Anthropological Reflections / Réflexions Anthropologiques

Anastasia, Paní Viera and Manong Lito: Reflections on Anthropological Friendships

David Z. Scheffel *Thompson Rivers University*

An exceptionally bright and motivated student recently took part in a directed studies course in Eastern Europe, and after spending several weeks in a Romani ghetto and an isolated Ukrainian village, she wrote an excellent paper describing the experience of her first mini-fieldwork. In these days of YouTube and Wikipedia scholarship, I have become grateful for students willing to engage in old-fashioned ethnography, and this competent research report seemed to confirm my expectation that its author was ready for advanced training in the discipline. But then, in the last paragraph, the student reflected on her future and thanked me for this unusual opportunity which helped her decide *against* pursuing a career in anthropology. "What?" I cried in disbelief! I had read correctly; my star student disengaged herself from the subject she had embraced for several years as a result of her first field experience. What she objected to were not the hardships of having to communicate with people who understood no English or coping with uncomfortable living arrangements. No, she disliked what she called the "intrusiveness" of fieldwork, the "false intimacy" and the "asymmetrical relationship" between the anthropologist and the informant. But it was the last sentence of the essay that provoked me. Here, my student drew what I believe is a false dichotomy between informants and friends, concluding that she "would rather be friends" with the many interesting people she had met.

Much has been written about the relationships anthropologists form in the field, but, as the verdict passed by this student-researcher shows, perhaps not enough has been said about their multidimensionality and complexity. While some of the people we rely on in our professional pursuits remain the non-descript "cultural resource persons" of soulless scholarship, others become "dialogical partners" and even friends. What follows here are my musings about the trials, tribulations, and rewards that I have experienced as a result of three friendships formed during fieldwork.

Anastasia

"Little Russia," Canada's only community of Russian Old Believers, located halfway between Edmonton and Fort McMurray, was the site of my first extended anthropological fieldwork. When I arrived there in the spring of 1981, the colony had been in existence for fewer than ten years, and tensions between the newcomers and their neighbours were running high. The "White Russians," as the Old Believers had introduced themselves in order to quell any suspicion of communist sympathies, were accused of separatism and religious bigotry. Their women, hidden under ankle-long *sarafans* and colourful *babushkas,* were pitied by their Canadian counterparts for what was perceived as domestic slavery that included the prohibition of any form of contraceptives. Their children were suspected of enduring child labour and discrimination on account of the elders' refusal to let them attend school beyond the legal minimum. The Russians, in turn, were disillusioned after realizing that their community, whose isolation they wished to perpetuate, had attracted unwanted attention from all kinds of state officials, ranging from social workers to police officers.

The arrival of a greenhorn anthropologist deepened the Old Believers' suspicion that their community was being infiltrated by yet another outsider hostile to their way of life. Centuries-old taboos against all but absolutely essential contact with "pagans" were revived, and my search for a family who might take me in for the duration of the planned fieldwork proved futile. On the verge of losing hope, I made one more attempt and knocked on the door of a homestead built at some distance from the core of the community. The setting immediately appealed to me. Several structures erected on the bank of a small river (local Old Believers at that time still clung to the conviction that rivers were blessed and purified by angels every morning) enclosed a pasture for horses and cows and a small field planted with wheat and flax. Clusters of mature spruce trees had escaped the builder's axe and provided shade for brightly painted benches, suggesting a degree of aesthetic sensibility rarely encountered in rural Alberta. Flocks of domesticated ducks and geese complemented the idyllic picture. I sensed peace and tranquility.

The middle-aged woman who opened the door introduced herself as Anastasia. My first impression was that she was heavily pregnant with a bulging belly that protruded out of her *sarafan.* She was in her mid-40s, and this could have been her last pregnancy, I thought. Later I realized that her body posture was the result of ten pregnancies, the last of which had occurred several years earlier. After Anastasia listened to my garbled explanations about who I was and what I wanted—all in my limited Russian, for most Old Believer women were incapable of communicating in English—she invited me into the house, offered me a chair and a few slices of homemade bread and a cup of fresh milk. That was more hospitality than I had encountered anywhere else in the preceding weeks and I was moved to tears.

Figure 1: The author with Anastasia's extended family. Reprinted with permission of the author.

What developed between us during the ensuing year of my fieldwork was an unconventional friendship. Anastasia and her husband Efim explained that they could not accommodate me in their home as the mere presence of a *pogany* (unbeliever) meant defilement for the entire household. But they welcomed my interest in their ways and consented to having me around whenever it did not interfere with their activities. Eventually, I struck similar agreements with other Old Believers, and the fieldwork yielded useful results. But throughout the duration of my stay on the margins of "Little Russia," it was Anastasia and her family who were most tolerant of my presence and who taught me the most. I think that Anastasia took a genuine liking to me, within the strict limits of a xenophobic community governed by a fundamentalist religion. Although we kept addressing each other with the Slavic pronoun of formality—*Vy*—and although the cleavages of age, gender, culture and language made even minor expressions of closeness, such as a hug, a tête-à-tête over a cup of coffee or tea or a private joke, unthinkable, I sensed that Anastasia was concerned about my welfare and tried to be helpful in an unobtrusive way. Unlike other households where my pogany status was always emphasized by serving me food at a separate table so that I was excluded from the commonality of the Old Believers' col-

lective meals, Anastasia placed me at the family table. There, only a trained observer's eye could detect the narrow line of segregation constituted by a separate table cloth that was not allowed to touch that of my hosts. Of course, I ate my meals from special, pogany, dishes that could not be used by anybody else. But even that sine qua non of Russian Old Orthodoxy was bent occasionally, especially during festive occasions when the potent home-made wine flowed freely and my hosts wanted to demonstrate affection for their outsider–guest.

With time, as I learned more about my host family, I came to regard its female head as something of a cryptocultural relativist. On the one hand, Anastasia was second to none in her determination to teach her children and grandchildren the principles of her faith. Every day, she would gather the younger members of the extended family, seat them at a large table and instruct them in the proper pronunciation of Old Slavonic sacred texts. She was fastidious in following the ritual dietary calendar and she attended church on as many feast days as possible. Yet, her checkered life—she was born into Manchurian exile where she experienced the Japanese occupation and postwar communist régime, then moved to Brazil, and subsequently to Oregon, before ending up in Alberta—had taught Anastasia the necessity of adopting a pragmatic attitude even in matters pertaining to her fundamentalist faith. Raising ten children is a formidable task in its own right, but doing so in a foreign environment that poses serious challenges to virtually every inherited value is almost beyond imagination for most of us. And Anastasia certainly had more than her fair share of family problems. Her eldest daughter had defected with a pogany Canadian before my arrival and she led an uncertain life somewhere in British Columbia. Another daughter, a pretty and unruly 16-year-old, kept disappearing at night for illicit dates with a French-Canadian neighbour, a relationship that eventually led to her pregnancy and marriage outside the fold. One of Anastasia's older sons had suffered a broken spine while felling trees in the bush and ended up in a wheelchair. Desperate and miserable, the man turned to drugs which prompted his wife to take their two children and leave—an unheard of act in Old Believer circles. Anastasia and her husband never complained about these misfortunes—at least not in front of me. But they did not try to hide them either. Instead, they learned to veer uneasily between the two extremes of their social existence: an inherited fundamentalist culture that threatened to alienate the young generation on the one hand, and an excessively permissive host society on the other. The compromise they struck was a precarious modus vivendi. Television was officially banned but the family kept a set in the closet for evening entertainment of the adolescent children. The aberrant daughter and her French-Canadian husband were officially excommunicated, yet they kept being invited to every family celebration. When the National Film Board tried to make a documentary about the elusive community, it was Anastasia and her family who made it possible—and she paid a heavy price for that.

Anastasia and I kept in touch after the completion of my fieldwork. We exchanged letters with news about our respective families and we talked on the phone from time to time. But our contact diminished with time, largely thanks to my preoccupation with other things. After several years of complete silence, I finally managed to organize a brief visit in the summer of 2004. By then, I had heard that Anastasia had been quite ill for a long time, but I had not grasped her condition until I saw her. She was lying in bed, crippled by a nervous disorder that nobody seemed to understand, her emaciated body kept alive by a battery of tubes. She had been told about my visit, and she had been prepared for it by having had her hair braided and covered with a kerchief. I held her translucent hand, longer than ever before, and she opened her eyes and moved her lips without managing to make a sound. The visit was brief and awkward, but it meant a lot to me and I like to think that Anastasia derived some pleasure from it too. That was the last time I saw her.

Paní Viera

My friendship with Viera grew out of my involvement in an impoverished Romani settlement in Slovakia. What had begun as a CIDA-funded (Canadian International Development Agency) community development project continued as longterm research of contemporary "Gypsydom," and Viera has been instrumental in helping with both types of activities. Although we have known each other for some 12 years, I keep addressing her with the honorific *Paní* (Mrs.), and she calls me *Pán* (Mr.) David. We could have switched to more intimate forms of address, but that would have undermined our type of friendship which entails patronage. We both understand and accept that I am the more powerful and richer member of the dyad who has to keep cementing the relationship with displays of generosity. As such, I would be entitled to dropping the honorific Paní, but I have not done so out of respect for Viera whom I consider a friend—albeit not an intimate one. Viera, who is in her late 40s, has told me several times that she regards me as something of an older brother or even father, and I believe that there is more to this declaration of affection than self-serving flattery used by a needy client.

Viera has experienced more than the usual share of hardship. As a child, she endured not only the racism meted out by ethnic Slovak neighbours and teachers but also a badly dysfunctional family life. Her father was a brutish alcoholic who terrorized his wife and children—to the point where his eldest son attempted to kill him, unsuccessfully, with a pitchfork. Viera tried to escape the unhappy family environment, but the ghetto-like nature of her home community provided few ways out. The most obvious one, marriage into another Romani settlement, was blocked by Viera's lesbian inclinations. And so, she chose another frequent "exit strategy"—prison. I do not know whether Viera really committed the petty theft that earned her a disproportionately long prison term in order to find a way out of her unhappy milieu, but there she was, incarcerated in a women's prison where the young lesbian was passed from one prisoner to another. On and off, Viera spent close to ten years in jail, and when she returned to her settlement, she found her family scattered, leaving no place that she could call home. She reacted in a brave and resourceful way. Instead of seeking shelter with one of her married siblings, Viera built her own hut and found herself a young single mother who moved in as her partner. This openly lesbian household, the only one in a community of 1000 people, is structured along traditional gender roles: Viera, the "husband," looks for work, repairs the hut and protects the family. Her young "wife" raises the child, shops, cooks and cleans. Viera's male role is accentuated by her musical skills. She plays the guitar and performs publicly in a setting where only men possess and use instruments.

Very quickly after my arrival in her settlement, Viera became my chief informant. I had discovered that her marginality had taught her to look at the surrounding society in a detached and inquisitive way, and I began to court her as someone who could answer all kinds of questions I had about her fellow Roma. The special bond that developed between us elevated her lowly status in the community and it gave her access to material rewards, such as interest-free loans, in a setting dominated by ruthless loan sharks. Of course, the loans were never paid back, and soon the requests for "loans" changed to expectations of monetary gifts. I have been handing out these gifts for many years now. Given the grinding poverty of the local Roma, it is next to impossible to visit the settlement without giving some cash. In the early years of my involvement, I used to quote the moralistic adage about a fishing rod being more useful than a fish, but as I grew wiser and realized the dearth of fishing rods in certain settings, my reluctance to hand out money diminished. This shift in thinking was expedited by Viera's willingness to share the money she received from me with needy members of her extensive kin group. I have come to think of her as the distributor of my—in Canadian terms fairly modest—private charity.

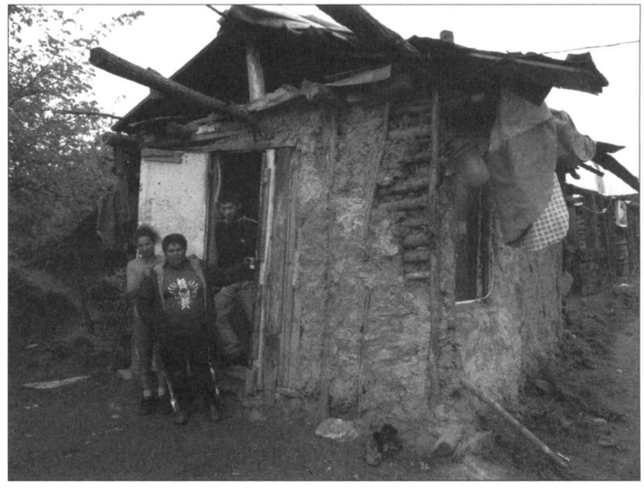

Figure 2: Viera, her wife and child in front of their hut. Reprinted with permission of the author.

Over the years, there have been many other Roma seeking my patronage. Some of them I have helped in tangible ways, such as assistance with the purchase and financing of homes outside the settlement. But the combination of clientage with friendship is the strongest in my relationship with Viera. Two factors play a role here. The first one applies to our ability to communicate when I am in Canada—which is most of the year. The obvious way to bridge the distance is by telephone, and to this end I bought a mobile telephone for her several years ago. I had purchased cell phones for other people over the course of many years, but none lasted more than a few weeks before ending up in a pawnshop. Viera, in spite of her poverty, has resisted that temptation. I suspect that I am the only person who calls her and I do so only once or twice per month, but whenever I dial her number, she answers. This has allowed us to stay in touch throughout the year to share news and to strengthen our relationship. The second factor is Viera's sense of justice and fairness. The community she lives in is as acephalous as the classical examples of this condition in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Quarrels are endemic, and there are no ways of settling them short of physical confrontation. Unlike the situation in Papua New Guinea and other acephalous settings where the parties in conflict can avoid each other, the tightly-packed, ghettoized settlements of rural Roma provide no such remedy. They are rife with strife, violence and oppressive stress. The recent emergence of a powerful class of indigenous loan sharks, who

charge *monthly* interest rates of 100% and terrorize clients unable to settle scores, has made matters even worse. Instead of exercising much-needed leadership, this proto-mafia has turned against the people, feeding drugs to ten-year-olds and selling young women and men into prostitution.

This has filled Viera with outrage. And it is not just the crassly exploitative machinations of the local nouveau riche that she objects to. Memories of her unhappy childhood, mixed with the experience of prison life and the injustices of Slovakia's racialized society, and her own marginality as a solitary lesbian have made her into an astute social critic. But where can she turn in her quest for justice? Unfortunately, under the conditions of her unenviable existence, the only person who listens to her with empathy and regularity is the foreign anthropologist. And so, during our lengthy telephone conversations, I become privy to a panoply of real and perceived wrongs. Viera tells me about the men who violate their daughters, the husbands who beat their wives, the wives who cheat their husbands, the adolescent girls who (she thinks) justify their illicit pregnancies with accusations of rape, and, most recently, the naive youngsters who had been lured to England with promises of milk and honey only to end up in bondage.

As the problems in her home community magnify, and as she grows more and more impatient with the people that surround her, Viera has hatched a plan that flatters and scares me simultaneously. She has decided to gather those members of her extended family who have retained a degree of decency and normalcy—this includes only two of her 12 siblings—and place them under my authority in some far away location where they may flourish unhindered by the corrupting environment of the settlement.

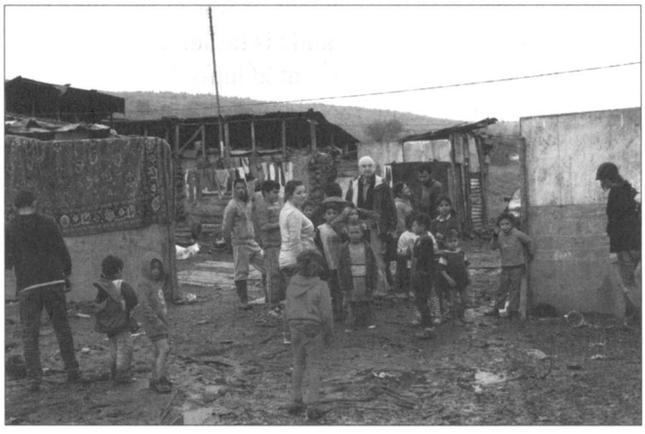

Figure 3: The author in a Romani settlement in Slovakia. Reproduced with permission of the author.

At moments like that, I am immensely grateful for the vast distance between us.

Manong Lito

My wife, a Filipina from a small island in the Western Visayas, has always been a source of exceptional anthropological inspiration and insight. Early on in our marriage, I used to argue with her about the plausibility of some of the events she described—the mutation of a man from her home village into a giant snake that was subsequently kept and nourished by the transformed man's brother stands out in my memory—but, as time passed, I learned to curb my positivist tendencies. I have come to nod in agreement when my wife tells me that her uncle's crippling disease has been caused by witchcraft or that a man has lost his potency after peeing at a tree guarded by the White Lady. Among the unusual beings described by my wife was a group of dark, little and semi-nude people who hunted monkeys with bows and arrows and lived in the forested hills above her seaside village. At first, I classified them as a Tasadayesque invention of the local imagination, but eventually some cursory research led to the surprising discovery that my wife's small island harboured a number of bands of aboriginal foragers classified in traditional anthropological literature as "Negritos." Of course, it is well known that pockets of this somewhat enigmatic population (its origins and early history remain shrouded in mystery) are found in several parts of Southeast Asia, including the Philippines. It was there that the modern pioneer of Negrito research, the German Jesuit anthropologist Paul Schebesta, collected most of his ethnographic material—before moving to the Ituri Forest in search of comparative data among the "Pygmies." But the bulk of the classical works devoted to the Negritos of the Philippines describes their northern communities in Luzon and creates the impression that they have been obliterated in the rest of the country.

The lead provided by my wife had fateful consequences for our vacations on her home island. What had been low-key family events have turned into my frantic search for surviving Ati—as the local "Negritos" call themselves—on three adjacent islands, including Boracay, the country's foremost tourist destination, where a small band of Ati faces imminent displacement. It was in the course of these erratic expeditions that my wife and I located the monkey-hunting band that she remembered from her childhood, and that is where I befriended *manang* Lito.

Lito, a diminutive but muscular man with a perpetual smile and friendly eyes, is the spokesman of the smallest of the seven Ati bands found on my wife's island. I liked

him right away when we first met in the summer of 2007. Back then, Lito had just learned that the owners of the land that his band had used as a home base for some 20 years were going to evict the Ati and the mood in the small gathering of primitive huts was sombre. Although the Ati are recognized by the national government as indigenous people entitled to state protection, government assistance is minimal, and Ati squatting on private land have no recourse whatsoever against the will of the landlord. By a strange coincidence, my wife had just been approached by a distant relative who was selling a few acres of hilly land above her village, which we purchased and offered Lito and his people as their new base. In a collective effort, dwellings were constructed for the eight nuclear families that constitute the band, an outdoor latrine—used only by visitors—was positioned at the edge of the settlement, and an old pump was reactivated in order to supply fresh drinking water. The land was turned over to the Ati with only two strings attached: it was to be used only by the eight families already present, and there was to be no cutting of trees for *oling*, which is a destructive way of making charcoal by cash-strapped people that has proven fateful to large tracts of forest throughout the country.

So far, the experiment has worked well. Lito acts as the caretaker of the settlement, and that entitles him to a monthly stipend of 500 pesos—slightly over $10—which I transmit through my brother-in-law. Lito also received a mobile phone which he periodically recharges in the house of my brother-in-law. The stipend and the telephone are symbols of Lito's special relationship with me—*Sir* David as he insists on calling me—which fortify his fragile authority in the band's egalitarian social environment. Although the phone was intended as a direct link to us, the Canadian landlords, we have never been able to reach Lito. Perhaps the signal is too weak or perhaps he chooses not to answer when he sees our number displayed.

As with my other key informants, I feel that Lito sees me as more than a foolish foreigner who can be exploited in one way or another. He was genuinely amazed to realize my interest in his people's history and culture and he was overjoyed to learn that his new "landlord" respected and encouraged the foraging lifestyle that the surrounding society tries to extinguish. It did not take me long to discover that Lito and his fellow Ati suffer from depression and that their smiling faces and seemingly carefree day-to-day existence conceal deep worries about the future. They know that sooner or later, the hunting and gathering way of life that has shaped every detail of their being will come to an end. Lito is painfully aware of the Epic of the Ten Bornean Datus, a nationally celebrated legend that commemorates the arrival of the ancestors of present-day Filipinos some 800 years ago on a beach not far from Lito's band's territory. There, the leader of a group of exiles from Borneo is said to have made a deal with the "chief" of the aboriginal Ati, Marikudo. In exchange for a golden *salakot*—a princely diadem—Marikudo and his people allowed the newcomers to settle on the island and retreated into the forested interior. As Lito put it, the Ati have been retreating ever since, but now there is nowhere to go. He compares his people to birds bunching together at the very end of a branch which is about to break off. The Visayans, the local population of the majority Malay-Filipinos, have taken all of the hunters' land. And, as if to mock them, they have created huge annual festivals—such as the Ati-Atihan of Kaliban or the Dinagyang of Iloilo City—where thousands of people blacken and paint their bodies, divide themselves into Ati "tribes" and re-enact the "Purchase of Panay" in front of tourist cameras.

Lito's life story exemplifies the challenges the Ati have encountered in recent decades. He was born probably in the late 1950s—he has no birth certificate or any other personal document—into the largest local band at a time when it was still fully nomadic. Appropriately, Lito recalls his grandfather still wearing the *ubag*, or loincloth, a badge of traditional Ati identity eventually abandoned by Lito's father under pressure from Roman Catholic missionaries. This must have been in the early 1980s when local Ati began to settle down in permanent communities encouraged by the government. Missionaries set up schools and sought to replace the hunting economy with cash-generating pursuits, such as the manufacture of "native products" consisting of wood carvings and purses woven out of natural fibres. Lito was too old to enrol in school—which is why he never learned to read and write—but he followed the call of the new patrons and took up work as a carpenter in a convent. It was at this time that all adult Ati, including Lito and his father, were baptized. When we first met, Lito presented himself as a Catholic, and he dismissed my queries about the animistic universe of the Ati with assurances that those were all things of the past. Step by step, however, the Christian façade began to peel off and I came to understand how much of the traditional animistic world view still influences Lito and his people. Remarkably, I learned that Lito's father was a *babaylan*, or "fire-walker," which is the local designation for a shaman. He practiced his craft well past his baptism, perhaps because he was the last Ati babaylan in the entire region, and there was much demand for his services.

Like the loss of the ubog, the disappearance of shamanism is regarded as a marker along the inevitable

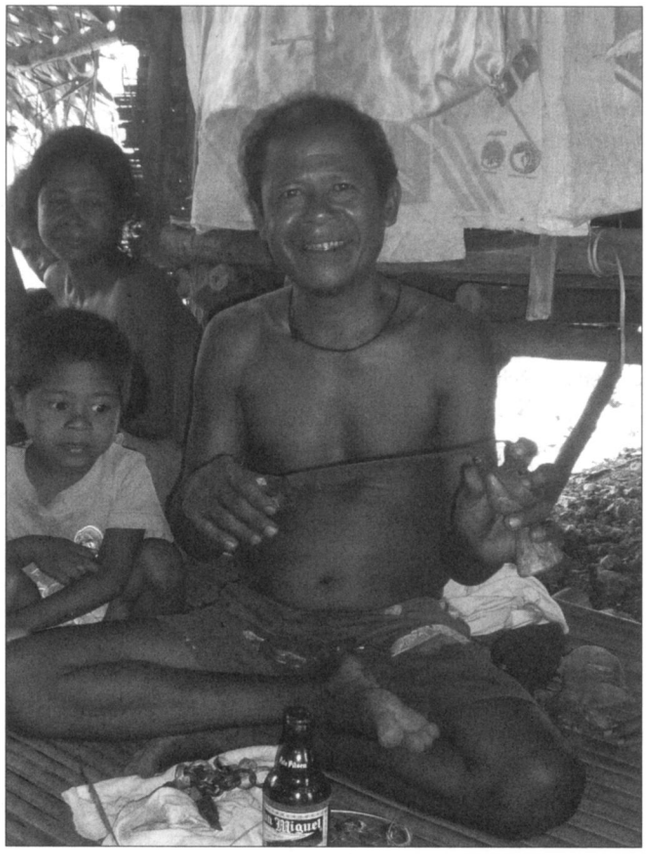

Figure 4: Lito with his hunting sling. Reproduced with permission of the author.

march of the Ati towards full sedentism and integration into Visayan society. But Lito insists that there is one trait that true Ati cannot lose, and that is their love of hunting. The *pangayam* way of life is in their blood, Lito claims, and they cannot forsake it. It was this "ancestral urge" that compelled him some ten years ago to leave the nuns and to join the smallest but most traditional of the seven local bands. Like the rest of the Ati, his people have a permanent base with durable huts, but unlike their kin elsewhere, they have no electricity, no church and no school. As often as possible, the men go on hunting expeditions of several days' duration while the women and children stay behind gathering wild plants and fruits. The traditional bows and arrows have been abandoned due to their conspicuous size—both were the length of the user—which made the Ati stand out too much when they traversed densely populated territories. Nowadays they use less visible slings that are, Lito claims, as effective as their former weapons.

The small hilly acreage that I have placed at the disposal of Lito and his people gives them a measure of independence unknown in neighbouring Ati communities. Centuries of asymmetrical contact with the surrounding Visayans have taught the Ati how to structure relations with their neighbours. On the surface, all is well, and bonds of ritual kinship—cooperating men address each other as *manong*—link Ati settlements with Visayan villages. Yet Lito confided that the disease-causing witches whom the Ati seek to protect themselves against through a formidable barrage of "native medicine" are always Visayans, and that, for this reason alone, they prefer living at some distance from Malay Filipinos.

But perhaps my meddling in their affairs has merely led to the replacement of one form of dependence by another? That seems to have been the verdict of a group of Canadian students who accompanied me on a research trip in the summer of 2009. They did not think much of "my" Ati. After much huffing and puffing, the students reached the hilly outpost, lowered their chunky bodies onto delicate bamboo structures built for the small and lanky Ati (some of them collapsed after the unusual impact), pulled out their cameras, and proceeded to document the seemingly odd combination of old and new: hand-made knives used to open beer bottles, store-purchased rice eaten with wild meat, Lito's cell phone lying next to his sling. They filled the normally quiet place with their shrill laughter and complained later that their hosts had given them the slip just before a much-anticipated hunting expedition. The alpha male of the small group, a mature student who had been to every "neat" place on earth, described my relationship with the Ati as an example of romantic neocolonialism. Perhaps it is. But what is the alternative in the local context? Most dispossessed Ati end up in a nearby metropolis where they barely survive as poverty-stricken scrappers.

Conclusions

The three relationships that I have described here are embedded in a much larger web of contacts that I have made as a result of ethnographic work in several settings. Due to the anthropological preference for marginal groups, the places I have chosen to explore are, for the most part, poor—a Romani ghetto, a Ukrainian village, an Ati settlement—and their inhabitants have sought to enlist me as a generous patron. But, in spite of the inevitably structural asymmetry that marks these relationships, some of them have flourished into friendships. As such, they entail emotional closeness, generosity, respect and durability. I would argue that anthropologists make good friends not only because of their indisputable ability to reward informants with valuable goods and services but also because of the sympathy and empathy they show to "marginals" in the widest sense of the word. I know—

though she never talked about it—that Anastasia valued my understanding of the challenges she faced as a moderate religious fundamentalist in a secular and foreign society. I know that Viera appreciates my willingness to listen to her frustrated diatribes against her own community. And, I know that Lito is delighted to have found in me someone who seems to grasp the anxiety he feels at pondering the future of his people. And what is in it for me, beside the access to exceptional ethnographic data that a cynic might point out? Like Lito, I also feel anxiety about the future of my people. Glancing over the shoulders of my children as they construct and maintain their virtual friendships on Facebook, I wonder how long it might take before my "anthropological" friends remain the last friends I have.

David Z. Scheffel, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada, V2C 5N3. E-mail: dscheffel@tru.ca.

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