

Prologue: Where is Anthropology Located in the Task of Putting People First?

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I would firstly like to acknowledge the whole-hearted support which the European Society for Oceanists (ESfO) organising committee gave towards me going to and participating in the conference in Verona. I participated in three sessions of the conference which included being a discussant on the session on 'Re-forming the Land'; a contributor on the session on 'Roy Wagner: Symbolic Anthropology and the Fate of New Melanesian Ethnography'; and a panellist on the 'Round Table' discussion on the theme of the conference.

My comments here are limited to my participation in the panel on the theme of 'Putting People First: Intercultural Dialogue and Imagining the Future in Oceania'. The panel featured me and three others who represented different parts of Pacific Island societies.¹ The appearance and involvement of Pacific Island scholars in such international gatherings are neither an accident nor merely politically correct. In this conference, there was a deliberate attempt to listen to and engage with Pacific Islanders not only on a common intellectual footing, but also on matters of mutual academic and practical concerns. The session was held early in the evening after the day's round of conferencing.

¹ These included: Manuka Henare, Aotearoa New Zealand; Joe Lizama, Northern Mariana Islands; and Marie-Claire Beboko-Beccalossi, Kanaky New Caledonia, who could not be present in person but sent a paper to be read.

I adopted a particular moral stance about the public role or value of anthropology when I participated in the panel and my strategy involved telling some jokes, each of which I hoped carried its own moral. Here I will reproduce only one of those jokes.

In 1998, I was trying to find my way from the Victoria Coach Station to Piccadilly in Central London. This was my first time travelling into London by coach so I had to ask an Englishman, who was walking along the same street, for directions for the train station in Victoria so that I could find my way to Piccadilly Circus in Central London.

I asked, 'Excuse me, Sir, can you help me find my way to the train station from here?'

Then he answered, 'Oh that's simple but I could tell you this on one condition that you first tell me, where do you come from?'

When I told him my Papua New Guinean origin, he said, 'So what brings you to London then?'

I then replied 'I came here to study.'

I thought my responses were already sufficient to lift the conditions he had imposed on my initial request for information, but he pursued further and asked: 'What are you going to study?'

'Anthropology,' I replied.

'Interesting. Anthropology and New Guinea, so do you guys still practise cannibalism?'

I was taken aback momentarily with his exoticism but managed to lend him a blowing punchline: 'I wish we still did because I am looking at my first meal on the streets of London.'

The story above will ring familiar echoes with the experience of anthropological fieldwork. The joke revealed that we were engaged in a cross-cultural dialogue and the punch-line brought home some measure of common understanding which our dialogical interaction sought to resolve. Subsequently I was guided to the train station where I was given coffee and a crash course on reading the London Underground map before I set off on my first trip. Anyone familiar with the story of Balinese cockfights will recall how Clifford Geertz (1973) and his wife had to run for freedom when police officers arrived in their village to arrest villagers

who were involved in illegally staging cockfights. When the police started harassing villagers, Geertz and his wife dashed after another villager. Running away from the police was a shared experience between the two anthropologists and the villager and it made the Balinese recognise, among other things, the common humanity that the anthropologists had with the villagers. After heading out into the fields they ended up with the villager who invited them into his home where they had coffee. That was the turning point that opened up access for a productive interaction that Geertz subsequently had with the villagers.

In the story that I have told, the arresting moral problem was the exoticisation of New Guinea and cannibalism, which was held up as a foil to inspire a line of conversation. It is nonetheless true that exoticisation has been part of the way in which anthropology has constructed its knowledge of the other (Fabian 1983; Peirano 1998). There have been other kinds of criticisms—one being its association with the western colonial project. Indeed, anthropological knowledge has been scrutinised because of the way it has been conceived and instrumentalised (see Asad 1973; Clifford and Marcus (eds) 1986). Leaving aside all such criticisms, I want to comment specifically on the theme of this conference.

The notional sense of ‘putting people first’ summons other kinds of pressing questions which revolve around the larger question of why we would want to put people first. Is this a concern about trying to restore subjectivity to where it has been de-subjectivised? Is it a concern with giving back voice to subjects who have been muted? Is it about incorporating cultural variables into the equations of development? If we want to put people first, where have they been located in yesteryears? If anthropology is to be involved in a putting people first project, where will it find itself and what will its values encompass?

I am from Papua New Guinea (PNG) and when I started studying anthropology in the early 1990s, it was considered one of the ‘dumbest’ subjects on campus by the student population. It was, nevertheless, considered slightly brighter than social work and library science. At least that was the mindset of the students during my years at the University of Papua New Guinea (UNPG) (1991–1996).

My teachers at UPNG at that time had to take decisive steps about the courses they could and should teach so that they could make their graduates competent enough to find decent jobs in the labour market.

So they committed their ingenuity to inventing courses such as Social Impact Studies, Social Mapping, Rural Sociology and Cultural Policy—some of which are still being taught with constant modification. However, a fertile field of some complexity was burgeoning in the discipline of applied anthropology. But this demanded that the only way for a Papua New Guinean to appreciate the complexity was to be trained to use and engage with the language involved.

My interest and curiosity in anthropology was sparked by lectures on Karl Marx and other sociologists such as Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, C. Wright Mills and Peter L. Berger. But these interests dwindled as my years at UPNG were brought to an end (1994–1995). These were the years when applied anthropology took on a particular relevance. Applied anthropology was a step removed from my earlier interests in the subject in the sense that, in order to appreciate and be able to do applied anthropology, one must not only know the basic grammar and lexicons of anthropology, but be equally competent in research methods as well as the art of analytical writing—writing that puts description into the service of explanation and explanation into the service of policy objectives.

The public relevance and perhaps respect for anthropology in PNG came with the onset of the Bougainville crisis in 1989. The PNG Government found an intellectual ally in anthropologists. Soon after that mines, logging and oil projects boomed in different parts of PNG and this made it necessary for the engagement and use of anthropological expertise to bring sociological variables into the mathematical equations of development. There is legislation in PNG now, such as the *Oil and Gas Act*, that legally mandates the employ of anthropologists in conducting social mapping and landowner identification studies. These are not just studies that serve to satisfy a bureaucratic checklist monitored by a clerk behind a desk. The studies are extremely rich and intellectually demanding and the problem is that there may be no one in the government who has the competence to understand what the studies are about and to be able to transform the insights into the pragmatics of governance. If the reasons for these studies have not yet been discovered, it means that the public value of anthropology awaits the discipline at large.

The second issue that attracted a public interest in anthropology was the theoretical crisis revealed in the intellectual property debate of the 1990s and subsequent years. These were the years when the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were

sponsoring developments in intellectual property regimes and exporting them elsewhere, especially to the developing world. I do not intend to suggest a causal link here, but in PNG the debate found a moral sound bite in the now famous Hagahai saga case. Another case, that provided a supply of fuel to a glowing fire of moral and intellectual respect for anthropology in PNG, came from the Miriam Willingal case in the Waghi area of Western Highlands Province. Miriam was part of a compensation payment made to her father's mother's people. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and human rights activists stepped in and the case made its appearance in the press and in the National Court of PNG. I am mentioning these cases to highlight the fact that it is in the public arena that people come to marvel at and be dazzled by the insights of anthropological thinking. Maybe the public value of anthropology should be to make anthropology conscious of the shape and form in which it wishes to make itself accessible, persuasive, legitimate and relevant in the public imagination.

I was converted to anthropology about 11 years ago when I first met and witnessed first-hand conversations among some of the finest minds of anthropology at the 'Myths to Minerals' conference held at The Australian National University in Canberra.² It was also during that time that I met the esoteric Roy Wagner who after learning that I was working for the PNG National Museum, told me, 'your country has a huge intellectual capital to export'. Having heard and seen Roy perform his customary poetics in the conference the previous day, I was left astounded and returned to PNG wanting to explore the intellectual capital that he mentioned. I thought to myself, 'This is a man of considerable learning and wisdom. Through his anthropology, he has seen something about my people and country that I have taken for granted and which I would never have had reason to suppose existed'. Since then I have come to realise that anthropology is one of the most noble of all the inventions of western cultural rationalisation. However, the intellectual capital that Roy Wagner told me about, and of which I have now become a bit cognisant, is something that has yet to be converted into stock that can be exchanged for the legitimacy of our discipline in countries like PNG.

2 Two volumes came from this conference: Alan Rumsey and James F. Weiner (eds), *Mining and Indigenous Lifeworlds in Australia and Papua New Guinea*, Adelaide: Crawford Publishing House, 2001a; and Alan Rumsey and James F. Weiner (eds), *Emplaced Myth: Space, Narrative, and Knowledge in Aboriginal Australia and Papua New Guinea*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001b.

At times, I am unsure what it is that I am not convinced about with anthropology. This has mainly to do with the public value of anthropological knowledge. Among other things I have learnt from reading Marilyn Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), is that social knowledge is about creating the conditions for apprehending the world anew and that 'conversion' works to retain its own value but 'transformation' carries it to yet another dimension of reality. I am wondering what transformations might yet exist for the public value of anthropological knowledge and await the moment when anthropology can ensorcell me by a power akin to a positivist sanction such as is publicly commanded by lawyers and economists.

I feel that the theme of 'putting people first' must cause anthropology to ask where it might want to locate itself in such an undertaking. The general message of the plenary session was that anthropology must take itself more seriously than merely being a social science that stimulates the brain cells of academic production. By calling 'for a morally resolved intellectual action', the panel reiterated the ongoing and increasing value of anthropological intervention in matters of public debate and policy in the Pacific and beyond.

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