality of our own relationship to that which we examine. Following the norms of structuralist method, Das shifts attention from elements to relations, taking the latter as the "smallest isolates" with which we may work.²⁰ At stake here, however, are not only the relations one may establish among the categories at work in some domain of social life, but also the investigative relations through which such categories themselves become visible. This becomes clear only in the epilogue of the work, where Das reflects on her choice of materials for analysis from the *Dharmaranya Purana*:

"In retrospect, it seems to me that within the significant unit isolated by me, the criterion of cumulative accretion provided an important clue. In other words, within this unit the precise order of succession of the stories was important, and could not be ignored for building up the paradigmatic structure."²¹

Let us mark that *Structure and Cognition* itself mirrors this order of temporal succession, presenting the relevant myths of the *Dharmaranya* in successive turn: "We shall now proceed to an analysis of the next myth, 'The Sorrows of Shrimata'..."²² It is as though the continuous differentiation of Hinduism that the work describes can only be revealed through a sequential accretion of transformative material in the experience of the reader. The "right to listen" – to the many tongues in which myths and rituals may be seen to speak – claimed by the work is a right that may be exercised only through an involvement of oneself in the time of one's object, an event of thought whose outcome can only be followed, rather than predicted in advance. Looking back at *Structure and Cognition*, what is most remarkable about the text is its insistent recourse

to the word "hope" for what it intends to show, a recourse that cannot be dismissed as simple rhetorical convention, for the uncertainty of the enterprise of anthropological thought suffuses the endeavor from the outset.

"The particular mode in which the subject is immersed in the temporal," Das writes in *Life and Words*, "shapes the contour of the event."²³ We may take this claim to concern not only those about whom anthropologists write, but also our own thinking and writing about them. For Das, anthropology begins with a posture of responsiveness, composing a text "that is being constantly revised, rewritten, and overlaid with commentary."²⁴ Her work suggests an image of anthropology as a mode of thinking in time and in the relational skein that time alone may weave and unweave, a discipline of abstraction that nonetheless clings obstinately to the circumstances of its emergence. This is a practice of thought that happens in and with the vicissitudes of the world, deeply implicated in the very circumstances that it explicates. In what follows, I seek to develop a further sense of what is implied here concerning the interplay between events of thought and events in the world, by refracting these concerns through some of my own anthropological work in south India.

Thinking on a Land Once Ruled by Kings

In her work on *Critical Events*, Das engages a series of historical moments in which "old concepts, being asked to inhabit unfamiliar spaces, acquire a new kind of life."²⁵ I first encountered her work – and this book in particular – in a graduate seminar on the anthropology and historiography of South Asia, taught by Lawrence Cohen at the University of California, Berkeley in 1998. Thinking back to this moment, I cannot help but recall this space itself as one in which older ideas from distant places found new life: incipient events of thought whose actualization might come in the immediacy of classroom encounter with the fullness of a text, or through a more inchoate play of dispersed resonance and unexpected echo as we carried these concepts further afield. What if we were to take the expression of concepts in our own work, then, not as a layer of truth to be superimposed upon the worlds of which we write, but instead as an outgrowth of the life of thought already engaged with the events of these worlds?

For much of 2002, I was in the rural Cumbum Valley in south India, completing field research for a doctoral dissertation in anthropology. One of the most critical events that year was the failure of monsoon rains. While meteorologists attributed the failure to El Nino, and Indian government agencies scrambled to redress acute scarcities of necessary water, the farmers and agricultural laborers that I knew in the Cumbum Valley worked out their own responses to the crisis. Some executed surreptitious and sometimes daring diversions of available water. Others decided to plant their wetland fields with pulses and other dry crops rather than risking an expensive failure of paddy. Many others examined themselves and the lives of their neighbors and kin, seeking to make a moral diagnosis of the refusal of rain.²⁶ It is this latter form of thought that I wish to engage most closely here: how the travails of the present were reckoned by some to follow from the mythical flight of a king in the distant past, and what this mode of reckoning might suggest for us in turn about ways of thinking anthropologically with the uncertain condition of a world.

Up until that season, I had heard and read various things about these long gone kings. Lying now on the southwestern edge of the contemporary Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the Cumbum Valley had been captured by the East India Company in the late eighteenth century and

later incorporated into the colonial Madras Presidency. Archival records from 1790s document a multisided struggle for sovereignty over the region, involving the East India Company, the kingdoms of Mysore and Travancore, numerous chieftain or “little kings,” and one mysterious kingdom variously identified in the archives as Poonnyuthu, Poonyattoo, Poonyuttoo, Poonayuttoo, Poonayauth, Pooneat and Poonear.²⁷ A somber letter to the Dindigul Collector from a servant of the Travancore Rajah reports, on the 15th of February, 1795, that “the Poonnayuttoo Rajah of Goodalooore yesterday departed this life,” at which point the men of a nearby chieftain briefly sought to occupy its “Mud Fort” before the East India Company established decisive control over the territory and its revenues.²⁸

Now, more than two centuries later, there are no discernable traces of this fort in the area. And yet, recollections of these kings endure in startling and powerful ways. In my many conversations with men and women in the region about questions of moral conduct and failure, there was one phrase that seemed to bear poetic force and moral conviction in equal measure: *ithu raajaa aanda bhoomi*—“this is a land once ruled by kings.” There was no doubt that the phrase was issued as a warning: some took it to imply that one could also disappear as these kings had gone, but most understood it as a reminder that the force of these kings lingered in the earth as a moral compass and corrective: “Behave with care, or it will topple you over.” Along with certain wells, temples, and other material traces on the landscape attributed to the activity of these erstwhile sovereigns, field songs also suggested the force of a lingering royal presence:

*You who bears a blue umbrella,
You who sets out to see the land –
the land has darkened, and the place
you stood has become an orchard*

The verse presents an image of both witness and power, conjuring a figure capable of gracing the land he surveys with the moisture that it needs.²⁹ There is also something ominous in this image of an earth darkening with water, as if it serves to remind that this was a power that could transform but also overturn.

I was working in a village first settled in the nineteenth century by households of an agrarian Gounder caste, but dominated socially, economically, and numerically now by Kallar castefolk: members of an erstwhile “criminal tribe” still reputed throughout the region for “savage” and uncivil conduct, despite extensive landholdings and close involvement in agriculture and other settled trades. One morning that June of 2002, amidst the peanut fields that stretched to the edges of the forest along the southern fringe of the village, I witnessed a ritual prayer for rain that echoed some of the spirit of this particular folk verse. A small group of Kallar and Gounder cultivators gathered under a small fig tree, fixed with a brass bell and a trident planted into the earth below. Setting a pot of raw rice to boil, the cultivators asked the goddess Mariamman why she had withheld the rain. “Mari, ma, give us a good rain. Look at how we’re suffering,” one elderly woman said. A rooster was sacrificed, blood and water tinted yellow with turmeric splashing over all of us. The mood grew somewhat theatrical, as the goddess appeared to possess several of the men and women in turn. One of them, taking on her voice, promised that it would rain by 3am the next morning. This was interpreted as an adequate signal. Banana leaves were laid out, and we all shared in the cooked chicken and rice.

Despite all of these preparations, it did not rain that day, and for many more days to come. Two of the cultivators involved in the ritual had blamed the failure of rains on the lack of

“good thoughts” in the village, a judgment echoed by many others. “These people will never, ever reform themselves,” I was often told by people in the region about their own neighbors and kinsmen. Criminal desires and deeds seemed rife. “This is a time of ruin,” said Uthandan, a middle-aged laborer who would often go to Kerala to lay down cables for a wage because he could not count on farmers here to pay him properly for work. He lived in the village’s small quarter of “untouchable” Madari leather-workers. Taunted regularly by Kallar moneylenders and others to whom they could not respond, those of his quarter were the ones most likely to console themselves that this was a land once ruled by kings. And as Uthandan and his wife Kathiriyamma described, the departure of these rulers for the mountains of Kerala was a flight inextricable from the desiccating trials of the present—

It was a time of justice when the king was here. But with the ripening of the Kali Yuga, with aggressive talk and mischief growing, the king decided to leave. They left in a time of great heat. As they were standing under a beech tree, across the river, they met a man of our caste. “We can’t stand the sun. Our feet are blistering. Can you stitch us some slippers,” they asked. “I don’t have anything here, but let me see what I can do,” he said. He cut the skin from his own back. As he cut and cut his back, the skin kept coming and coming. He stitched slippers for all of them.

“What kind of boon do you want for yourself,” the king asked. “What should I ask?” our man said. “We have no land, we have nothing. If you let down some rain, we would at least be able to work a little and survive.” The king said, “So, there is at least someone here who thinks like this. Not bad. Whatever day you think of me, I will give you a boon.” The king’s sister was pregnant then, and she could walk no further. How beautiful she would have been? Some young men teased her and tried to rape her. She prayed to the goddess, and became a statue. That temple is still there.

After some time, they were suffering again without rain. Eleven of our people prepared to go to the house of the king, and one Gounder went along, to see whether there truly was a man of such justness. “Among the twelve of you, hasn’t one other person come?” the king asked. He gave them twelve kinds of vegetables to eat, and money for their expenses. They stopped to eat on their way back. The rice was still warm, but for one man, it had turned to worms. He came to think that the king was a just man. He dumped the worms into the river, and they turned into rice again. Our people piled up their rice for him to eat. And in the village, the Gounder announced by drumbeat that these lowly people should be given whatever they want, for they have divine powers.³⁰

There was something wrenching about hearing this tale on the stoop of their dilapidated hut, husband and wife so plainly debilitated by the physical and spiritual hardship of their lives. For them and other Madari castefolk, the relationship with the king was a source of slender hope in the face of persistent deprivation and exploitation. One morning that June, I was taken by one of their sons through the fields across the river, to “the temple of the great king that once ruled”: the beech tree described in the myth. There before the thick trunk of the tree, adorned with sashes, a spear, and vermilion markings, was an oblong, grey rock, bearing a butterfly-shaped depression on its surface that looked remarkably like a pair of feet standing together. Gathering donations from the households of the village, the Madari castefolk would pray here each year for

rain. Uthandan and Kathiriyamma showed me the long sickle they kept within their house to lead these ritual processions, from which they would always return with rain. They had gone this year as well, but with great dissension among their people, they said, nothing had happened.

Meanwhile, schooled in historical anthropology and taught to search out the colonial and postcolonial afterlife of diverse forms of Indian royal power, I was pursuing these historical threads for reasons of my own. I learned that the descendants of the Poonjar kingdom still maintained a palace and temple in Kanjiramattom, Kerala, where I finally arranged to meet P. K. Rama Varma Raja one morning. An airplane pilot once based in Gujarat, he described the border between myth and history as a puzzle. The Pandya king Manavikrama had fled from Madurai in the 12th century to establish a new capital of Gudalur in the Cumbum Valley, until the “salty, brackish water” of the region led his descendants a few centuries later to seek out a new area to settle in the mountains of Kerala.³¹ Rama Varma took me to the Meenakshi temple in Kanjiramattom maintained by his line, pointing out the parakeet motifs on the murals and woodwork that attested to their derivation from the Madurai Meenakshi temple in Tamil Nadu. And he described how people of the Madari caste from the Cumbum Valley had recently asked to measure his feet, offering to make him a pair of slippers. He was intrigued by my story of the rock, which he had never heard about, and we made arrangements for him to visit the site.

On the 3rd of July that year, we could hear drums beating in distant anticipation as we picked our way between dry fields bereft of paddy, toward the beech tree where many villagers had already gathered. The king, clad in a simple checked shirt and white dhoti as he stood beside the rock and its pediform impression, was venerated as a temple idol: his feet bathed with water, turmeric, and flowers, and his body adorned with garlands, vermilion, and ash by Kathiriyamma and other women. He fed a few of these women by hand from the rice that had been cooked here in a pot. Sitting then on the grass beside the tree and rock, men and women gathered all around him, he listened as Kathiriyamma told him the tale that she and her husband had told me. “We felt great thirst in our hearts,” she concluded: “And it was for that reason that Anand has been wandering for these last three months, vowing that the house of the king must be found.” Others addressed him more plaintively. “We’re withered up here, lord,” one woman pleaded: “bring down the rain.” With a firm tone of assurance yet somehow wanting in conviction, the king promised relief in clipped Tamil: “Now it will rain.” People kept beseeching him, all the same.

Back in the village, hundreds of others gathered to receive his blessings. Lunch was served in the house of the ailing Gounder headman, where many continued to approach the king individually. Among them was Rajendran, a middle-aged Kallar man who had contested the village panchayat election in 2001. One of the dominant themes of that election season was the idea, widely circulated by one of the leading Kallar candidates for village president, that only a Kallar man could protect the Gounders and other more vulnerable people of the village from the depredations of more unscrupulous members of his own caste. Rajendran in turn had tried to appeal to the most landless and desperate Kallar castefolk of the village, arguing that only he could defend them from the aggressions of forest officers and police constables seeing to thwart their more obviously illicit forms of livelihood. What both of these electioneering narratives had shared was a picture of rowdy Kallars as the sovereigns of an unruly present. It was this picture that came into focus again when Rajendran addressed the Poonjar king, telescoping past and present in a drunken ramble that assumed the form of both moral parable and veiled threat—

My mother must be 95 years old. What would she say? “A land once ruled by kings, boy, you should behave well.” What would my father say? We are very poor people. My father

was a watchman. He would watch over Gounder lands. "You shouldn't go grab from the bushes on the next field, boy." If there's a great heap of grain, it might be ok. But if it's small, they would say, "A thieving fellow came. He circled around our field, looking." We shouldn't go unseen to the next field and grab and steal from it. "Eat unseen from the Gounder's field," they say. The responsible one takes rightly and eats. Take unseen, and that Kappiliya [Gounder] fellow, if he curses us, our children won't flourish. This is what my father would say.

I was recording then with a video camera, and I must have stopped to intervene, as Rajendran had begun to speak of the tussles between Kallars and Gounders in the village uplands that had brought this Gounder headman's household to the brink of destitution. But then the video picked up a few more lines that Rajendran delivered, still facing the king with a somewhat menacing smile: "Because the water wasn't right, you ran there [to Kerala]. For us, there's not enough water now, so save us. You're the king, no? Give us some water too!"

Rama Varma named a few children that day and left shortly thereafter, rain yet to fall from the cloudy skies. A few days later, I spent the morning with Thangathai, widowed sister of Rajendran. I asked about the proverb that her brother had expressed at the headman's house, just around the corner from her own. What ensued was another narrative, one that shared in certain elements of what her brother had said, but also seemed to present certain peculiar echoes of the Madari tale. Hers was a story that "the elders" tell about the mountain king—about those, she said, who had just come and gone:

There was a king who had seven sons, but wanted a daughter. For a girl, he vowed to repay the Suruli temple with a sacrifice of seven goats and seven measures of rice. When the girl came of age, they went to the temple to give this offering, but it rained so hard that they could not stand it. They asked the girl to pray for the rain to let up.

"Mountain king," she prayed, "we have cooked and kept seven kilograms of rice, and the meat of seven goats. It will all go to waste. Let us all eat and go. You come back after we have eaten. Come back when the whole village sleeps." Suddenly, the rain cleared up just like that. They ate, cleaned up, and came home.

This girl had a room of her own, and seven attendants to watch over her. That mountain king came into the room where she was sleeping, and sat on the bed beside her. "Oh no, who are you, where did you come from?" she asked. "What girl, didn't you say to come back when the whole village sleeps? Now I've come, and I desire you." She tried to refuse him, but she could not, and they had sexual relations.

Before he left, he promised to bring her jewels from his own country. He wrapped them up in a bundle and tied them to the leg of a crow. But what did that crow do? It went to one of his concubines. She took them all, and made a bundle with snakes and scorpions. This is what the girl saw when she opened the bundle.

The mountain king came to her once more, and asked, "What, girl, did you like the jewels that I sent you?" She slapped him roundly, and went to lie down, refusing to talk. He tried to cajole her. "Dear, sweetheart, why don't you say at least one word to me?" She

wouldn't speak at all. "So you won't speak, will you? You are the daughter of a rich man. Thinking this, you are being difficult. But if I thought to do it, I would grab all of this from you." He told her all the ways that she would suffer if she did not speak to him this day as she had spoken that day. But still, she didn't budge.

Then her brothers, mother, father, all of them were left with nothing. They went one day to cut paddy for a wage, leaving the girl at home because her hands and feet would blister, and asking her to thresh the paddy they had cut. The mountain king came in the guise of a donkey, and spilled and scattered all the grain, as he said that he would do. But the girl did not chase the donkey away. "Let it be," she said.

The next day, they went to cut wood from the forest to sell. The sun beat down like fire, and their feet were burning. The mountain king sat there in disguise, selling slippers. They all came running and asked, "Lord, please give us slippers!" But she refused to ask. "I don't want slippers, my feet aren't bothering me," she said.

The next day, they were carrying the wood when the wind and rain beat so fiercely that it ripped their clothes away. They stood there with nothing. They all came running to the mountain king, now in the guise of a cloth vendor. "Give us a cloth, give us a sari!" they cried. But this girl, she asked for nothing. She gathered up those torn saris and stitched them together, covering herself up just like that.

Then she felt a terrible pain in her eyes, and unable to see, she lay down in bed. The mountain king came to her in the guise of a woman, and said, "I will give you some medicine. Why are your eyes hurting like this?" The girl replied, "For some reason." The woman then asked: "That mountain king, what did he do to you? How many ways has he tortured you, and still you take nothing from him?" She, unable to see, not knowing that this was him, told her everything that had happened.

When she said all of this, he appeared as himself, and stopped her eyes from hurting. "What girl, is this why you have endured all this torture? I had bundled up true jewels for you, but that woman took them and put snakes and scorpions there instead. If you'd told me, you wouldn't have suffered like this, you and your brothers and your mother and father." After that, it seems, the two of them lived happily together.

Meanwhile, the drought persisted. Each night that month, I learned later that afternoon, a convoy of scooters, motorbikes, and jeeps had been coming into the village from the nearby town of Cumbum, diverting water into the local MLA's fields.

An Anthropological Image of Thought

Admittedly, this may have been a convoluted way of sketching what had happened over the course of a few weeks in one small corner of south India, nearly a decade ago. I would suggest, however, that we may best grasp what was happening then only by attending more closely to these convolutions: the ways in which the course of events folded together –

convoluted – different faces of the past and present, weaving their enduring force and gathering momentum into the texture of an emergent experience. The sense of a shared condition – drought, desiccation, lack of rain – was ramified by various resonances and associations through a diverse field of living circumstances. This was a “situation,” in John Dewey’s sense, “a complex existence...held together, in spite of its internal complexity, by the fact that it is dominated and characterized throughout by a single quality.”³² Thought always emerges as the outgrowth of such complex wholes of qualitative experience, Dewey argues, as a “conceptual transformation of what begins as an intuition.”³³ For nearly a decade, I have had the sense that there was something to think with vested in the myriad intricacies of this particular situation. But I did not know what that thing might be. Let us proceed now with both faith and hope.

Consider the trio of stories that surfaced serially in the midst of my retelling: the tale of the departing king, the tale of the upland fields, and the tale of the king’s unexpected return. Certain contrasts are immediately apparent. Two of these stories are mythical in their narrative time and texture, while the other appears to be a more straightforward recounting of the historical past. Looking otherwise, though, we arrive at another arrangement: the first of these stories takes the Madaris as its protagonists, while the other two concern Kallars, their contemporary antagonists in the Cumbum Valley.³⁴ In fact, if it is Kallar dominance that is obliquely referenced in the Madari tale, it is precisely the injustice of such conduct that is exercised in the other two stories, to the point that the second narrative challenges the contemporary embodiment of the king with the very kind of speech that is said to have driven away his ancestors in the first place. We have, among them, a field of transformations that generate the elements with which these tales are composed, as skin becomes slipper, jewel become snake, king becomes thief, and taker of slipper become its vendor. And as we track such transformations between the stories, we begin to see a common field of oppositions emerge among them: not only the coming and going of a king, but also a time of justice and a time of ruin, the quality of people both high and low, and practices of both taking and giving.

In other words, these stories may be taken to express a open structure of difference and repetition, a differential repetition of sensible forms composing a field of emergent and transformative potential. In his examination of this theme, Gilles Deleuze seeks to challenge “a dogmatic, orthodox, or moral image” of thought, reducible to what is already familiar, known, expected and exalted. “Something in the world forces us to think,” Deleuze proposes instead, describing this force of thought as a matter of sensible and affective encounter.³⁵ Thought is torn from “its natural torpor” through the contingency of such encounters, which bear directly upon the senses in a manner that cannot be conceived or perceived in recognizable terms.³⁶ Rather taking the confrontation of self and other, subject and object, as the ground of whatever is new, at stake here is a play of sensations that may bring into focus some other quality of a world already there.³⁷ We in anthropology may feel a kinship with these philosophical positions. Our work also depends upon the exercise of a certain sensibility of encounter, that is, a cultivated openness to the moment and its incipient promise, to the unpredictable happening of natural and cultural life in time. How then is the sensory force of such a world of experience registered in our modes of thought, in the way that we may think in, with, and about such worlds?

Consider these three tales once again. Consider again the dimension of taking and giving that all of them share in—the one theme that all three focus most insistently upon. What do we find when we examine them laterally, tracking the displacement of figures and dispositions from narrative to narrative? Gounders take food but refuse to give grain. Kallars give liberally and take freely, even without the right to do so. The transactions of kings are deeply ambivalent:

giving rain but also taking it away, giving rice but also worms, giving jewels but also snakes, giving comfort but also pain. And then there is a girl who takes nothing, and a Madari who does the same. If there are any figures of infinite capacity in these stories – for even the skies ebb and flow with limited bouts of rain – it is these two, one in the limitless extent of her defiance, and the other in the boundless yield of his exfoliating back and generous heart. One may indeed be the inverse of the other – for she is reduced to nothing, and his goodness assumes a cosmic reach – but still, what they share is the rare power to freely give, for neither needs anything from others.³⁸ Of what does this power consist?

This is not a question I can answer any which way, for I do not stand at a distance from these stories sufficient for such perspectival freedom. I am deeply implicated, involuted, in the powers of these tales, having been drawn not only into the fashioning of this essay, but further into the circumstances out of which it arises. The king came back to the Cumbum Valley, I was told, because I brought him there. And I brought him there, I was told, not because of any arbitrary or incidental rush of scholarly curiosity, but instead because I had responded to the “great thirst” in the hearts of those I knew. And even this, I was told, was not something that I chose to do, but was instead a consequence of a movement between myself and that world that both possessed and exceeded me: the momentum of “good thought” as it passed between myself and the king, the king and the Madaris, the Madaris and the many others living there, those other lives and the elemental forces that sustained their vitality. Let us resist the temptation to interpret these suggestions as yet another instance of the anthropologist being read back by the natives in an endless and inescapable hall of mirrors. The problem is a serious one. From where – in what generative milieu – do our thoughts arise when we think and work anthropologically? When I think back on this particular moment, the possibility that startles me is this: that my thought was already there, in that world, as a substance of that world, and a force within that world, a resource to seize with various ends in mind, only some of which were my own.

It did not rain that month, but many other unexpected things did happen. And returning to these tales now with these things in mind, I cannot help but find, in the figures of this generous cobbler and stubborn girl, an image of the kind of thought that we in anthropology also exercise. Look again. What both of them share is a thought of unfathomable depth, unfathomable precisely because it folds into itself the breadth of a world of experience. One of them astonishes with his refusal to fix upon something wanted for himself, while the other disturbs with a capacity to fully conceal what she is feeling. These stories, in other words, may indeed be interpreted as reflections of a particular way of thinking in this part of the world, in their shared grammar of terms and relations. But they may also be taken to present the nature and capacities of a mode of thinking in relation to the vicissitudes of ordinary life. What we find here is a picture of thought as an event among the events of the world, one that brings new modes of action into being by confounding the topology of inside and outside, surface and depth: nothing happens in the world without the constitution of a depth of intensive thinking and feeling, and no such depth arises without the provocation of events in the world.³⁹

Isn't this how we think in anthropology? Anthropological thought begins *in media res*, writes Michael Jackson, in a world of practical activity, “mundane interests, material matters, cultural preoccupations and everyday situations.”⁴⁰ This is a way of conceiving the specificity of anthropological knowledge in relation to its mode of activity rather than its object of concern. It is not our thinking about culture, society, meaning, identity, or human life and experience that makes us anthropologists. Nor is it the comparative or classificatory enterprise that knits these objects together into schema of unity in diversity, or diversity within unity. We might take

anthropological thought instead as a receptivity to events in the world, as a field of conceptual becoming alongside a world of accidents and interruptions, unexpected realizations and foreclosed possibilities. Call this ethnography, if you will, but the sensibility to which I refer is one whose exercise extends far beyond the “field” of empirical research—this is only one of the many lessons that remain to be learned from *Structure and Cognition*. It is thought that we encounter when we do anthropology, the novelty of our thought as the difference, experience, lives, and worlds of situations beyond ourselves. What I have tried to do in this essay is to call some attention to the eventedness of such thought: the intimate relationship between its generativity and that of the worlds in which we think and work.

Of all the images in these tales from south India that I have lingered on here, it is that of the endlessly growing skin that has the strongest hold on my imagination. I have trouble visualizing this infinitely expanding surface. I am reminded of the endlessly unraveling sari of Draupadi, and her appeal to Krishna, at the failure of Yudhisthira to anticipate the consequences of his wager. I am reminded too of what one of the Gounder cultivators had encouraged everyone to do at the outset of the ineffective sacrifice for rain that June in the Cumbum Valley: all should pray with “full hearts” he said—hearts full, that is, of “good thoughts.” It seems to me that the myth of the Madaris is suggesting that their kinsman was literally *thinking* with his skin. The boundlessly extensive back of the leather-worker, and the rains that would ensue as an outgrowth of its form, may be perhaps be understood as an exfoliation of this depth: the depth of good thought with which it would come to rain. This is not to imply that the human mind may be taken to somehow dominate the world that it pursues—even the Madari, let us recall, did not know what would happen as he began to cut from his back. Instead, what we find here is the idea that the nature of thought and the nature of world are convoluted in a mutually expressive – that is, mutually generative – relation.

“For every single meaning of the categorical term that is brought to the surface, there is a class of unexpressed meanings that form a kind of hidden treasure,” writes Das.⁴¹ The stories that I have shared here fell out, stage by stage, from my dissertation, and from the book into which it grew. And yet, thinking now with Das, I can see how their presence suffused the manner in which that book was composed. Let me conclude by gesturing toward the title marking its skin: *Crooked Stalks*, naming the volume yet never explained within. Before the book was published, I only had the vague sense that this title would somehow “evoke” what lay inside its covers. It strikes me now, however, that the appeal of these words had much to do with the circumstances in which I had learned to think with them. I had wanted, without quite knowing it in these terms, to compose a book as if it were a sheaf of paddy, ripening in different directions and to different degrees all at once. The form of these thoughts owed a debt to the world in which they had begun to gain expression. I too had come to share the dream that it is the world that expresses itself in the experience that we bear, a dream that persists even now.

Surely, it must rain.

¹ “Two Plaits and a Step in the World: A Childhood Remembered,” in *Remembered Childhood: Essays in Honour of Andre Beteille*, edited by Malavika Karlekar and Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Oxford University Press, 2009.

² “Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26(1), 1984, p138.

³ Andre Akoun, Françoise Morin, and Jacques Mosseau, “A Conversation with Claude Levi-Strauss,” *Psychology Today*, May 1972, p78.

⁴ Levi-Strauss has described the significance of this momentary encounter in several ways at different times. See Patrick Wilcken, *Claude Levi-Strauss: The Poet in the Laboratory*, Penguin, 2010, pp118-19 for a discussion. The passage conveys well what Deleuze has written about the event in structuralist thought, in his essay “How Do We Recognize Structuralism?”: “the event [is] interior to the structure insofar as the structure can never be reduced to a simple essence.”

⁵ *The Savage Mind*, p58. See also the essay by Frederick Keck, “The Limits of Classification: Claude Levi-Strauss and Mary Douglas,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Levi-Strauss*, in which Keck observes that for Levi-Strauss, “every event raises a problem, but it is also a chance to widen the scope of classifications” (p149). Levi-Strauss himself proposed “Pansies for Thought” as an appropriate title for the English translation.

⁶ See his essay “Structure and Sensation” in *The Cambridge Companion to Levi-Strauss*, edited by Wiseman.

⁷ See the “Overture” to *The Raw and the Cooked*. p

⁸ *Structure and Cognition*, p2

⁹ *Structure and Cognition*, p2

¹⁰ *Structure and Cognition*, p6, p7

¹¹ *Structure and Cognition*, p16

¹² *Structure and Cognition*, p16

¹³ *Structure and Cognition*, p47-48

¹⁴ *Structure and Cognition*, p69

¹⁵ *Structure and Cognition*, p54-56

¹⁶ *Structure and Cognition*, p90

¹⁷ *Structure and Cognition*, p113

¹⁸ *Structure and Cognition*, p140

¹⁹ *Structure and Cognition*, p48

²⁰ *Structure and Cognition*, p50

²¹ *Structure and Cognition*, p151

²² *Structure and Cognition*, p41

²³ *Life and Words*, p97

²⁴ *Life and Words*, p80

²⁵ *Critical Events*, p1

²⁶ For similar problems of explanation, see Ann Gold, *In the Time of Trees and Sorrows*.

²⁷ See Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, for a discussion of these “poligar” wars.

²⁸ Translation of a Malabar Letter received from Mahootasum Amildar of Cumbum and Goodalooore dated 15th February 1795, Vol. 1203, p120, Madura District Records, Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai.

²⁹ On the relationship between irrigation and virtuous kingship in this region, see my *Crooked Stalks*, ch5.

³⁰ In my fieldwork, I also encountered other variations on this startling tale: that the king doled out a larger wage to pregnant women laborers, for example, to give what was due to their unborn children, but that he resolved to leave when a Gounder accountant tried to reduce this generous measure.

³¹ Some of this history is also described in a Malayalam-language book that Rama Varma had given me when we met in Kanjiramattom, *History of Poonjar Kingdom*.

³² John Dewey, “Qualitative Thought,” in *Philosophy and Civilization* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1931), p97.

³³ Dewey, “Qualitative Thought,” p101.

³⁴ In a fascinating reflection on the temporal and experiential vicissitudes of tracking such a field of transformations, Levi-Strauss writes the following, in *The Raw and the Cooked* (p118): “Myth transformations are multidimensional, and the various dimensions cannot all be explored simultaneously. Whatever angle of vision one adopts, some transformations are thrust into the background or become lost in the distance. They become confused and blurred or are glimpsed only intermittently.”

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 176.

³⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, xvi.

³⁷ James Williams’ discussion is helpful in *Gilles Deleuze’s Difference and Repetition*, 208.

³⁸ On the “free gift” of rain, see my *Crooked Stalks*, ch4.

³⁹ The Tamil term that occurs in both of these stories is *ninaivu*, associated with thought, reflection, memory, and imagination. See my “Interior Horizons: An Ethical Space of Selfhood in South India,” for a discussion of its “ripening” within and beyond the space of the heart.

⁴⁰ Michael Jackson, "Where Thought Belongs: An Anthropological Critique of the Project of Philosophy," *Anthropological Theory* 9(3): 235-251.

⁴¹ *Structure and Cognition*, p150