

Nick (NJ) Allen (1939–2020), Indo-European comparativist

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Beneath his shy and donnish exterior Nick Allen was a man of determination, self-belief, and bravery. “Like a rock climber, a comparativist must take some risks,” he wrote (Allen 2003: 283n10). Nick knew what he was talking about, both about the rock climbing and about comparison. Nick was a serious, hardworking, deeply learned, and committed scholar, a polymath who acquired Latin, Greek, French, German, Italian, and Spanish at school (Rugby); later he learned Russian. Until quite late in life he went on learning new languages (Sanskrit, Pali, Old Norse, Old Irish) to help him in his research.

From school he won a scholarship to read Classics at New College, Oxford; but he decided to switch to medicine. Unhappy studying medicine, he stumbled across Haddon’s *History of Anthropology* at the house of his maternal uncle, the father of anthropologist Alfie Gell. This gave him the idea of returning to Oxford to do the Diploma (now the MSc) in Social Anthropology in 1963–4. He was strongly influenced by his supervisor Rodney Needham, who was in his high structuralist period. Needham had been in the Gurkhas during the war and encouraged him to do fieldwork in Nepal for his doctorate.

Nick worked principally on the oral literature and myths of the Thulung Rai. The Rai are divided into numerous subgroups, each with their own mutually unintelligible language. Nick’s first publication (1975) was a grammar of Thulung Rai. That his historical interests were already strong is demonstrated by the fact that he had chosen the Thulung, of all the myriad Rai groups, because he had read that theirs was the most archaic branch of east Himalayish within the Tibeto-Burman language family (Allen 2003: 257n6). His DPhil on the mythology of the Thulung was published many years later by Vajra Books in Kathmandu (Allen 2012).

Nick taught for four years, 1972 to 1976, at the University of Durham. He then returned to Oxford as University Lecturer in the Anthropology of South Asia. As well as teaching the whole range of social anthropology to MSc students in weekly tutorials, Nick was responsible for the option course on South Asia, with a focus on Hinduism. Rodney Needham had sown a crucial seed by introducing Nick to the work of Georges Dumézil in 1965. While he was still in Durham, Nick had tried to apply a Dumézilian approach to Tibeto-Burman mythology. Now, in Oxford, and focused on Hinduism, a whole new field of Indo-European comparativism began to open up.

In his later career Nick made significant contributions to three main areas: kinship theory, the history of anthropology (specifically the *Année Sociologique* school, particularly on Mauss as well as Durkheim and Dumont), and comparative Indo-European mythology. To those three areas should be added his work on east Nepal and on comparative Himalayan, particular Tibetan, myth, kinship, and social structures. The paper he contributed to *Anthropologists in a Wider World* (Allen 2000b) is a passionate defence of his decision, after coming to Oxford in 1976, to focus his efforts on desk research and to leave time-consuming ethnography to others.

Nick’s reflections on Marcel Mauss, honed over years of reading and teaching the French school, are collected in *Categories and Classifications* (2000a). The kinship work was prefigured in two early articles, ‘A Dance of Relatives’ and ‘Tetradic Theory: An Approach to Kinship’ (Allen 1982, 1986), both published in *JASO*. They distilled the lessons of quadripartite kin systems into a simple model of

four kinds of relative. They ended with the speculation that, as the simplest possible kinship terminology and structure, it had emerged initially out of tribal celebrations and subsequently was used to organize society into totemic clans.

Perhaps the intellectual contribution closest to Nick's heart was his pursuit of the comparisons to be found between the *Mahabharata* and Homer's *Odyssey*. Inspired by Dumézil's work on the Hindu epic, Nick believed he had been able to go much further. The parallels between the two epics were so numerous and so precise that "there is little room for doubt. The only reasonable explanation is that the two epics go back to a common origin from which they diverged in the course of separate oral transmission" (Allen 2000b: 254–5). Nick's crucial theoretical advance was to supplement Dumézil's three functions (religious and magical power; physical force and war; fertility and prosperity) with a fourth sacred pole (focusing on the outside, the other, and the uncanny), with both a positive and negative valence. This meant that, depending on context, the key organizing number for underlying structures could be either four or five (Allen 2020).

One of Nick's great attributes was his complete indifference to academic fashion. He did not seek recognition from others and, unlike some of his Oxford colleagues, he made no attempt to turn his students into disciples. He was happy that a few dedicated Dumézilians around the world shared his interests, even if they had not (yet) accepted his reinterpretation of the Dumézilian triad.

Nick was devoted to his wife Sheila, whom he met at Linacre College during his Diploma year. She came to join him in his Thulung fieldwork for six weeks after a period doing VSO (voluntary service overseas) in Pakistan. He was devoted also to his two daughters, Charlotte and Martha, and to the four grandchildren who came along in due course.

Nick wrote that he saw early retirement "less in terms of stepping 'down' than of stepping up – into an indefinite sabbatical" (Allen 2003: 281). He often appeared in Wolfson College for lunch and worked in a small office in the basement of the department in the afternoons. He took advantage of the riches that Oxford has to offer, often going to classicist, philological, and even occasionally social anthropology seminars. His photographs, notes, and audio recordings are in the Pitt Rivers Museum. Despite the cancer that he had to battle with in his final years, he kept working cheerfully until the end.

References

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Photo 1 caption: The ethnographer and others photographed by the shaman (*dhami*), Dan Bahadur Rai, in front of the latter's house, 5 February 1970. Reproduced with permission, (c) Pitt Rivers Museum. 2008.115.158.

Photo 2 caption: Nick Allen in Oxford, 2018. Photo courtesy of VOX, Voices from Oxford.