

FAS Reports...

A Supplement to *Almanac*

May 23, 1978

A Commitment to Interdisciplinary Study

When the Task Force on University Governance reported its findings in 1970, it criticized the fragmentation of Penn's arts and sciences faculty into highly autonomous units. It found faculty members working in the arts and sciences divided among the separate faculties of the College, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the Wharton School, and the College for Women—an arrangement that limited opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching and research.

The Development Commission Report pointed out in 1973 that, while the presence on a single campus of both Penn's liberal arts and professional schools provided an unparalleled opportunity for intellectual cross-fertilization, much of that potential remained to be realized. This criticism provided a major rationale for the creation of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences: in 1974, for the first time, all members of the arts and sciences faculty were united in a single administrative unit.

FAS Dean Vartan Gregorian admits it is easy to overestimate the effects of that administrative unification: probably the professional lives of most arts and sciences faculty members were not radically different in 1975 from what they had been in 1973. However, it is difficult to overestimate the opportunities and the challenges the creation of FAS presents. This is particularly true when it comes to exploiting the potential that exists at Penn for interdisciplinary research, teaching and discussion.

Some of this potential has been realized: Penn undergraduates are invited to enroll in thematic seminars which allow them to look at a problem from several disciplinary perspectives. Students pursuing individualized majors draw on the advising resources of a number of departments to put together programs that will meet both their educational needs and their degree requirements.

A surprising number of FAS faculty hold appointments in more than one department. Others have forged links between departments or schools to study phenomena that cannot be contained

within a single discipline. For example, Dr. James Muhly, in ancient Near East history, and Dr. Robert Maddin, in metals and materials science, have been working together for several years to trace the development of ancient metals. Other faculty members are affiliated with interdisciplinary research institutes such as the Laboratory for Research on the Structure of Matter and the Institute of Neurological Sciences.

More and more research requires that the scholar be at home in more than a single, narrow discipline. Dr. Zellig Harris's analysis of language as a mathematical system is one example; it is also an example of the sort of research that has implications for disciplines beyond its own. Dr. Harris's linguistic analysis has already been used as the theoretical base for a computer program that translates texts from one language to another.

Some FAS departments—history and sociology of science, for example, or South Asia regional studies—are in themselves interdisciplinary. An area of study like genetics both draws on and has implications for all the life and health sciences; it makes sense that the graduate group in genetics comprises faculty members from 10 departments in FAS and the health schools.

It is possible to start at almost any point in FAS and weave an interdisciplinary web that takes in what might at first seem entirely unrelated areas: a graduate student comes to the music department to study composition with composers of national reputation. Through a special departmental arrangement, he can if he wishes study an instrument with a private instructor of his choice and be reimbursed for part of the cost of instruction while receiving academic credit. If he wants to know how his instrument makes the sounds it makes, the physics department is right across the street. Somebody at the Institute of Neurological Sciences is probably studying the way the brain responds to those sounds, should the student be interested in that. This web could be expanded to include the departments of psychology, anthropology,

sociology, history, the Annenberg School and possibly a few others.

FAS is committed to realizing its potential for interdisciplinary study. The FAS segment of Penn's Program for the Eighties calls for the endowment of a number of interdisciplinary professorships that would support scholars whose expertise spans several different fields.

FAS has also proposed, and is already beginning to set up, three interdisciplinary research institutes modeled on the Laboratory for Research on the Structure of Matter, which brought together physicists, chemists, metallurgists and engineers, provided them with facilities and equipment, served as their funding medium, and continues to make Penn one of the world's significant contributors to the development of better materials. The three new institutes are designed to do the same for the social sciences, the humanities, and the mathematical sciences.

The Institute for Social Sciences will support research by faculty from the various social science departments and other fields on problem areas like population, poverty, inflation, crime, technological change and organizational effectiveness. In the Institute for the Humanities, a corps of fellows drawn from a variety of disciplines will focus on such broad themes as early American studies, semiotics, cultural groups in multicultural societies, and the Latin, Byzantine and Islamic Middle Ages. In addition to supporting pure research, the Institute for Mathematical Sciences will serve as a resource for faculty members in the arts, sciences and professions whose research can be advanced by the use of mathematical methods.

FAS offers many distinctive opportunities for interdisciplinary cooperation, and it is making a firm commitment to exploiting those opportunities as a way of strengthening teaching and research in the arts and sciences at Penn. A look at the development of ethnohistory—and the development of the Interdisciplinary Ethnohistory Program within FAS—may offer insights into some of the uses of interdisciplinary research.

Looking at Maya Culture from Inside the Pueblo

In the spring of 1974, Nancy Farriss, an associate professor in the history department, sat down and wrote a proposal for an interdisciplinary program in ethnohistory. The proposal elicited favorable responses from a number of faculty members in the history and anthropology departments—some of them had been exchanging information and ideas informally for some time—and in the spring of 1976 they constituted themselves the Ethnohistory Committee. Joined later by representatives from American civilization and folklore and folklife, they began meeting formally to discuss what might best be done to enhance teaching and research in ethnohistory at the University. In September 1976, they launched the Ethnohistory Workshop; by this time the group had expanded to include faculty and graduate students representing South Asia regional studies, history of art, ancient history, classical archaeology, history and sociology of science, landscape architecture and regional planning, the Middle East center and Oriental studies. They began meeting once every three weeks to discuss work in progress by a member or a visiting scholar seeking to combine cultural anthropology

and social history. ("Somebody said, 'Who can we get to give a paper?' and I said, 'Well, I have one,' so we got it started," Farriss remembers.)

Anthony F.C. Wallace, a professor of anthropology who co-chairs the program and the committee with Farriss, had been teaching a seminar in ethnohistory for several years. In 1973, Farriss and Lee Cassanelli, an assistant professor in history who serves as program administrator for the committee, had introduced a colloquium in ethnohistory in the history department. As the program took shape, two courses were added: in fall 1977, a team-taught introductory methods course coordinated by Wallace, and in spring 1978, a course taught by Cassanelli and Brian Spooner, an associate professor of anthropology, in the ethnohistory of nomadic societies.

This spring the program received a \$49,600 pilot grant—its first outside funding—from the educational division of the National Endowment for the Humanities to support an expanded workshop program, an expanded and coordinated core curriculum in ethnohistory, an ap-

prenticeship program for graduate students, an interdepartmental advising system, and the development of a series of teaching and research aids.

From the beginning, Farriss has seen the ethnohistory program as a way of institutionalizing the informal conversations with colleagues that have influenced the direction of her own research and contributed to its progress.

The principal focus of the book she is working on now is the Maya Indians of colonial Yucatan: she wants to know "what it meant for them to be conquered by totally alien people." It would be an unconventional question for a traditional historian—even a traditional Latin American historian, which Farriss used to be—to put first on her agenda, but it is the sort of question that is central to ethnohistorical research.

Answers are hard to come by, not only because the kind of information she needs is limited, but because of the way in which the study of Latin America has been apportioned among different disciplines, each with its characteristic methods of addressing characteristic questions.

"The study of indigenous groups in the



Nancy Farriss (left) with informants who became friends, at the Mayapan site in Mexico. The child, Nancy Beatriz, is her godchild.

New World," Farriss says, "tends to be divided among three disciplines: archaeologists study their [the groups'] pre-history, ethnographers study them as they exist in the present, and historians are responsible for what happened in between. And they don't speak to each other much."

Because historians, archaeologists and ethnographers have traditionally used different kinds of evidence to answer different kinds of questions about different groups in different time periods, people like the colonial Maya have, until recently, tended to slip through the cracks between disciplines.

The Maya, Farriss says, "have been dealt with as if they disappeared when they were conquered by the Spanish in the sixteenth century, and then came out in the 1920s when ethnographers started looking for them."

"Most Latin American historians look at Indians the way the conquering Europeans did: as passive objects of conquest. They might study Indians as victims of the Spanish and as units of labor—but not as people with a separate identity of their own."

"The archaeologists," she says, "stop in 1519, and they've exaggerated the effects of the conquest, as if it obliterated Maya culture. The tendency of the ethnographers is to minimize the effects of conquest—one sees these vast acrobatic leaps across the chasm of 400 years, as if four centuries of domination had no effect at all."

The perspectives and methods of the disciplines are also at odds. "If you're trained as a historian," Farriss explains, "you're trained to analyze documents, but not to be interested in Indians—because they were losers. They're part of history's debris, so why bother with them? Archaeologists and ethnographers are trained to be interested in Indians, but not to go through archives and read documents."

Recently, however, social historians and cultural anthropologists have been moving in converging directions. "Anthropologists," Farriss says, "are more interested in looking at the pasts of the groups they're studying—they sense that a time dimension reveals things the capsule doesn't. They're becoming more interested in long-term processes of change. And social historians have become more concerned with dominated and inarticulate groups: women, ethnic minorities, peasants, non-literate groups and societies—people who didn't leave diaries or official documents. They're also interested in attitudes, values, perspectives—not just patterns of social behavior but what the behavior means."

"I like the illustration one anthropologist uses: the tremendous difference in

meaning between a wink and a blink. You're interested not just in what women *do*, but in how they see their own roles and how others see them. It means trying to get to the network of assumptions that underpins a culture—and that's difficult to do from outside the culture. It's difficult, for example, for my students to understand social relations in traditional Latin America, where work was part of a system of rights and social obligations and had little or nothing to do with monetary payment. The students, coming from the culture of the twentieth century United States, take it for granted that work is something you exchange for money."

Farriss says she started as "a very traditional historian," no more interested than most in marginal or subject groups like the Maya. Her earlier research focused on the interaction between Spanish clerical and secular authorities in colonial Mexico.

The shift in her interest had something to do with her situation at Penn: "I would have had to get interested in broader issues," she says, "or I wouldn't have had anyone to talk to. There's no one else doing Latin American history here."

"But that's been good for me. I was already becoming dissatisfied with the questions being asked in Latin American history. And one of the things I liked about Penn when I came here for an interview was that people didn't seem to barricade themselves in their own regions and disciplines."

As she talked to people in history and anthropology about the work they were doing on other times and places, she began to develop new sets of questions. Her interest in the colonial Maya, she says, resulted in part from the influence of anthropologists, "who think it's worthwhile to study marginal peoples because any human group has something to tell us about the totality of human experience."

"I wanted to see what the impact of conquest really was on the Maya. So I had to study the conventional things, like the tribute and labor exacted by the Spanish—in fact, the whole economy of the region and how it was integrated into the colonial commercial system. But I wanted to look inside, and see what was happening *within* Maya society and culture."

It was that interest in looking at colonial Maya history from within the culture rather than from outside, on its own terms rather than from the traditional perspective of the Spanish conquerors, that landed her—along with the converging social historians and cultural anthropologists—in ethnohistory, an interdisciplinary discipline which combines the theoretical perspectives and the methods of anthropol-

ogy with those of history. To the historian's critical analysis of written documents and his concern with long-term change, ethnohistory adds the anthropologist's use of oral traditions, material culture, and analysis of social structures and symbolic systems.

Farriss's analysis of the post-conquest fragmentation of Maya society illustrates the point of combining historical and anthropological perspectives.

"After conquest," she says, "Maya society broke down into small, isolated units—the pueblos. Their own political superstructure was destroyed. In a sense they became incorporated into a much larger system—the Spanish empire—but they had no formal links of their own. I'm interested in how Maya culture survived at this community level. It *didn't* survive in

From the Dean. . .

The Faculty of Arts and Sciences is just four years old. Composed of the College of Arts and Sciences—the University's oldest school—the College of Liberal Arts for Women, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and the four social science departments formerly in the Wharton School, FAS is composed of 28 academic departments and 33 graduate groups—46 if one includes the biomedical graduate groups which affiliated with us last year. It brings together some 500 faculty members, more than 250 biomedical faculty and over 8,000 students.

Developed as a result of concern over the fragmentation of the arts and sciences within the University, FAS has during its brief history attempted to promote linkages—new and existing—among its own departments and other schools, integrating the many resources available in the University and providing opportunities for students and faculty to work in a broad spectrum of disciplines in a variety of settings.

In his visit to the campus two years ago, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, president of France, reminded us that early in its history the University of Pennsylvania chose to explore new horizons: it offered its students new fields of study, great unexplored areas that were still untouched. That tradition continues today. The formation of FAS has fostered a number of new disciplines—ethnohistory being just one. This is the first in a series of FAS Reports which will focus on the varied research and teaching programs being undertaken by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

—Varian Gregorian

anything like its former complexity and splendor. You only have to look at this"—she pulls out a photograph of a pre-Columbian polychrome wall painting—"to see how much was lost. They were still painting these when the Spanish arrived. Actually a new culture was created, very impoverished, but it was identifiably Maya.

"I concentrate on the pueblo. That's the basic socio-political unit the Spanish ruled through—where the pressure was exerted and where you can see the adjustments. To measure the changes I had to look at group formation and cohesion at this level before the conquest, and I began to see the Maya community as a fairly fragile structure even without the strains of Spanish domination.

"After conquest the Maya community crumbles at the edges: many people scatter, drift from place to place or into the bush. It's simple to blame that disintegration entirely on the conquest. But the Maya also had their own internal dynamics." In other words, you can look for traditional "historical" explanations or for anthropological explanations—how parts fit into a system—or for a combination of the two.

"It's possible," Farriss says, "that the Maya moved out of the towns to avoid Spanish constraints—this is the traditional view, and there are accounts by Spanish priests who say they left 'to practice their abominations in secret.' But I'm arguing that the coming together and dispersal of the community could also have been part of a cyclical process that occurred several times during the pre-Columbian period, too, as a function of the strength of social cohesion.

"The Maya practiced slash-and-burn agriculture, which means they periodically had to move on to new land. When social cohesion is strong, people will travel farther to new fields and still 'commute' back to the center of the community in the town. When social cohesion is weakened, the convenience of settling closer to the fields they're working wins out. They set up satellite communities, new outposts. The conquest weakened the internal social bonds: the Spanish undermined the legitimacy of the native rulers and destroyed the public ritual of native religion—and they also created peace, so that the Maya no longer needed to huddle together in larger settlements for mutual defense. Similar processes may have occurred earlier, when central Mexicans conquered the Maya before the Spanish. If you put this in the context of their form of agriculture, with its constant pull of distant fields, you end up with an explanation that combines cultural ecology with historical events."

Farriss's approach combines different types of evidence: principally manuscript

documents but also archaeological material. The Spanish left voluminous written records, but their interest in the Maya was more utilitarian than ethnographic.

Using the Spanish documents, she says, "means teasing out information the writers themselves weren't interested in conveying or maybe didn't understand. So much is inference, constructing a picture out of passing remarks and allusions. Also you have to filter out the perspectives of the Spanish officials and priests who wrote the reports—their own cultural biases. And of course there were many things going on they didn't know about. Some of the best records are the judicial inquiries, verbatim testimony by the Maya themselves. Even there you have to try to figure out what the Maya wanted to hide or distort deliberately to keep the Spanish off their backs.

"You can count on parish registers—births, marriages, deaths. They reveal a lot of social patterns. For instance, they help to trace population movements: who abandoned one community for another and how easily they were incorporated into the new one through marriage and godparenthood. Then there are documents the Indians wrote themselves, in Maya using the Latin alphabet the friars taught them:



Nancy Farriss

wills, land titles, petitions, confraternity account books. Wills are very useful—all kinds of information on kinship, inheritance, sources of wealth."

The Maya also left sacred books: colonial transcriptions of pre-Columbian texts, with later additions. "They're a very complex mixture of history, prophecy and cosmology," Farriss says. "Even the English or Spanish translations are often baffling."

Farriss's main interest in these documents is in the way they incorporate Christian elements. To understand how these elements were integrated into Maya religion and what the Maya took them to mean requires familiarity with pre-Columbian beliefs and symbols, and these are not always well understood. Here she has often relied on the work on pre-Columbian visual symbols of her husband, Arthur G. Miller, a research associate at the University Museum.

"The Virgin Mary, for example, is identified with the 'Cord from Heaven' in one of the books," she says. "I couldn't have made any sense of that without a paper Arthur had written on the imagery of the umbilical cord in Maya mural paintings. The cord symbolizes the link between the natural and sacred worlds. If that's what they meant by the reference, it strikes me as a much more sophisticated understanding of Catholic theology than the Maya have been credited with."

Documentary evidence also establishes the influence of the native religion on the colonial practice of Christianity. After the conquest, Farriss says, "the old Maya religion was partially destroyed and partially pushed underground or subtly infused into Christian ritual. For instance, it's only through a couple of chance references that I know that the drums from the traditional Maya ritual were used several centuries after conquest to call people to Mass—whether the Catholic priests were aware by then of their former ritual significance or not I haven't yet found out."

Combining archaeological and documentary evidence can illuminate the subtlety of the interpenetration of the two rituals. In 1974 Miller found a post-conquest building on a pre-Columbian site he had been excavating at Tanchah on the east coast of Yucatan. "He suspected it was an early Christian chapel," Farriss says, "and showed it to me when I was down there on another project. We decided to make some test pits there the next season. It was a chapel and we found many burials under the floor. At least one was Mayan in style, the body flexed instead of, in the Western style, prone, and with a jade bead in its mouth. We also found a pre-

Columbian pot which must have been an heirloom secreted as a cache under the altar—the usual Maya practice.” The archaeological evidence, in other words, indicated that some of Maya religious practices had continued in this Christian chapel.

“The twist in the other direction,” she says, “came from the documents, which said that there had been a settlement and a chapel on the site—but no resident priest. Since there was no priest on hand to oversee burials—they visited maybe twice a year to baptize and marry people—it means the Maya were freely choosing to bury their dead in this Christian chapel instead of under the floors of their own houses or the temple mounds that still survived, which would have been traditional practice. And they buried most of them in the Christian style. The accepted model is that the Maya were forced to practice Christian ritual by fire and sword—but, clearly, it was more complicated than that. I’m working on a hypothesis now that they acknowledged some spiritual power in Christianity—not exclusive power, as the friars saw it, but something to be reckoned with.”

Farriss describes her association with her colleagues as “probably crucial” to the development of her research. When she came to Penn she found that, although she was the only member of the history department specializing in Latin America, the department included “a lot of people who are open to cross-cultural discussion. I can talk to Mike Zuckerman about the sense of community and what it means, for example. Lee Cassanelli in African history is interested in the interaction between environment and social organization. I could probably name at least 10 people in the department whose work touches mine in some way. A particular issue arises in my work, and I can almost always find someone in a different area who’s thought about that—I can talk to them and refine the way I’m attacking the problem.”

She has also found useful associations beyond her department: “Penn has a lot of people working on the Maya from different perspectives besides Arthur and me—mainly in the University Museum. Ben Reina, an anthropologist, and Bob Sharer, an archaeologist, and I organized an informal seminar once to discuss the development of Maya elites over the past two thousand years or so. John Fought in linguistics and Arthur and I have talked about how visual, linguistic and documentary evidence could be pooled to study Maya religion.”

Interdisciplinary links are not confined to Maya studies: “I can talk to Arjun Appadurai in anthropology about coloni-

zation and cultural exchange—he’s working on South Asia—and about common problems in method. We’re both interested in working out to what extent and in what ways modern ethnographic evidence can be used to interpret historical data: what are valid and invalid inferences? Sandra Barnes and Igor Kopytoff are both working in African anthropology and I find them extremely valuable resource people. I can always count on Sandra to clarify some theoretical issue—she has a knack for cutting through muddle. And discussing work in her area has helped me develop fruitful ways of looking at my own material. Igor, too. For instance, he recently gave me a copy of an article he had written on kinship in Africa, and I found

Ethnohistory Committee:

Anthony F.C. Wallace and Nancy M. Farriss, Co-Chairmen
Arjun Appadurai, Anthropology and South Asia Regional Studies
Dan Ben-Amos, Folklore and Folklife
Lee V. Cassanelli, History
Drew Faust, American Civilization
Robert M. Hartwell, History
Igor Kopytoff, Anthropology
Lynn Lees, History
Charles E. Rosenberg, History
Brian Spooner, Anthropology
Bernard Wailes, Anthropology

things in it that made me go back and look at some explanations I’d given for population movements and territorial integration in Yucatan. I also like to compare notes on the impact of conquest with Bernard Wailes—an archaeologist who’s done work on the Romans and Normans in Britain.”

Farriss describes her role in getting the Ethnohistory Workshop going as “almost purely selfish—I wanted to formalize these contacts, instead of just bumping into people in the Potlatch—and I thought it might be useful for other people.”

She says it “seems almost miraculous that we all meet every three weeks and it doesn’t fall apart, considering the range. There are people from eight or nine departments. They represent an enormous chronological range, a variety of topical interests, and a broad geographical range—people who study the Mideast, South Asia, East Asia, the U.S., Europe, Latin America, Africa. What holds all these people together—the common ground—is an interest in sociocultural processes from, usually, a non-quantitative point of view.”

Because of the range of research interests

represented in the workshop, it is inevitable that the paper presented at any given meeting will be outside the fields of most of the people discussing it. But, Farriss says, the discussion “isn’t confined to the particular field involved. We’re more concerned with general questions of theory and method. A paper presented by Irene Winter, in history of art, at one of this spring’s workshops, for example, discussed a question of artistic influence of the Assyrians on a neighboring group of people. But in discussing it we were concerned not so much with ancient Near Eastern art history, but with how this particular instance might help refine our ideas on how exchanges take place across cultural boundaries. Clearly, most of the people there were not deeply interested in what happened in ninth century B.C. northwest Iran—but in how Irene developed her argument and used her evidence.

“You don’t,” Farriss says, “want your friends in anthropology to become historians; you want them to help you become a better historian.”

She cites the workshop’s continuity as a major advantage: “It helps tremendously that there’s a core group of regular participants—maybe 25—and a varying number of visitors. But the regular participation means that discussion *develops*—it doesn’t start from scratch each time, so there’s opportunity for further refinement.”

The “required reading” is another advantage: “One tends to make good resolutions about reading other people’s work, but unless there’s a formal occasion for it, one tends to put off things that don’t seem immediately relevant—although those sometimes turn out to be the most fruitful.”

Interestingly, she says that when she talks to people in history, she often comes up with answers, but when she talks to anthropologists she tends to come away with new questions—an observation that suggests that the integration of anthropological concerns into history is a continuing process.

The development of the Ethnohistory Workshop and Program is also a continuing process. “This is just a start,” Farriss says. “We’ve established some common areas of discourse. At first it looked as if we might not be able to do more than talk at each other across our disciplinary ‘moats.’ Now we are discussing ways in which we can focus more sharply on some of the overlapping issues—for example, how to analyze structural change, or how symbolic and ideational systems relate to social forms. We also need to discuss the limits of an ethnohistorical approach as well as its possibilities.”

Ethnohistory: An Historian's Perspective

Ethnohistory, the study of documented processes of culture change, uses concepts and techniques derived from anthropology and history. Anthropology provides a body of perspectives on human behavior with which one can confront and interpret historical evidence, as well as the ethnographic techniques of participant observation and collection of oral traditions. History provides a time dimension, the telescoping of long-term change that can reveal patterns and processes, theories of causation, and the specific techniques of documentary research.

Ethnohistory is kin to social history. Both are concerned with analyzing social forms in the past and their transformations through time. But there exist several real if fine distinctions, the basic one being the dimension of culture that ethnohistory, like anthropology, adds to the study of social behavior. Some confine culture to purely mental phenomena—the ideas, values and beliefs that men hold; others include the actions for which the mental constructs provide meaning. But culture is not merely the sum of the two. It is their nexus as well: the ideational systems as expressed in and signified by the social forms they generate.

Because of anthropology's emphasis on the interaction between the structure of society, on the one hand, and the structure of ideas and symbols, on the other, it can

enrich both social history and traditional intellectual history, especially where these two converge—for example, in the study of popular culture or mass movements.

The other distinctive quality of anthropology, and hence ethnohistory, is a concern with the problems of ethnocentrism. Anthropology arose from the study of "exotic" peoples. Thus, anthropologists (unlike historians, who originally, at least, interpreted the past within their own cultural traditions) have always had to address themselves to the problem of cross-cultural translations: how, despite their own cultural baggage, to "dissolve the opacity" of the alien society and then how in turn to make intelligible within the terms of their own culture what they learned; how to conceptualize and render into the analytical framework of their discipline not only the actions but also the perceptual categories of the peoples they studied.

Ethnocentrism can be temporal as well as spatial. The problem of a faithful translation is faced—though not always faced up to—by historians, when they seek to interpret the past. And it is compounded when they study the past of an alien cultural tradition.

Ethnohistory is a particularly useful approach to the past of the so-called Third World. Anthropologists have been sensitive to the dangers of imposing theories derived from the study of Western coun-

tries on the non-Western world: of believing, in other words, that Indonesian or Mayan Indians are merely shorter, darker Europeans. The reverse application can, however, be productive. Studies of simpler, pre-industrial societies often reveal basic structures and processes obscured in more complex societies by their complexity and by the opacity that the familiar produces: the lack of detachment produced by working within a set of assumptions shared by the group being observed.

Concepts and techniques developed through the study of mainstream Western society may also be inappropriate to the study of previously neglected groups within that society. Historians have recently widened their focus to include women, ethnic minorities and other Western subcultures whose values and perceptions may be as alien to the researcher, and whose written records as scarce as those of a more exotic society. Ethnohistory, by combining anthropology's skills in interpreting the culture of unfamiliar and often non-literate groups with history's experience in tracing the development of complex societies, can provide a suitable analytical framework for understanding subcultures within our own plural society.

—Nancy M. Farriss,
Associate Professor of History,
Co-Chair Ethnohistory Committee

Ethnohistory: An Anthropologist's Perspective

As anthropologists come to be increasingly interested in the study of complex societies and of long temporal sequences, it is to be expected that they will have much to learn from historians. From the point of view of the anthropologist, at least four kinds of problems could profitably be treated in the context of such interdisciplinary dialogue.

Firstly, and most broadly, there is the question of change, particularly structural change in societies over time. While anthropologists have already made some advances in the study of cultural change, it may be argued that in identifying and explaining change in social arrangements, they have relied all too often on arbitrary or unverified reconstructions, based on the ethnographic present. Historians, with their professional skepticism about this kind of retrospective projection, might usefully show anthropologists constructive

ways of resisting this tendency.

Secondly, there is the problem of the relationship of the unit of analysis to its larger spatial, social and historical context. Both the increasing absorption of small scale societies into large scale economies and polities, as well as renewed anthropological interest in these "centers," has made the heuristic assumption of isolation untenable. Historians, who have always faced the problem of analyzing specific phenomena within a larger context, might have useful lessons to offer on how this can best be done.

Thirdly, there is the question of approach. Characteristically, and in one or another form, anthropologists tend to place considerable reliance on the concept of function, in order to show the ways in which culture, environment and society fit together. Historians, concerned principally with processes in time, are prone to use the

concept of causality (explicitly or implicitly) to link variables and explain human action. Thus, anthropologists might find it useful to complement their traditional concerns with function by asking causal questions, on the historian's example.

Lastly, there is the question of sources. It is a truism that anthropologists are much more comfortable with the use of participant observation and the field notes that it yields as their principal source of data. As they begin to approach questions of change directly, they will no doubt discover that they have much to learn about the use of documentary sources, the sociology of the archive, and the peculiar virtues and pitfalls of the written word. Historians can no doubt give them helpful advice in this regard as well.

—Arjun Appadurai,
Assistant Professor of Anthropology
and South Asia Regional Studies

art, the Somalis have devoted their creative energies to poetry, something they can carry with them. Their oral tradition is rich and exerts a strong influence on political, economic and social life. "It's hard to be a political leader without being a good poet," Cassanelli says. "Even in the modern setting, persuasive poetry had an important role in the war with Ethiopia. If a merchant is a real crook, somebody will compose an eight- or ten-line poem about him and it'll diffuse along the trade routes and his reputation will be shot."

Much of Cassanelli's research involves "going around collecting poetry and other oral traditions and writing it down." At the time of his first poetry collecting trip, Somalia was allied with the U.S.S.R. against Ethiopia, and he and his family were the only Americans in the country who were not government officials.

In analyzing oral history, Cassanelli's basic assumption is that "most people only remember what is useful: in traditional Somali society it's particularly important to remember whom you can trust and why. You have to remember whom your clan has helped in which war or which drought so that you can call on them if you need help. In a nomadic society, it's critical to know where you stand in relation to other groups."

Sifting legend from fact is a problem. Since every clan tells its own story, there are overlaps. Events that are remembered in the oral histories of several clans—droughts, famines, plagues—are likely to be historical. Poems about legendary military leaders sometimes contain motifs that also turn up in Middle Eastern or Greek folklore: "these things probably didn't really happen in Somalia," Cassanelli says. On his most recent trip, he began looking at the ways in which oral traditions have been changing since the government's introduction of written language in 1972.

While teaching a course in the ethnohistory of nomadic societies with anthropologist Brian Spooner this semester, Cassanelli came to some conclusions about the ways in which anthropological perspectives can contribute to his work in African history: "Historians tend to be intellectual or economic or social or family or political historians; anthropology looks for how everything ties together. When I find a tradition about the emergence of a very powerful sultan—well, it's unusual for the Somalis, with their egalitarian government, but every so often a powerful confederation of clans emerges under a strong leader. From an anthropological perspective, you can ask: under what circumstances does this happen?—what does it mean to have power in a nomadic

society like this?—how does political power relate to other spheres of life? A leader in a society like this is typically someone who has made shrewd marriages, and thereby has allies in a lot of different areas.

"In a nomadic society, those who have the most people to call on in time of need are strong. Or a man can accumulate wealth by shrewd management of herds. In a bad drought, 70-80 percent of the herd can be wiped out in the affected area. A shrewd manager with a lot of livestock can disperse his herds to kinsmen or clients in other areas, preserving his animals and at the same time obligating other people to him. This isn't stuff a historian would tend to think of—but you can see how the same model might apply to acquisition of power in feudal Europe. In somewhat the same way, learning why some things stay in the oral tradition—when memories are no longer useful, they tend to drop out, a clan with an oral history of their journey 2,000 miles from the Gulf of Aden won't remember passing through a particular area unless it has some importance for them—may offer ideas about why things are preserved in, say, Irish or Scottish folk traditions."

Although Arjun Appadurai is asking different questions about a very different kind of society, he has focused on a set of symbolic transactions that serves a function similar to that of Somali poetry. Worship in the Madras temple he studied focuses on "feeding the gods and eating the leftovers." Although the food that is left by the gods and distributed to the worshippers is valued as food and as a kind of sacramental union with the god, Appadurai explains that "it's also important because it indicates where the individuals receiving it fit in the temple hierarchy—who gets the most, who gets the best, who is served first. The shares of divine food indicate key roles, and if it's shaken up people get very uptight."

He divided his time in the field between participant observation and interviewing in the temple, on the one hand, and, on the other, doing archival research on the documented history of the temple. Although, he says, "at first what I discovered from archives and what I learned from people in the ethnographic present didn't seem to fit," understanding the historical sources ultimately allowed him to define those areas in temple politics that continue to produce conflicts.

For example, the earliest British document he discovered in the Revenue Archives of the state of Madras included a detailed settlement by the collector of Madras—the highest local colonial

official—of the sumptuary privileges of worshippers at the temple; detailed in particular were the shares of the leftover food of the deity due key members of the temple staff. At first the document was enigmatic. The list of amounts and kinds of food to be given to members of each class within the temple hierarchy contained many English transliterations that were either so incorrect as to be indecipherable or else named offices that no longer existed. The document did not say why such a settlement had to be made by a British colonial official.

At the same time that he was attempting to decode the document, Appadurai was also receiving information from "one of my major informants at the temple, who had been involved over the past two decades in a movement to assure that poor, non-Brahmin worshippers would be treated fairly; the movement's central concern had been in the share of this constituency in the divine food-leavings. These two very different kinds of information referred to the same set of cultural symbols, and both appeared to link concrete forms of divine favor with the politics of temple control. Seen in isolation, each was hard to decipher. But juxtaposed, they led me to see that one of the enduring principles of authority in the temple was the relationship between the privileges of various groups and their symbolic transactions with the deity.

"It wasn't," he says, "like putting the two sources together made me understand a detail—it made me see that these transactions indicate who you are, what your privileges and duties are—that's why people get upset, go to court, etc., when the protocol is violated."

In somewhat the same way that Cassanelli suspects analyzing Somali oral history might offer clues to the mechanisms underlying Irish and Scottish folk traditions, Appadurai looks to his analysis of conflict over status and authority relationships in the temple for aid in understanding the basis of authority in other areas of Indian society—for example, the old, unsolved problems of caste: What do South Asians consider authority to be? How does hierarchy arise? How are status relationships mediated through symbolic transactions? What produces conflicts over authority, and how are these conflicts resolved? And how does it all fit together?

FAS Reports: 116 College Hall
Editor..... Patricia McLaughlin