



## **Travels in Time: History and identity in today's world**

**Dr Michael Wood**

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### **Introduction:**

It's a great pleasure to welcome you to the 2005 Colin Matthew Memorial Lecture, which is delivered under the auspices both of the Royal Historical Society, of which I am currently the President, and of the Gresham College. I think it's the first time it has been held here in the Museum of London, and it's nice to see so many people are able to find their way in here on such a wet evening.

The lecture this evening is given by Michael Wood, with the title of Travels in Time: History and identity in today's world. I think it's very difficult to think of anybody better equipped to talk about travels in time because, looking at his biography, it seems that he spends most of his time travelling around the world. He is well known for appearing on the television screen, but also for being involved with a small independent film company, making films for the BBC and the Public Broadcasting Service in the United States. He has made nearly 100 films over the past 25 years. He has followed in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, from Greece to India. He has followed in the footsteps of the Spanish Conquistadors in the New World; I hope not following exactly the sorts of things that they were doing on their travels! He has produced a biography of Shakespeare on television. He has been to the Caucasuses, Tibet, Eritrea, the Yemen, and has produced a large documentary on Iraq since the late-Eighties, a documentary on Saddam's Killing Fields - all of these things of course really fitting in to the overarching theme of our lecture series on the public understanding of history. We look forward very much to seeing a new series that he is producing, which will appear on the television in the summer of 2007, on a TV history of India.

But not only is he travelling around the world, understanding figures of the past and their experiences, he is also doing things more domestic and closer at home. I am told that his passion is Anglo Saxon England, and he has a long term project to produce a book on the reign of King Athelston of Wessex and of England.

He is somebody with a huge range of interests, over wide geographical areas and chronological periods, so we look forward very much to hearing what Michael Wood has to say to us this evening.

Michael Wood

Thank you very much, and thanks for coming tonight. It's a great pleasure and an honour to deliver the Colin Matthew Memorial Lecture for the Royal Historical Society, an especially great honour because I'm not a professional scholar, and many great historians have lectured at the Society in a way I couldn't hope to do tonight. As you've heard, I'm a film maker, I suppose you could say a populariser of history, but I hope that some of the things I'm going to talk about tonight coincide with some of Colin Matthews' wide interests. As you know, he was the founding Editor of the new Dictionary of National Biography, an incredible resource. It came out about a year ago, and has already become indispensable to anybody interested in British, and indeed wider, histories. I think it was *The Telegraph* called it "the greatest reference book in the world" – slightly British-centric perhaps, but I daresay it is! Colin also worked in Africa – Uganda, Tanzania – and had a wide frame of reference for a scholar. As you will see tonight, from the three topics I've chosen, I'm one of those who feels that the age of colonialism and imperialism marked our world and shaped our world for bad as well as for good. It's maybe in some of those themes, speaking in memory of one of our great modern scholars of the 19th Century, that it will be appropriate to his memory tonight.

It's a lecture about the public understanding of history. There's a huge interest in history these days in the general public, as you know, in books, TV, museum visits, membership of heritage and historical organisations. It is the biggest leisure time activity in Britain. That doesn't seem to me to be surprising. With the pace of change at the moment, the past seems to be receding from us ever-faster, and there's a hunger to know. With globalisation, it is not only climate change, but the eroding of identities - often built up over thousands of years - literally in a generation or two they are being wiped out. You will see one or two of those things tonight. It's no wonder that we all need history to explain the world as well as to explain ourselves.

In fact, also, the battles that are being fought at the moment, that we read about in our newspapers and on TV, often seem to centre on history. Osama Bin Laden lectures us about the Crusades in Andalus, as well as the border configurations worked out by the imperialists in the 20th Century. Look at the debates in India on history, when the Hindu Nationalist Party took over the country and re-wrote the textbooks, renouncing the earlier version of Indian history as a colonial construct. Everywhere, those questions rise up: who are we, what makes us, and what narrative do we wish to draw out of our pasts now, to give meaning and value to our present, which is obviously what history does. That process seems to me to be the same as the one we use in our lives as individual people.

Our view of our own histories is a constant process of selection, highlighted perhaps by life-changing events which make you all the more closely scrutinise your past. But at different stages in your life, you choose different episodes in your life to give significance, or find significance in different parts of your life depending on how old you are. Nations, I suspect, are the same. I can remember as a student in the late Sixties, the rediscovery of the English radical movements of the 17th Century under Christopher Hill and his disciples, a major revaluation for the period, and E.P. Thomson and his followers' reconsideration of the 18th Century social movements and labour movements, a view of British history which didn't go down too well in the Governments of the 1980s, I seem to remember. I recall Mrs Thatcher writing a preface to an anti-E.P. Thomson pamphlet on the teaching of history. Now, of course, the revaluation of the 16th Century Reformation and the Catholic tradition – we encountered that in our recent biography of Shakespeare.

The world is the same: the narrative is changing, the narrative we grew up with, which I suppose you could call the triumph of the West, as John Roberts did, is giving way, or changing, under the impact of the re-emergence of much older civilisations, drawing on the most incredible historical resources. China, nearly about a fifth of humanity; India, getting on for the same – if you count the whole sub-continent, nearly a quarter of humanity. The past is re-asserting itself. Reading the news items, or seeing the TV reports from some of those places, especially about the impact of modernity and industrialisation, I sometimes find myself recalling early 19th Century writers on my home town, Manchester – the same sense of shock. Here was the template for what happens when modernity hits you, you know, De Tocqueville on Manchester, that mixture of admiration, shock, horror, foreboding. A traveller in India, even in the 1980s, let alone in the Sixties and Seventies, could never have guessed that already India is being spoken of as the, potentially the giant of the 21st Century, and the same in China.

It's those kind of things that are part of the fascination of my job: we travel, we see this history working itself on the ground, and the relation between human beings, landscape, culture, identity, memory, the givenness of the past, if I can put it that way, and it's those living links that we've always tried to film. You can make history films where you dress everybody up in costume and they speak lines, and they're very successful, or just with costumes and commentary. My kids are always saying to me, "Why don't you make films like David Starkey, Dad?" to which my answer of course is, "Well, who else could?!" For us, it's travel, it's landscape and it's living connections, watching history being made, and sometimes unmade.

Tonight I've chosen three areas of journeys that we've made in film over the last twenty or twenty-five years. I have chosen them for both topical and sentimental reasons: travels in Iraq, in India, and in Latin America, in each case, looking at some of these themes about history, about resistance, about the impact of modernity and colonialism, about loss. They are travels in time, because they are travels over time, over this last twenty-five years, and they are travels in time because sometimes it is almost like having a time machine in some of these places. You literally can, as Philip Pullman puts it in *The Dark Materials* "cut through the membrane of the modern world and go back to another one." But they are also travels in time because some of the things you will be seeing we may be the last generation to see, although some of these cultures have shown incredible resilience and the ability to modify and reinvent themselves and go on into the future, changed but somehow the same.

I'm a great believer in travelling in a landscape. Landscapes are what make cultures and civilisations, local and wider, and of course journeys tell you all sorts of things, about continuities, connections - you see things at a different pace when travelling in aeroplanes, don't you? "You do what they did and you go where they went" is a good principle, I think, for making films. You travel on foot over the Hindu Kush - well, actually, it was the only way to travel during the war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. On the way, you learn all sorts of things about history. You learn that there are many other histories. There are received views of history of course, there are narratives compiled by the winners, or by the rulers, but there is a great subversive mass of other stories which constantly bubble up and influence that.

We went to Iran. We were following Alexander the Great. "Oh we don't call him the Great!" said Mr Tehrabi, one of the last of the old one-man storytellers who used to roam the back roads of Iran, with their painted backdrops, playing in the coffee houses, telling the stories from Fiodosi. He had the text in front of him, carried it with him, improvising on that thousand year old text, itself based on Persian traditions and Hellenistic traditions. "No, no, not Alexander the Great! The accursed! He killed our priests, destroyed our fire temples, burned our sacred book, the Avesta, forced our girls to marry Greek boys against their will!" There is truth in those stories, carried down within the Iranian diaspora. The further out you go, of course, the stories become a different kind of thing.

In the tents in Turkmenistan late at night someone said: "Oh yes, you want to know about Alexander! He went up to heaven in a winged chariot pulled by griffins. He dived to the bottom of the ocean in a diving bell to see the Mistress of the Deep and, do you know, he had horns, real horns? This is why we call him Zurkani in Arabic, but only his barber knew his terrible secret, because he had long and wavy hair!"

Stories, narratives: narratives that sometimes can be the founding narratives of nations, as we discovered recently in Ethiopia, with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the story of the Queen of Sheba, who of course is the founder of the nation, just as her consort Solomon, in the story, is the founder of the present nation of Israel. These are stories whose currency sometimes last for thousands of years, sometimes go with the mainstream flow of the culture, sometimes against it, but sometimes have much more importance than, dare I say this in an audience of historians, mere historical fact. Sometimes, those chance encounters on these countries can open up hidden vistas of those, what I call the subversive other visions, especially in cultures where the colonial impact has been shattering. We went to Guatemala, where we saw the sacred cave underneath the Mayan citadel destroyed by the Conquistadors in the 1520s. There we saw two shamans are doing their rituals to Santo Mondo, the Holy Earth, to the Mayan deities as well as the Christian saints. One shaman, Don Andres Siloj, turned out to be the custodian of the Mayan genesis story, written down in the Mayan language in the 1550s, the text borrowed by a European priest in the 1720s, a pre-Conquest text whose interpretation has only come down in the hands of people like Andres. When Dennis Tedlock, the anthropologist who has produced a wonderful modern translation of this text, wanted to plumb its mysteries, Andres made him do a year traineeship, as it were, before he was prepared to expound the complexities of the text to him. So acts of resistance and deep cultural context can come out of those things.

Those are the kind of themes that interest me in making those journeys, and I hope interest you too. They are the kind of things that you only discover by being out there. It's a great privilege to spend any time in a foreign culture of course: you spend a little bit of time, and those things start to become apparent, the different visions of the past and what it means.

We travelled to Iraq. Some of you will know the famous book by Wilfred Thesiger on the Marsh Arabs. They are virtually gone now of course, destroyed by Saddam in the early '90s. This was a journey that I made into the marshes in the late '80s, and saw the characteristic reed huts on their little islands. The roots of the material culture lay back 5,000 years, the method of construction, the design of beautiful arched reed huts, depicted on Samarian seals of the 3rd Millennium BC. The landscape, 6,000 square miles of marshes, with half-aquatic human beings living on artificial islands, on fish, keeping water buffalo that had been brought from India during Persian times, a landscape which had contracted and grown, but had been there since the beginning. A lot of the Samarian myths talk about this great expanse of fresh water at the top of the Gulf. Early Arab historians in the 8th and 9th Century talk about the people down there still following the ancient gods of wind and water. We visited many of the smaller groups in the Iraqi population. Extraordinary – we have these visions of Iraq today, especially when you go to war with a country, governments give you a version of a culture to make you feel more compliant in allowing them to devastate a defenceless country, as happened in this case, if I can put it that way. Travelling through Iraq, especially in the pre-'91 era, all the minorities were still there, the Christians, the Caldean Christians, the Assyrian Christians, large minorities, many churches, the smaller groups. We met the Mandeans, people who speak a kind of Aramaic, an ancient baptismal sect, part Babylonian in their customs, and partly influenced by Gnostic and sort of Hellenistic sects, Christianity too probably. They call themselves now the Christians of St John, although they are not. They speak Mandaic, a kind of Aramaic, practise full immersion baptisms in the Tigris, which they call the Jordan. A priest we met there is living in Hull now because, like all these minorities, his has been devastated in the last fifteen years.

It's the most incredible historical landscape, Iraq. I can try and convey it to you by what looks like the most forbidding, inhospitable, dry, lunar, austere landscape you could imagine. We visited the top of a Hellenistic tomb, about a hundred feet high, looking over the desert to the ruins on the horizon of the city of Uruk. We could see the track of the River Euphrates and the mounds of the city, six miles round, a larger extent than Rome at its height, which grew up about 3,000 BC onwards. If anywhere, this is the place where writing was invented on Earth, where we get the first literature, I've never been anywhere so moving to the historical imagination.

We saw its great gates. They still have great mud brick defences underneath, but silted with wind blown sand and erosion. Your feet tread Ubadian pottery from the 5th Millennium BC and Islamic glass from the 1st Millennium AD. These places were not only generators of culture in their own time, but they generated cultures through all the succeeding epochs of Hellenistic, even the Romans ruled in Uruk for a while. These places, some of them, lived all the way through that period. Nippur, a sacred city, founded around 5,000 BC in the 1st Millennium AD, had a Jewish synagogue, a Christian bishop, a Manichean community, a great Muslim mosque, and produced literature, survived until the 5th Century AD, when it died out through lack of water, as Uruk did, but the population only transplanted a few miles to the present town of Afij, which is still there, and now has a huge American base next to it.

You are fascinated when you go to these places. What's the connection between the living and the dead? Is it a break between that immensity of the ancient world, those thousands of years, and the Muslim period? Of course it isn't. It's never like that, is it? You know, those essays you used to write at school, continuity or cataclysm, change or continuity, these sort of things...it's never like that in history – well sometimes, perhaps. If you want to imagine – this is how I imagine what that was like, make that connection. I stumbled upon some photos that are part of the colonial impact, because they were taken by the RAF after the British invasion of Iraq in 1917.

One is of a Mesopotamian city, a famous city in the Middle Ages mentioned by some of the famous travellers of that day, and slightly earlier. One is of Najaf, the sacred city of the Shiites, on a beautiful clear day in 1919. I got these out of a little volume of pilgrimage sites in Iraq published by the Times Press in Basra in 1922. The negatives have gone. The RAF no longer has them. One shows the temple in the middle, the long covered sukh running to a gate nearby, the walls defending it, the desert beyond, the different quarters. Excavation of the ancient cities of Mesopotamia and the translation of all the documents shows you that they were organised in exactly the same way as Arabic Muslim cities right up to the present day. Each quarter had its own sukh, had a hamam for water, for washing. Of course in the desert you have to have that kind of facility, especially in Najaf, where water is a difficult question. Each quarter had its own



scribe. In every way, the Mesopotamian city carried on – even the decoration on the shrines is similar.

Even in these copied, faded old prints you can see the city. These survive right down to Saddam bulldozing them, and then of course the American devastation of part of the city two years ago. You can see the orial windows in the old houses. Houses, never more than three or four storeys, but with very deep systems of wells, the places where you could go for the water cistern and to be cool in the ferocious heat of the summer - murderous place in the summer, southern Iraq ! Even Wilfred Theseger, who was the hardest guy who ever lived, only spent seven months a year in South Iraq ! An architecture designed for the climate, it survived right down till Saddam's deliberate devastation of the old city architecture, to have large boulevards for control and concrete buildings with air conditioning. Sukhs, covered, just as they were in ancient times, dark, cool...A lot of rude Iraqi proverbs about the sukhs that you can find in the ancient texts as well... And the craftspeople, you know, they used the same materials throughout Iraqi history – of course mud brick, in a land where there's no stone in South Iraq, tiles. Their temples were covered with beautifully covered tiles, just as the mosques are, often using wonderful kind of multi-coloured diamond patterns on the front of the mosque.

I have a picture of an old tile maker. An acquaintance of mine shot it about thirty years ago in Iraq. He looks just like those Samarian statues that Leonard Woolly recovered from Ure. The long, big, bulbous nose, the beard, and the bald head.

The temples themselves, large landowners, centres of scholarship, lots of attached buildings... I have an interior shot of the Shrine in Najaf taken in the Fifties, showing the old scholars. The manuscript copiers were still there then. A dear friend of mine's grandfather told me that there was a Shiite cleric before the Second World War, told me that they still not only had manuscripts in his day, but the curriculum included Euclid, Gayland, and Aristotle, and the "divine" Plato.

One of the things that always upsets me, travelling around Iraq and reading the ancient literature, was the culture of lamentation. Egyptian friends used to say, "Oh, the Iraqis are all so nervy. The character of the Iraqi people – they're very pessimistic, they always see this... Egypt is so optimistic." You wonder, don't you, about these generalisations, about character, but it's very interesting that the culture of lamentation should have been such a strong feature of the Southern Iraqi culture, the heartland of cities. This was a culture devastated time and again over many thousands of years, by outside invaders who had come for the riches of Iraq. How history repeats itself! You can find enormous volumes of the lamentations of ancient Iraq. Could there be a connection? Certainly the rituals are the same, what they do is the same, and that is often the case, I find, in history. Theological belief may change, but what people do remains the same.

Another picture I have from that old Iraq showsthe communal cooking in the alleys, the cooking for Hussein, when all comers, the million or two pilgrims who used to come over from Afghanistan and Persia and so on, were fed in the streets by the locals.

So that's one culture that has endured a colonial assault over the last eighty years which has left it on its knees. A Shiite cleric said to me in the marshes when we were making our film about the destruction of the South ten years ago, when we went in from the Iranian side: "My biggest fear," he said, "if this goes on ten years more, is that the goodness of the people will be destroyed." That's the fear at the moment, and despite the great pluralism of Iraq, which of course included a massively important Jewish community for 2,500 years, it looks like the pressures of modern politics and the modern nation state will break it up.

I am now going to talk about India. India is the opposite, it seems to me, but here of course another civilisation going back to the 7 th Millennium BC. Now we've got archaeological excavations in Belujistan and west of the Indus. A great civilisation in the Indus Valley, of which too little is known now, because we still can't translate the language, and civilisation arising in the Ganges Valley during the 1st Millennium BC.

Keeping to these themes about identity and resistance, I will now turn to South India. For all sorts of reasons, South India preserved what a great European Tamil scholar calls the last classical civilisation in the world. Some of thre same images keep cropping up: another image of a sacred city, like Najaf. Madurai in Southern India was known to the Greeks and Romans, it was the cultural centre in the Greek/Roman period when great literature was produced in Tamil lands, which was largely forgotten until the late 19th Century when it was rediscovered, still in the hands of, for example, the Jane community. It was in Jane circles that some of these Tamil epics from that period were written, and wonderful pieces of work they are too. Others were in Tamil Buddhist circles, although there's no longer a Tamil Buddhist community. There are still Janes in many of these towns. But Madurai was the great cultural centre of the South, and a giant sacred city. There you can still see the remains of the two circles of sacred streets which went round that

central enclosure.

We all get those images of the Taj Mahal, don't we, and of North India, but you rarely see other examples of the architecture and culture. There is an extraordinary fact about India : despite the colonial impact over a very long period of time, and the effort made by the colonial power to reshape the Indian view of the world, for them to redefine what history was, what time was, what the goals of society were. India took that on board, but tenaciously hung on to the other things as well.

In Madurai there is a temple from ancient Greek/Roman times, although its structure is now 17th Century. It's a fantastic example of the Tamil imagination. These are great gate towers that you walk under to go into shrines. They were often dismissed by British architectural historians as disobeying all the tenets of architecture. Gothic cathedrals were the thing, you know. There are thousands of these temples, smaller versions, but scores and even more than a hundred of the giant ones, scattered over Tamil, from different epochs. The gates define the sacred perimeter, and the labyrinth gets smaller and smaller and smaller as you go in, until the encounter with the deity is in a tiny, dark, lamp-lit chamber, the womb chamber. It's the reverse of our principle of sacred architecture – and jolly good too! They have bathing tanks in these great temples. These are living institutions, still connected to the community, the culture of the South, the four great languages of the South, of course a great culture in literature, in music. The languages are not related to the Sanskrit based languages of the North, although they have borrowed from them over the last 2,000 odd years. Despite the Tamil Nationalist Movement anti-Brahmin and anti-temple stance in the 1930s, 40s, 50s, they have stayed on as great institutions in the minds of the people.

I visited the Golden Hall and the very famous Temple of Siva, probably 9th Century. All over the temple are the poses of the sacred dance, one of the great things in Tamil culture, and in Indian culture indeed – god is a dancer. It's a rice culture of course. I spoke about the landscape of Iraq, a wheat and barley culture, often, as in places like Uruk, eventually destroyed by over-exploitation. That's why places like Uruk died in the end. This is a rice culture. The housing, compared with the Iraqi houses, again designed for high temperatures, but this is deep in the tropics so it's also designed to cope with monsoons. There are priests' houses just outside the Temple. You can see the big colonnades where you can sit and receive your guests. The rain runs off, goes into the yard outside, although there is also a pump.

This culture, despite modernity, alongside modernity, has still survived until today. You do all the things you used to do. We have family friends who have a little house there. The grandfather, who was a head man under the British, died in his nineties in about 1992. He could have been out of a medieval world, endowing little lodges for pilgrims, bequeathing a portion of his rice paddy to the god and so on. The daughters, the granddaughters all work in computer firms in Madras or as librarians and things like that, but nevertheless follow the traditional culture, perfectly comfortably alongside the ancient culture, and are still part of a memorising culture, even though they work on computers. For example, they know off by heart many of the hymns, the famous cycle of songs about places, sacred place in Tamil which go back to the 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th Century.

Similar kind of cultural - hot climate things that you'll use - a vegetarian culture of course, absolutely strictly vegetarian in their caste. Flowers are a major part of the culture. There are Tamil hymns from Roman times which do extraordinary things. There's one Tamil poem that is a tour de force mentioning 99 different favourite Tamil flowers in one poem seemingly.

A pluralist country too – India has always been a pluralist culture. Conquests of India of course go back to the Bronze Age. You might pray in a little shrine before you get on the train, and you'll see the image of Vishnu in the middle, Christ on the right, and the symbol for Mecca on the left. There is a great Muslim shrine at Nagor, to which Christians and Hindus go. Just over the hills, there is a lovely Jewish synagogue. You can sometimes find villages where you've got Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Jewish shrines in the same place.

The main culture, though, is Hindu. It's one of those funny things, isn't it? We're always taught to use the word Hinduism, but one of the things you get as a traveller is you realise that even before you discover this to be the case, there's no such thing. We know now from modern scholarship on India that Hinduism as a concept is actually a colonial invention. The religious systems of India are extremely diverse, and even the followers of the main religions, that is of Shiva, and Vishnu, and the Goddess, have different litigies, different sacred texts. The point behind this is that very early on, India learned, and rulers of India learned, whatever persuasion – Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu – to give equal value to different religions. It's an interesting idea, picked up by Mahatma Gandhi. He talks at one point about mere tolerance – tolerance is not good enough, but what is needed is to give equal respect to the other, and that isn't tolerance – it's

more than that. India managed that.

One of the strange things about Hindu fundamentalism, its rise over the last 100 years, is it has almost been colonially inspired, to create a Hindu nation in the image of the modern nation state, in which all the minority religions of India, so called, become dutiful minorities rather than part of this complex, interactive series of systems. One Indian scholar compared it to the American idea of a melting pot as opposed to a salad! The culture down south, all goes back a couple of thousand years in terms of texts, as do their grammatical and literary traditions. You go into the Hindu shrines in the South today, and you'll see all these things, the young Brahmins learning their sacred texts, the many different rituals that people do, the festival times, and rituals that went in the monotheistic tradition, but you're familiar with from classical sources, for example, or ancient Babylonian sources, still alive. They keep up with the times as well of course. These are rituals which have been done in India for thousands of years. Excavations of prehistoric, Mesolithic and other sites have brought some of this up.

I'm talking about religion as a crystallisation of a culture. I remember meeting a nuclear scientist, a top Indian nuclear scientist, many years ago, who was wearing his stripes of Vishnu, and he told me all this was perfectly consonant with modern nuclear theory.

Of course the musical, sculptural and other traditions are still alive here. They still use the lost wax process that was used by the ancient Greeks, for example, to make magnificent images. I saw one from 1014, in a temple in the Delta. I came over in 1982 for a festival exhibition – you may have seen it – it was smaller than life size, but a magnificent image. He would be leaning on his bull. The bull's gone. That's Shiva as the herdsman, with a turban of snakes, very lush and skimpy sort of loincloth – a fantastic image, made by a family of bronze casters whose work spreads over about 50 years in that part of the Delta, and a series of incredible masterpieces. There'd be nothing like this since the ancient Greeks of course. They still do it down there, and stone sculpture too. The familiar gestures, you know, the binding of a garland of flowers round the head – a wonderful image from about 1030.

I talked about those gestures. That's part of being, isn't it? It's part of identify, part of a culture, your idea of your history, the idea of time, the idea of your place in it, the idea of your culture and language, and its relationship to whatever else you may believe. The ritual is always tied to place. All over India, these things are tied to place. The epic of India, whose materials derive from the 1st Millennium BC, has a great pilgrimage, clockwise pilgrimage around India with about 270 sacred places already. Whether it actually was committed to writing, I don't know. These are time-honoured rituals and gestures. They are the things that people do. When you look at the census of India, the funny thing is that Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Janes, Pasis, whoever you care to look at, actually do virtually all the same things, and believe virtually all the same things.

A wonderful book about India mentioned "a million mutinies" and the survival of this culture, perfectly comfortable with modernity - it is one of those fascinating things, isn't it, and could only come from a great tradition whose sense of itself goes back a very long way, albeit the British undoubtedly added something to the political idea of India.

My last example is a culture where the colonial assault was tremendous, and still is, and where this history is much more recent – 500 years is a very short time in the span of these stories, as you'll have gathered by now. It is Latin America.

Our journey took us in the footsteps of the Conquistadors, the Spanish conquerors of the New World and its civilisations. These civilisations in the New World of course had existed out of contact with the civilisations of the old world. From very early times, before historical times, civilisations of the near east, Iraq, Egypt, Anatolia, India, had connected with each other. Even China had not been totally isolated prior to its late Bronze Age flowering. Our ancestors only left Africa 80,000 or so years ago. All of us are descended from that migration. All modern non-Africans carry in their DNA traces of the DNA of two people in Africa from before that migration. All of us Europeans, of European descent, share traces of much more recent DNA. These are very, very recent stories, aren't they? In that perspective, it's almost possible to find oral tradition of some of these migrations.

So the migration into America, the last 20,000 years. Those cultures bore many traces of their East Asian origin. We were after historical events, but of course uncovered much deeper connections in the same things that I've been talking about tonight – ideas about history, identity, resistance and loss.

It was a real clash of civilisations, the first Europeans not knowing that there was a continent of course at that stage. They were stunned to discover great buildings, and not only palaces, but observatories, such as El Grande Cairo, and the Pyramids of Tulum. Imagine those first letters back – they have law, they have writing, they are rational! This word keeps cropping up in colonial discourse, all over the world – they are rational! Hindus of course were irrational to some early British commentators. These people are rational – they have observatories – great architecture. Comparisons rapidly started to be made with the Greeks and the Romans. It was only when the horrendous details, as the Europeans saw it, of their religion came out, that they were then re-calibrated in the historical record as a branch of humanity who had escaped the revelation! But the same kind of things crop up.

Of course there is a different kind of agriculture. I spoke about the rice culture of the south of India, the wheat culture of the Ganges plain, the wheat and barley culture of Iraq, central to any great civilisation. Here, the corn and other crops are on a terraced system – there are no great rivers in the Andes –which amazed early Spanish commentators, and some of them, ruefully, by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, acknowledged that the colonial powers had not been able to maintain these and most of them were falling into disuse. They are just starting to be brought back, interestingly enough.

The paradigm of this history is uncannily similar to some of the ones we have already talked about. The likes of Cortez are kind of modern men, aren't they? The version of history and time which is to be put over, foisted on, forced on the native cultures is of modernity. Cortez in the record becomes a kind of supreme version of modern man: manipulative, supreme ironist, flexible, able to diagnose any culture, an individualist in the century that ends with Hamlet and Don Quixote, That's the narrative of earlier versions of the story. It's a narrative, and here I'm going to turn to manuscript just for a few moments before I finish, a narrative which has its other versions, as all these stories do of course, other versions in the big historical narrative. Maya and Aztecs of course had writing. The Incas don't appear to have to have done, although they had recording systems. An Aztec codex from just after the Conquest shows the tragic sequence of events: Montezuma on the roof of his palace seeing the omens ten years before, the terrible comet, his spies perched in the tree, the Spaniard fishing from a little boat, and the strange wooden thing, as it says in the Florentine codex, "This fearful object floating like a house, which went back and forward in the bay," these strange creatures who could not be categorised within the Aztec conception of the universe, and whose coming so amazingly coincided with the chronology of Aztec prophecies.

The Aztec language, Nahuatl, is still a surviving language, spoken by about three million people, and there is incredibly rich poetry, from even before Conquest times, wonderful poetry, including a poetry of defeat, a poetic record of the Conquista, along with historical records. There is a 12 volume account of Aztec culture produced by Aztec eyewitnesses for the great Father Sagun, one of the great historiographers of all time, who fell in love with the culture, to the point where he was summoned back to Spain by his superiors, and his manuscripts were nearly destroyed. There's the dreadful account, the speech-glyphs, Montezuma in his palace, the Spaniards in their armour coming past Popocatepetl, Montezuma's speech recorded: "My heart burns as if it's been washed in chillies," the nightmare of the story. There are some wonderful Aztec codices in Britain, in Glasgow and Oxford. There is the terrible account of the battle in Mexico City. It is in monochrome, metal of the conquerors depicted by a native artist. They were all metal. Their horses were covered with metal, they wore metal, their weapons were metal, and the eagle warrior and the jaguar warrior facing them in their traditional beautifully coloured costumes, the terrible plague of smallpox which destroyed them after they had successfully repelled the first invasion... What would have happened in history if this had not happened? You can see the speech-glyphs coming from the mouths of the dying – "It was so painful, when we rolled over, we cried out in agony," says the text.

Similar accounts exist in Peruvian society, from after the Conquista. There is a wonderful manuscript in Copenhagen written by Waman Poma, the great native historian of Peru, who devoted 30 years to writing this history. One shows the death of Atawalpa at the hands of Pizarro, an attempt to give an account of Inca history and culture, which he wanted to send directly to the King of Spain himself. Of course the King of Spain never read it. He hoped that the King of Spain would be the fount of justice and that if he only understood what had happened and what was happening in the Mayans and in the plantations and so on, he would interfere with the colonial rulers. Of course it never happened, although a great debate did happen at that time in Spanish culture, including the memorable debate in 1555 in Valladolid between Las Casas, the great Dominican protector of the Indians, and Juan Gines de Sepulveda, the great Aristotelian philosopher, a debate sponsored by the Emperor, asking whether these civilisations were indeed civilisations as we are, do we have the right to go and do this? Las Casas argued on what we would call basic issues of human rights, that we had no such right, that even conversion couldn't be done with force,



but only by persuasion, that loving kindness should be used to our brother human beings. Sepulveda argued, on the other side, from Aristotelian point of view, that these were not only inferior peoples but they had been contaminated by the devil, human sacrifice and all that proved this, and that it was Spain's duty to bring them into the modern world. "Sure, they make beautiful art," he said in response to one of Las Casas' submissions, "but bees do wonderful and intricate things that human beings cannot imitate." It's an extraordinary moment of a clash of civilisations, these codices also recording all the details of Aztec poetry, examples of Aztec poetry, their feather work, their metalwork, and so on.

I mentioned this with India. At the top of Indian newspapers, you'll still see a calendar. The Aztec calendar is Quetzalcoatl. These times are still maintained in some parts of Latin America, very tenaciously.

The aristocracy in Cuzco remained, as it still remains. There are many people in Cuzco who trace their descent to the panacas of the Inca royal family, in every detail. Some still hold properties in the canchas right by the former Sun Temple, now the cathedral. So these were tenaciously maintained. There was a great revolt in 1780/81. The stories were handed down.

To conclude, these things still, even in a colonial situation as horrendous as this, where it's calculated 90% of the population died in the first century, because of Western diseases and so on, the older cultures persisted and are re-emerging. These acts of vast mutinies continue. When you go there today, you find the two systems not even existing alongside, but co-existing, the forms of Catholicism in this part of the world almost reverting to the native rituals, which have never been abandoned. You see the Mayan fire altar in front of the church.

I'll never forget returning to see Don Andres in 1990, autumn, winter. Our daughter had been born on September the 19th, and Andres said, "How are you?" I said, "I'm fine." He said, "Your daughter was born?" I said, "Yes." "What day was she born?" I said, "September the 19th." You could see the Mayan calendar computer in his brain go like this... "Ah 13: Monkey." Thirteen is a very lucky day, and this was a very auspicious day, but it took him no time at all to calculate. Two worlds exist side-by-side. Up on the Andes, there is the great pilgrimage to Q'olluriti, the glaciers, where thousands of people go up, in loyalty to those older systems.

Those are my reports, from a traveller with a historian's eye, from those traditional civilisations. We could have done similar reports from Africa, from China and other places, about identity, landscape and culture, and transforming speed in the last 25 years. Those valleys of the Andes already have got the power lines going up them, so we may be seeing the end of some of these things.

I spoke about encoded memories, at the beginning, being lost, that have taken thousands of years to build up, now being rubbed away. That's true, but others are being re-made because history of course is never static, it is always change, and identity is never static. That's the danger of those who think identity is something that can be packaged and then sold, especially politicians. Identity is always itself being re-made and reconsidered. Not long ago, somebody wrote a book called *The End of History*, and it seemed to me to be a book that was written from somebody who had been in a study reading books, because none of these seems to me like the end of history, but the beginning almost of things new. History gives us our institutions and our religions, our allegiances, our sense of justice, which all go into identity. Some social historians and psychologists would argue that history is one of the things that stops you going mad. If you know who you are of course as well, it can help you embrace the other, and embracing the other is one of those big questions at the moment, going back to Mahatma Gandhi's business about tolerance. Many of the conflicts in the world at the moment don't even get as far as tolerance. I hope these journeys and impressions have given some ideas to you. Let me conclude with one of the great late 19th Century writers that Colin Matthew really loved. "We need history, certainly, but we need it for a reason different from those for which the idler in the garden of knowledge needs it. Even though he may look nobly down on our rough needs, we need history, that is to say, for the sake of life and action."

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