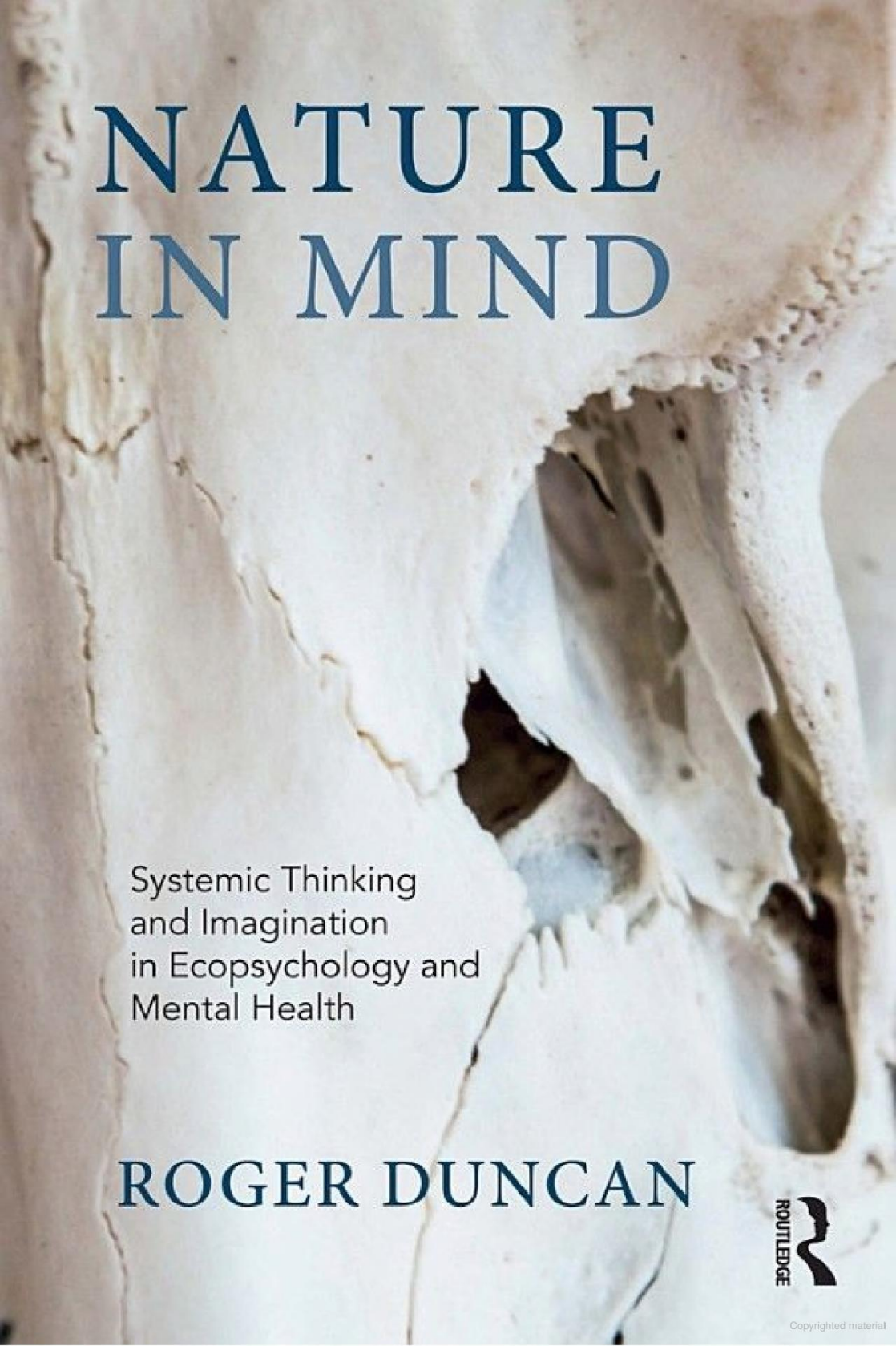

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Contents

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About the author

Roger Duncan trained as a biologist, Waldorf teacher, and wilderness rites of passage guide with The School of Lost Borders before becoming a Systemic Family Therapist and has been involved in nature-based practice for thirty years. He was one of the pioneer tutors of Ruskin Mill Education Trust, developing therapeutic education programmes for complex adolescents in the woodlands and wilderness settings and had a leadership role in senior management. He currently works as a Systemic Family Therapist in the NHS and in private practice, with individuals, families, and organizations. His intention is to find innovative ways to bring experiential encounters with the imaginal world into mainstream culture.

Introduction

What's the problem?

It sometimes seems that human culture is sleepwalking into a series of ever-deeper humanitarian and environmental disasters, and even with the increased environmental awareness and widespread social education, the future does not look hopeful. In fact, it looks unlikely that much of human culture and the ecosystems we have learnt to love will immerge intact from this process of catastrophic change. Despite increasingly complex technological developments, this process of environmental degradation seems difficult to stop.

However, in 1988 British documentary film maker Alan Ereira was contacted by one of the last indigenous pre-Columbian South American tribes, called the Kogi. The Kogi had managed to evade conquest by the Spanish by retreating high into the Sierra Nevada Mountains of Columbia. Here they were able to keep their indigenous culture intact by isolating themselves from Western cultures. Through the training of shamans called mamas, they believed they could communicate with the earth. According to the Kogi, this initiation process involved mamas being identified at birth and then removed from their family at seven months old and kept in a darkened initiation lodge and only allowed out for a short period at night, until they reached adolescence. During this process they were slowly taught how to communicate with nature, through a particular type of thinking. They also learnt cosmological stories that described the complex systemic relationship between human beings, nature, and the

cosmos. After this initiation the mamas believed that they were able to read nature in a way that supported the ecological integration of their culture. The Kogi believed that it was their role to take care of the earth, and without their daily shamanic practices the earth would begin to die.

The Kogi contacted Alan because they had observed the reduced snow on the Sierra Nevada Mountains and understood that the earth's climate was changing. This, they believed, was the result of the activities of Western cultures, because they were not able to understand or communicate with the earth. The Kogi hoped that by making a film about this, Western cultures (who they called the younger brothers) would understand the complex and interconnected quality of the ecosystems and change their destructive practices. If this did not happen, then the Kogi believed the world would see an increase in uncontrollable diseases, flooding, and other climactic events, as the earth tried to shed itself of humanity in a process of systemic self-healing.

Twenty-eight years later in 2016, professor of psychiatry Daniel Siegel challenged the Western medical model of the mind and suggested that mind is an emergent and systemic phenomenon that connects individuals and the planet. Siegel proposed, like the Kogi shamans, that a mechanistic approach is not only leading to the destruction of the planet but is also insufficient to describe the complexities of mental health (Siegel, 2017).

The urgency of global catastrophe is real, but it is never too late for systems to change, in fact, change is intrinsic to the very nature of systems. The earth has been through catastrophic systemic environmental changes before and will do so again. It is our current human civilization that is not prepared or ready for this inevitable transformation. The threads of a new way of thinking and working already exist in our culture, if we know where to look for them, and the work of reconnecting these

threads is loosely linked to the emerging discipline of ecopsychology, or nature-based practice, and sometimes just called "the work".

This book is therefore about connecting disciplines to create consilience, a coming together, in order to understand the relationship between humans and nature in a new way. This process of reconnecting with a deeper understanding of nature has been influenced by a small group of highly original thinkers, who have described the process in detail. They include amongst others: Carl Jung, Henry Corbin, James Hillman, Gregory Bateson, and Rudolf Steiner, all of whom point to a different way of seeing the world that is non-reductionist, complex, systemic, and essentially healthier, and characterized by an emergent spiritually.

This book is also about re-envisioning and engaging with a different future for the earth and the humans that live on it; it is about finding a language so we can talk about and develop shared practice, interventions and ways of working that are in tune with the ecosystems of the earth. Therefore, this book is a tool for therapists, teachers and outdoor educators, social workers, farmers and landowners, ecologists, leaders, and managers who have an interest in creating a healthy world for future generations. Creating an alternative system, while the rest of mainstream culture continues with the slow process of gradually greening unsustainable practice, is not what I advocate. Instead, I believe it is important to find ways of bringing about rapid, positive, and healthy systemic change from within existing human cultural systems.

While ecological and nature awareness is now entering mainstream education and culture, starting with disparate protest groups and activists, the type of change required to realign Western culture with the ecosystems of the earth will need more than tinkering at the edges. Deep systemic changes in existing

unhealthy human social systems will require the work of determined individual change agents from within those systems, and this book is an invitation to be involved in that change.

The desire and urgency of creating a sustainable culture no longer needs further debate, and I believe the time for talking is over. I therefore hope this book will inspire people to think and act in ways that can bring about systemic ecological and social change.

How to read this book

I have written this book partly in the form of a biographical narrative linking the development of my thoughts and experiences in a way I hope is clear. The chapters have been structured to allow for the reader to be drawn into a gradual understanding of this work. By doing so I hope it provides the reader with a guide to the field of nature-based work and thinking, that is accessible to the general reader. I have also referenced the work in a way that I hope will be useful to professionals who are new to this field, and are interested in further research.

Chapter One describes the deep impact that losing an indigenous context has had on our current social, psychological, and epistemological perspectives, and how recently in our indigenous history we have lost contact with our understanding of nature's systems in favour of a siloed scientific and materialist perspective that currently dominates Western thinking.

Chapters Two, Four, and Six are shorter chapters that focus on the practice of wilderness experience, working in woodlands, and vision fast as a rite of passage. These chapters are based on my personal experience as well as the experience of others in the

field, and provide examples of best practice as well as qualitative and quantitative evidence where possible. These three chapters also include suggested design criteria for people interested in developing this work, as well as references that offer further reading, practice, or research. I have written these three chapters in a slightly different style to the other chapters, and they could be read as a standalone practical guide to three different types of nature-based practices.

Chapter Three is probably the most challenging chapter in the book, since it deals with the complex issues of epistemology, of how we interpret the world. This chapter explores how we might find a common language to describe Gregory Bateson's idea of the creatura and Henry Corbin's idea of the imaginal world. This is a way of seeing the world, also described by the visionary educationalist Rudolf Steiner and was previously described by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and has its roots in Gnostic philosophy. This epistemology is explored, because it appears to have a strong similarity to accounts of how indigenous cultures saw the world, and could indicate a way of deeply reconnecting with nature on a psychological level.

Chapter Five is a brief introduction to the use of three nature-based developmental wheels or mapping tools that have been used in nature-based work and can each be applied in slightly different ways. They are best understood as guides to imaginal qualities, rather than as a fixed consecutive or conceptual framework. Chapter Seven offers a guide for how imaginal thinking can open up different ways of seeing nature that can complement and enhance the scientific viewpoint. This might 'give the reader the opportunity'? to begin to read some of the deep and systemic patterning in nature. Finally, Chapter Eight combines aspects from the previous chapters into an ecopsychological framework of human development that could be used in the formulation and thinking about care plans and

interventions that encourage healthy human growth and is based on isomorphic patterns in nature. This chapter also offers an ecopsychological framework for professionals who are working with children and adolescents, integrating aspects of developmental neuroscience.

My connection to nature-based work

I have been involved with nature-based work for more than thirty years, both practically in my work with adolescents, but also in reading and research and trying to make sense of an approach to nature that can appear either overwhelmingly complex or just too mystical to be of any practical use. My personal journey into exploring a new relationship with nature perhaps grew out of my early life experience of adoption that resulted in a distrust of the human world and an attraction to a connection with nature instead. My path of reconnection involved the study of biology, travelling and meeting indigenous people, working as a Steiner teacher, working as a forester, raising a family, experience of vision quest, my own psychotherapy, and training as a systemic psychotherapist.

During this time, through a number of twists of choice and fate I had the good fortune to be involved in innovative projects where I could put some of the ideas I had been researching into practice by working outdoors with troubled adolescents. This included setting up and leading wilderness experience camps, setting up and leading vision fasts with groups of adolescents, and being involved in the growth and development of an independent specialist college providing a therapeutic education curriculum for adolescents with complex needs through a craft- and land-based curriculum.

My experience of working in the NHS as a family therapist also encouraged me to join up many areas of research in healthy human development that are not usually brought together. For many historic reasons the different professional practices, such as education, psychotherapy, biological sciences and practical outdoor work such as farming and forestry, are siloed disciplines that use language which is self-referenced and does not include an explicit holistic understanding of the links between nature and human mental health.

In this book it was my intention to explore how approaching nature and human development in a different way might bring together different disciplines that would create a more integrated and systemic ecological approach to psychotherapy that includes education and deep ecology.

An in-depth reading of Bateson's ideas on mind and nature could provide a rationale for why practical outdoor body-based activities are an effective nonverbal therapeutic technique and the value of the theories of systemic psychotherapy to ecotherapy and nature-based practices.

It is my opinion that a synergy of Bateson's view of ecology and the practice of systemic psychotherapy could contribute substantially to the emergence of systemic ecopsychotherapy as a beneficial practice in order to address the needs of our time.

Chapter 1
Our indigenous heritage

An awakening

One of my earliest and most vivid memories was an experience I had at the age of about seven years old, when I was exploring an old chicken run in my parents' garden that had been abandoned for many years and become overgrown with stinging nettles. Amongst the moss and the nettle stalks I found a small, clean, white, skull of a mouse. I picked up the tiny skull in my hand and turned it over to reveal underneath two smooth and shiny domes of bone, like tiny bone balloons that form part of the structure of the inner ear, and are known as the tympanic bulla. I was transfixed by what I saw, not only by the beauty and smoothness of the bone, but because I experienced this beauty as an intense feeling of wellbeing inside myself. I had the experience that the border between nature and my psyche had, surprisingly and spontaneously, melted away. I had become *one* with this delicate mouse skull and it was an experience that began a lifelong interest in bones and a search to rediscover this deep experience of connection with nature again.

This childhood experience led me to the study of biology, and later systemic psychotherapy, in search of a place where mind and nature connect and to rediscover a feeling of deep intersubjectivity with nature.

New brain, old planet: The neocortex and nature

The collective language of modern Western culture is, according to Carl Jung and James Hillman, based almost wholly on *directed thinking* (Cheetham, 2015). This is the type of thinking that we use to find direction and gain control of our environment when things become unpredictable. Hillman and Jung believed that the current alienation of modern humans from the rest of nature has a *chronic locus* in the use of conceptual language as the only way of making sense of the world (Cheetham, 2015).

Yet, the more unconscious parts of our thinking do not use conceptual language, but communicate in forms, images, and stories that signal to us about patterns and relationships that are often too complex to be captured in concepts. The rest of nature – ecosystems, plants, and animals – use this same type of communication, without concepts, which is transmitted in patterns and narratives that carry information about relationships between things (Bateson, 1979; Hoffmeyer, 2009). In this way nature is very similar to the unconscious parts of the brain, or more radically, nature could be seen as the oldest and subtlest but extended part of the human mind. For over 99.97 per cent of our time on earth modern humans have lived in close contact and communication with this subtle mind that we share with the earth. Currently, the part of the brain involved in conceptual thinking, the neocortex, has lost emotional contact with nature and the more instinctual patterns in our own minds because of its dependence on conceptual language. As a result of this separation the directed thinking mind now struggles to control the world; it sees the world only on its own terms. This book is, therefore, about the relationships between the human cerebral neocortex and the rest of the planet.

Gregory Bateson's unfinished business

It has been more than thirty years since Gregory Bateson's call to understand patterns that connect mind and nature (Bateson, 1979). Yet, the search for a logical and linguistic solution to this problem remains elusive. As Bateson himself famously said, "The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think" (Bateson, 2010).

From Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in the 1960s, the threat of global overpopulation in the 1970s, nuclear mutually assured destruction (MAD) in the 1980s, to climate change and fracking in the 2000s, it seems clear that something humans are doing is fundamentally out of step with the rest of nature. We have the capacity to construct increasingly complex human artefacts, but the systemic intelligence that maintains the ecosystems of the earth still seems beyond many people's understanding. Despite an endless treadmill of technological fixes and complex explanatory narratives, we are travelling ever deeper into an unfolding ecological disaster. We have fallen out of the dance with nature.

Gregory Bateson (1979) believed that in the development of the biological sciences and Darwinian theories of evolution that have shaped our contemporary view of nature, something important has been left out. Our sense of unity between mind and nature and the sense of being part of a larger whole has been broken, we have lost a more ancient belief in the wholeness or "parallelism" between nature and the human world that can be found in cultures that are more integrated with their environment. Bateson believed that,

> We have lost Shiva, the dancer of Hinduism whose dance at the trivial level is both creation and destruction but in the whole beauty. We

> have lost Abraxas, the terrible and beautiful god of day and night in Gnosticism.
>
> (Bateson, 1979, p. 18)

This loss, according to Bateson, is the result of a systemic epistemological error, an error in how we think about things that has led to alienating humans from the earth.

In his study of anthropological writing, professor of human ecology, Paul Shephard identified some fundamental differences between the modern and indigenous relationship with nature. The indigenous relationship was shaped by continual exposure to nature, both as hunters and the hunted, and was characterized by an embodied participation, through hunting, running, walking, and the creation of tools and imitation of patterns of behaviour in the animal and plant world. Indigenous mental processes have been recognized by anthropologists as having a sophistication rarely seen in Western thinking, where the environment was perceived in a non-linear and relational way, with less dependence than modern cultures on objects and a perceived objective reality. Nature was an environment encountered subjectively, where a hunter moved as a participant within it, oriented by action, and where animals and plants were seen as elements of a message requiring symbolic interpretation (Shepard, 1998).

These skills seemed to equip our ancestors really well when dealing with the discontinuity and complexity of the natural world and enabled them to maintain fluid and yet stable cultures that remained resilient through cycles of climatic and other ecological change; they were able to maintain a dynamic relationship between the emergent ecological and psychological narratives within nature and culture. This is in stark contrast with the fragility of modern culture where our current accumulated knowledge of psychological processes and our descriptions of the science of ecology and biology have remained

closed from each other within separate academic silos.

As I walked out: A journey through time

As many young people have done before me, I set off travelling in my early twenties in search of adventure and, perhaps more importantly, in search of a sense of belonging to the wider world. I was curious about what other cultures did with their time and how they found a meaningful context for their lives. Growing up in Britain the culture around me seemed a little too rigid and removed from some deeper connection that I had fleetingly experienced in my encounter with the mouse skull. In my youth I had spent years searching for this connection in the fields and woods where I lived. Beyond the new housing estates and supermarket car parks, I found fragments of a lost natural history in the hedgerows and woodlands. Remnants of past farming practice, derelict farm buildings and implements, neglected old woodlands and paths, once part of a way of life now abandoned that had silently slipped away in one generation.

The Dead Sea Bedouin

My travels took me out of Europe to the Middle East in the early 1980s. At first I was just passing through unknown towns on buses and lorries looking out of the window on a changing landscape, but as I slowed down to a walking pace this changed. One night in Syria, in early March, I camped at some hot springs where sulfurous water, the temperature of a hot bath, ran in small rivulets and mixed with the cold water streams that also

ran through the dry and rocky wadis. I spent the evening bathing in the hot water. Close by, Syrian workers were beginning the construction of a luxury spa; even here the land was under threat of change. The next afternoon I hitchhiked along a hot mountain road heading south. To my left in the east the landscape was sparse and arid, a land of mountains and huge dry canyons. To my right the land dropped quickly away to the Dead Sea far below, shrouded in heat haze. Beyond that, was the desert of the rift valley, Israel and the West Bank. My reverie was interrupted by a white Toyota pickup that stopped in front of me. I began climbing into the back for a lift but the driver called me round to the front. The driver and his companion were both dressed in smart traditional Bedouin attire, with white dishdashas down to their ankles and red and white scarves around their faces. The driver told me that he worked in the local bank in town and was going home for the day and asked if I would like to stay the night with his family. I agreed and we drove on for a few more minutes and then he drove off the road and parked the truck on the edge of the ravine overlooking the Dead Sea. He pointed down into the valley where there were a few Bedouin tents far below. "That's my home," he said, pointing to one of the tents and then to a small moving dot next to a camel, and said, "and that is my father".

I followed him and his companion, sure footed in their sandals, down a rough goat track into the valley, arriving at the Bedouin tent to be greeted by his father. He invited us into the tent where he seated himself cross-legged by the smouldering, dusty fire pit. In the ashes was an ancient brass coffee pot with a long spout and he stoked up the fire with a few aromatic twigs to heat up the coffee, he chain-smoked and chatted to his son in Arabic as he did so. Coffee was then served in a single tiny cup that we all shared; he drank first as was the tradition when entertaining guests to show that the coffee was not poisoned. The

Bedouin women lived in the same tent, but were screened behind a wall of woven goats' hair, and as the sun went down they came out to receive and tether the goats, which the boys and men had brought in from the surrounding hills. She goats with kids were tethered by one foot to loops in a long hairy rope pegged at both ends and the girls milked them into an old and well-used five-litre Castrol GTX oil tin. The camp became busy for the evening as jobs were completed before the fading of the light. After a supper of goat's meat and milk we strolled in the warm air and looked out across the valley to the rings of lights that marked the security fences of kibbutzim in Israel.

This event was embedded in a both ancient and current narrative of that land. Apart from the Toyota Land Cruiser, their belongings, tasks, and rituals of that day were unchanged for hundreds and possibly thousands of years. Abraham would have had no problem fitting into this evening and would have felt at home. Life for these Bedouin was modern and yet strongly referenced to timeless coordinates: land, family, and the daily rhythms and seasonality of animals' lives. These Bedouin were connected with at least two thousand years of incommensurable and yet fundamentally unchanged history. The goats and Bedouin have been involved in this ritual for thousands of years, but every day was subtly different. Having been raised in suburban British culture and despite a good education and a University degree, I realized I was less prepared for this world of Abraham and his ancestors than the small boys who tended the goats. Here something of the indigenous remained intact in a way that was not romanticized, forced, or fabricated.

Loosening the ties

A few days later I had a meeting with a Syrian policeman who confiscated my passport. After a few hours of maintaining the pose of his professional position, he gave my passport back and invited me to his house for supper and we ate together on the floor with his children. He also served coffee in tiny cups that we shared, but this time it was from a thermos flask with a press down dispenser and not a brass coffee pot. Instead of watching the goats return from the hills we watched an episode of *CHiPs* on the television, a series about the Californian Highway patrol motorcycle police. I am not sure Abraham would have followed the show if he had turned up. The rituals of the policeman's family had shifted from the Bedouin context and the goats were replaced by a TV series from another culture, a powerful new story with only a short window of relevant context. The episode of *CHiPS*, although probably running somewhere in the world, is now a dated 1970s TV show destined to become obsolete after a few short decades.

In a subtle way the lives of the policeman's family had been altered by becoming uncoupled from the emergent, creative, and destructive matrix of nature; Bateson's "terrible and beautiful god of day and night" that must have been experienced by the ancient lineage of Bedouin shepherds. The policeman and his family were now linked instead to stories and contexts generated out of the minds of TV producers. The beginning of an intangible and almost invisible disconnect between nature and everyday human life had begun.

The Sudan

Having travelled through Egypt and the Sudan by train and bus, I once again slowed down to walking pace and journeyed on