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# The outsider anthropologist? Leonhard Adam in Germany and Melbourne

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Leonhard Adam was ‘a lonely figure, humiliated by the university’s and the community’s lack of respect for his learning and his world status in scholarship’.<sup>2</sup> That was the view of the esteemed Pacific scholar, historian and anthropologist Greg Denning, who worked briefly for Adam at Melbourne University during the 1950s. He observed that Adam was ‘always on the edge of establishment at the University of Melbourne’.<sup>3</sup> Yet the Melbourne academic Robyn Sloggett has written of Adam that ‘Melbourne society embraced him’, supporting her observation by detailing the many writing and lecturing activities Adam was engaged with.<sup>4</sup> How can these two apparently contradictory assessments of Adam be reconciled?<sup>5</sup>

I want to suggest in this article the possibility that, to some extent, both may have had some veracity. I would hesitate to use the term ‘embraced’ to denote the relationship Adam had with the Melbourne scholarly and intellectual community. But I argue that it is feasible to surmise that, while Adam was fully engaged in a wide range of pursuits in the academic and intellectual world of Melbourne and Australia, at the same time he experienced a sense of isolation, of being outside the establishment. It is this latter quality or sensibility that Denning was likely to have observed.

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1 Most of my research on the Leonhard Adam Archives at the University of Melbourne Archives was assisted by a small grant as a Council of Australian University Librarians/Australian Society of Authors (CAUL/ASA) Fellowship in 2016. I am grateful to the organisers of that fellowship for the support. Versions of this paper were presented at the University of Melbourne on 23 August 2016, and at the conference ‘Global Histories of Refugees in the 20th and 21st Centuries’, University of Melbourne, 8 October 2016.

2 Greg Denning, *Readings/Writings* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1998), 94.

3 Denning, *Readings/Writings*, 98.

4 Robyn Sloggett, “‘Has Aboriginal Art a Future?’” Leonhard Adam’s Essay and the Development of the Australian Aboriginal Art Market’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2015): 169, doi.org/10.1177/1367877913515871.

5 Leonhard Adam’s daughter Mary-Clare Adam has commented that ‘as the years went by, my father increasingly felt that his world status in his field was not appreciated by his colleagues at the University of Melbourne’, but she adds further, that ‘Robyn [Sloggett] is also correct that Melbourne society embraced him, particularly his allies, the professors of Fine Arts and Law ... Also groups of “Society” such as the Leepers and their entire circle’, personal correspondence, 18 September 2020. The Leeper family, Valentine, Molly and Geoff, were friends of Adam; see Robyn Sloggett, “‘Has Aboriginal Art a Future?’”, 175.

To explore the idea of Adam as an outsider, I want to complicate this notion, to bring out its messiness, and investigate the possibility that he was simultaneously outsider and insider in both his personal and his professional lives. I suggest that the loneliness Denning had observed in Adam was a manifestation of many factors and influences. One important aspect was shaped by his accumulated experiences as an ostracised academic in Nazi Germany, his travel to Australia on the prison ship HMT *Dunera*, and his subsequent internment in a camp at Tatura in rural Victoria as an 'enemy alien'.<sup>6</sup> Adam's German Jewish heritage (on his father's side) also contributed to his being both an outsider and an insider, a theme I discuss later in this article.

To explore the complexity of his identity, I examine Adam's academic activities in Berlin during the 1930s, at a time when the Nazis were gaining ascendancy, and then look at his work at the University of Melbourne in later years, during the 1940s to 1950s. I discuss the impacts on Adam's academic activities in Berlin with the rise of Nazi anti-Semitism, and explore his later interests in Indigenous ethnography and art at Melbourne University in the context of the prevailing academic and intellectual influences during that period.

## Adam as outsider and questions of identity

The complex question of his identity, the experiences and traumas of fleeing anti-Semitism, and enduring the challenges of internment, were all factors contributing to what I refer to as Adam's outsider status. He did not regard himself (at least not explicitly) as an outsider; however, this is the way in which I characterise him on the basis of having explored aspects of his research, writing and editing, and the milieu in which he sought to carry out his academic work in Berlin and, subsequently, in Melbourne. Having a Jewish father meant that Adam was classified by the Nazi regime as 'non-Aryan', and therefore deemed to be undesirable by the regime. The historian Ken Inglis stated that Adam's 'family history was sufficiently Jewish for the Nazis to strip him of all official positions'.<sup>7</sup> Although Adam did not explicitly declare a Jewish identity in his correspondence, he referred to himself as being of 'partly non-Aryan heritage'.<sup>8</sup> He explained this in a letter on 15 October 1941 to Ada Duncan, a welfare activist who had many roles, including at that time director of the Victorian International Refugee Emergency Council:

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6 Ken Inglis, 'The Odyssey of Leonhard Adam', *History Australia* 14, no. 4 (2017): 561–78, doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2017.1389234.

7 Ken Inglis, 'From Berlin to the Bush', *The Monthly*, August 2010, 50.

8 Adam's daughter Mary-Clare Adam comments "'Of partially non-Aryan heritage" is Nazi language, but this was also terminology that my father was used to hearing in Germany in the 1930s'. She adds that 'He was classified as a Jew when he applied for a grant to go to England', personal correspondence, 18 September 2020. It is also useful to note that Adam's mother converted to Judaism, and his parents had a Jewish wedding; Mary-Clare Adam, personal correspondence, 18 September 2020.

In 1930, I was appointed member of the Board of Experts to the American, African and Oceanian departments, Berlin Ethnograph Museum (appointment by the Minister of Education). Prof. Kohler was, among others, editor of the *Zeitschrift fuer [sic] vergleichende Rechtswissenschaft* (founded in 1878), an international centre of comparative studies in Oriental laws and primitive laws. I became his co-editor in 1917 and, after his death in 1919, editor-in-chief. Since then, the journal was still more devoted to ethnological and oriental subjects. In 1933 I lost all my official posts for my partly non-Aryan parentage but, for some time, could still carry on the journal as this was a private enterprise.<sup>9</sup>

It is worth considering further the question of Adam's Jewish identity. While his father was Jewish, his mother had converted to Judaism, and was later, in 1938, 'induced to renounce her conversion to Judaism'.<sup>10</sup> Adam's own reflections on his identity suggest a complicated, possibly ambivalent self-characterisation. As noted, he had referred in some of his private correspondence to his 'partly non-Aryan' heritage. This was one of the classifiers employed by the Nazi regime's machinery of anti-Semitic laws and regulations.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as Inglis has noted, when asked about his identity, Adam at times had also referred to himself as 'Prot' (i.e. Protestant). Inglis explains:

Melbourne friends sometimes assumed that Leonhard was Jewish, but this was not a perception he encouraged. On official forms filled in soon after his arrival in Australia, he gives his religion as 'Prot.', and when applying for permission to remain permanently in Australia on 29 August 1944, he describes himself as 'of European race' and adds 'Not Jewish, although late father was Jewish'.

To further complicate the picture, Inglis notes that, Adam 'combined a thoroughly secular view of the world with a reverence for both Jesus and Buddha'.<sup>12</sup> This multifaceted, perhaps troubled sense of identity may also find some of its roots in the context of German Jewish identity more broadly. Being of Jewish descent in Germany already brought with it some ambiguities and tensions for Adam. German Jews had sought to identify as both Jewish and as German. Within a context of Enlightenment culture, the tensions between assimilation and maintaining a distinct Jewish identity were central to identity formation for many German Jews, and contributed to what Mendes-Flohr describes as the 'bifurcated soul of a German Jew':

9 Leonhard Adam to Ada Duncan, Director, Victorian International Refugee Emergency Council, 15 October 1941, 'From Dr. Leonhard Adam, No. 35000, No. 4, Internment Camp, Tatura, Victoria', Box 1, Folder 1/2, Adam Papers, Accession 1994.0060, University of Melbourne Archives. On Ada Duncan, see Diane Langmore, 'Duncan, Ada Constance (1896–1970)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, [adb.anu.edu.au/biography/duncan-ada-constance-10061/text17747](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/duncan-ada-constance-10061/text17747), published first in hardcopy 1996, accessed online 2 September 2020.

10 Inglis, 'The Odyssey of Leonhard Adam', 563–64.

11 Mary-Clare Adam has commented that this was also terminology that her father was used to hearing in Germany in the 1930s. Personal correspondence.

12 Inglis, 'The Odyssey of Leonhard Adam', 568–69.

by virtue of the adoption of *Kultur* and *Bildung*—grounded in the cultivation of universal values sponsored by enlightened, liberal German discourse—German Jews were no longer simply or unambiguously Jewish. Their identity and cultural loyalties were fractured, and they were consequently obliged to confront the challenge of living with plural identities and cultural affiliations.<sup>13</sup>

The desires, struggles and successes of assimilation or acculturation, and emancipation into German society, only to have this fractured and utterly rejected under the Nazis, undoubtedly brought further stresses into this complex of German Jewish identity.<sup>14</sup>

What might we conclude then about Adam's self-identity as Jewish? His own descriptions of himself as 'Prot.', or as 'of non-Aryan descent', while also apparently gesturing towards Buddhism and Christianity,<sup>15</sup> suggest multiple identities at play. This plurality is congruent with Adam's cosmopolitan and global world view espoused throughout his professional writings. Yet within this, we might also detect a counter-narrative that speaks to ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty of identity, possibly encompassing what the cultural theorist Sander Gilman described as Jewish self-hatred.<sup>16</sup> Yet how is it possible that an individual like Adam, seemingly confident and successful in his career, and well regarded by friends, colleagues, students and peers, might be haunted by the shadows and echoes of anti-Semitism, of a sense of being 'Other', and of being an outsider? In the context of Adam's successes in work and life, perhaps Denning's observation was particularly pertinent.

My argument that Adam was perhaps both an outsider and an insider might find further support by drawing on the observations of one of his students, John Mulvaney. Commenting on Adam's lectures between 1947 and 1957 in the history department at the University of Melbourne, Mulvaney wrote: 'This is not the place to reflect upon the extraordinary scholarship of these lectures, nor upon their total unreality in a context of utilitarian undergraduates pursuing the ever rising middle classes through so many periods and places.'<sup>17</sup> This suggests that Adam's erudition, breadth of scholarship and European cosmopolitanism, while making him a gifted presenter, were somehow misplaced at the time. Reminiscing about R.M. Crawford, the former head of the department, Mulvaney wrote about Crawford's influence on Adam:

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13 Paul Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 3.

14 On the 'cultural emancipation' of German Jewry and its implications for their intellectual, political and artistic lives, see George L. Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

15 Inglis, 'The Odyssey of Leonhard Adam', 568–69.

16 Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

17 John Mulvaney in Manning Clark, A. L. Burns, Hugh Stretton, D. J. Mulvaney, J. S. Gregory, W. Macmahon Ball and W. K. Hancock, 'R. M. Crawford: Some Reminiscences', *Historical Studies* 15, no. 57 (1971): 13.

The small museum of ethnography and primitive art which Adam built up in the Department was testimony to Crawford's co-operation, as much as to Adam's ingenuity. It was always an experience in the departmental tea-room when Adam burst in triumphantly bearing his latest trophy from Tibet, Timbuktu or Tahiti. Had Melbourne University followed Crawford's lead and established a teaching department of anthropology, this collection would have proved invaluable. It was no fault of Crawford's that all his initiative on Aboriginal studies came to nothing within his university. He was in celebrated company, for Sir Baldwin Spencer, A. W. Howitt (a Council member) and F. Wood Jones had failed before him.<sup>18</sup>

This comment captures well the ambiguity of Adam's work at Melbourne University, which was at one and the same time innovative, engaging and scholarly, but also out of place and time. The notion of outsider status might also be construed in a negative sense, if Dening's suggestion of Adam as a 'lonely' figure, who was 'humiliated' by the scholarly community, is interpreted in that way. It is very likely that Adam's experiences under the Nazis had inculcated in him a sense of being apart. Yet, I also argue that his outsider status was a manifestation of the particularities of his work in Aboriginal art and ethnography in Melbourne at a time and place when these ways of working were not common. But as will be seen, the calibre and volume of Adam's work also established him in some senses as an 'insider' who, in Sloggett's terms, was 'embraced' by Melbourne society.

It was not uncommon for individuals from a Jewish background to experience a sense of alienation and marginalisation in Australia, and these feelings may, in some sense, have also facilitated an anthropologist's ability to retain a 'distance' from the peoples they were working with. This was the case, for example, with the anthropologist Ruth Latukefu, née Fink. Born in Frankfurt am Main in 1931, she and her family were able to escape the Holocaust and settle in Sydney in 1939. She wrote candidly that 'I think my marginal and somewhat alienated situation made me self-aware in many situations, as though I was an outsider watching myself':

As a child, I never felt completely at ease with people other than my immediate family. I was also very sensitive to signs of hidden prejudice, and this guarded outlook and tendency not to take things at their face value were probably helpful in later fieldwork. Feeling an outsider myself made it easier for me to show empathy with Aboriginal people when I came to know them, and to understand how they felt as an oppressed coloured minority, socially outcast from mainstream Australian society.<sup>19</sup>

While Adam's experience and outlook were different from that of Fink, his approach to ethnographic and anthropological work was nonetheless similarly influenced by his Jewish heritage, albeit implicitly, and by his experiences under the Nazis and as a refugee. His views on the role of the individual Aboriginal artist and on the potential

18 Manning Clark et. al., 'R. M. Crawford: Some Reminiscences', 13.

19 Ruth Fink Latukefu, 'Like a Film Running Backwards', in *Before It's Too Late: Anthropological Reflections, 1950-1970*, ed. Geoff Gray, Oceania Monograph 51 (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2001), 77.

for Aboriginal art to become commercially viable might also have been influenced by his German Jewish background, with its tensions around cultural progress, assimilation, and intellectual and artistic achievement. The context in which he worked in pre-Nazi era Berlin offers possible insights into how he developed such perspectives.

## Intellectual and political context in Germany during the 1930s

During the 1930s under the Nazi regime, anthropologists and other social scientists were increasingly caught up in the brutal ideology. It was a complex scenario, with conflict, cooperation and resistance, as the Austrian anthropologist Andre Gingrich explained: ‘German anthropology in the Nazi period involved complex scenarios of collaboration, persecution, and competition.’<sup>20</sup> At this time, ‘academic anthropology’s integration into the Third Reich was a relatively smooth process, as was the case with many other fields of the humanities’.<sup>21</sup> Another academic, Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, has examined the transformation of ethnology under the Fascists in Germany, writing that ‘when the Nazis seized power, there was an increasing pressure on teachers and graduate students to join the Nazi party, or at least to align themselves clearly with party doctrine’.<sup>22</sup> This was to have a profound effect on the discipline and its practitioners, including Adam.

In 1934, as Nazification continued to assert its stranglehold, a ‘legal decree introduced political Nazi criteria for academic promotion to positions as senior lecturers and professors’.<sup>23</sup> With the growing anti-Semitic proscriptions:

In 1935 the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnography, and Prehistory introduced an Aryans-only clause for new members, as did most other anthropological and academic associations in Germany of those years. In 1938 the same society excluded all its remaining Jewish members, among them Franz Boas in the United States. By that year, virtually all anthropologists with a Jewish background who had not already been forced to emigrate had lost their professional jobs in Germany.<sup>24</sup>

Adam was one of the anthropologists ‘who were forced into emigration or were harassed, persecuted, jailed, tortured, or murdered’.<sup>25</sup> His exclusion—which was to have lasting impacts on him professionally and personally—can be illustrated by

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20 Andre Gingrich, ‘German Anthropology during the Nazi Period: Complex Scenarios of Collaboration, Persecution and Competition’, in *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology*, ed. Fredrik Barth, Andre Gingrich, Robert Parkin and Sydel Silverman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 111.

21 Barth et al., *One Discipline, Four Ways*, 112.

22 Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, ‘Ethnology and Fascism in Germany’, *Dialectical Anthropology* 9, no. 1/4 (June 1985): 319.

23 Gingrich, ‘German Anthropology during the Nazi Period’, 114; see also Walter Dostal, ‘Silence in the Darkness: German Ethnology during the National Socialist Period’, *Social Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (1994): 251–62.

24 Gingrich, ‘German Anthropology during the Nazi Period’, 114.

25 Gingrich, ‘German Anthropology during the Nazi Period’, 117.

detailing his experiences with an ethnology textbook that he had initially established, and was publishing articles in and editing, called the *Lehrbuch der Völkerkunde*. The book, which continued for many years as a respected ethnological resource, had originally been conceived by Adam. But with the introduction of anti-Semitic laws, he was unable to continue his editorial role, and Konrad Preuss took over.<sup>26</sup> Adam did, however, maintain his involvement, by publishing papers in the book. But he was subject to continued opposition and hostility that infected the entire milieu of writing, editing and publishing in anthropology. A Nazi sympathiser, Walter Krickeberg, a follower of earlier forms of diffusionism who became curator for North America at the Berlin museum, had attacked Preuss for ‘publishing two articles by a “non-Aryan” person, Leo Adam’.<sup>27</sup>

Adam outlined in a letter to Ada Duncan, who had assisted in his eventual release from Tatura, his long involvement in the textbook and the problems he had endured under the Nazis:

Early in 1938, I was eventually compelled to resign the editorship of my journal, largely because I had praised the work done by Malinowski, Raymond Firth, and the Royal Anthropological Institute, in a German Handbook of Ethnology (*Lehrbuch der Voelkerkunde*) [sic] to which I had contributed the chapter on primitive law, etc.<sup>28</sup>

This experience seems to have haunted him for the rest of his life. Writing in 1958 to Fred McCarthy, curator of anthropology at the Australian Museum, Adam described how the first edition of the *Lehrbuch*, ‘inaugurated by myself, was destroyed by the Nazi censor’.<sup>29</sup> The *Lehrbuch* had been a significant part of Adam’s work, and, despite his traumatic experiences with it under the Nazis, he later proudly promoted its value in a letter to the Edinburgh-based bookseller, printer and publisher James Thin:

I believe there is a need for a textbook like this in the British Empire. The U.S.A. have produced numbers of textbooks and there is still no end to it. But in the U.K. we have only the small volume ‘Anthropology’ by my dear late friend, the Rector of Exeter College, Oxford: R. R. Marett; and we have Raymond Firth’s volume ‘Elements of Social Organization’ (London, 1951. Watts & Co). Neither of these two has the great variety of different chapters like our ‘Lehrbuch’. The ‘Notes and Queries’ of the R. Anthropological Institute are not a textbook for students but a guide for field workers.<sup>30</sup>

26 Preuss, like Adam, was also wide ranging in his disciplinary interests. Jell-Bahlsen states that he ‘had studied history, geography, and to a lesser extent ethnology’, Jell-Bahlsen, ‘Ethnology and Fascism in Germany’, 322.

27 Jell-Bahlsen, ‘Ethnology and Fascism in Germany’, 320.

28 Adam to Director, Victorian International Refugee Emergency Council, 15 October 1941, Adam Papers. Adam to F. D. McCarthy, 15 June 1958, Adam Papers.

29 Adam to F. D. McCarthy, 15 June 1958, Adam Papers.

30 Adam to James Thin, Esq., Director, Oliver & Boyd Ltd, Edinburgh, 20 November 1958, Adam Papers.

Despite anti-Semitic accusations of partisanship, or allegations levelled at him of having had allegiance to particular anthropological approaches considered to oppose Nazi ideology, as a transdisciplinary, humanist and pragmatist, Adam's cosmopolitan and global approach to anthropology enabled him to publish papers that were not 'aligned' specifically with either or both of the prevailing 'schools' of thought in anthropology.<sup>31</sup> His reputation was such that he gained the attention of leading scholars in his discipline. Some of those people were, however, frustrated at their inability to assist in securing his release from the Tatura internment camp. Writing in February 1941, the then elderly German-born anthropologist Franz Boas, by now residing in America and near the end of his life, wrote to a colleague, Arthur Kohler, 'I really do not know what I can do for Leonhard Adam. I have had him for years on the list of those whom I should like to help, but no opportunity has ever offered.'<sup>32</sup> The well-known anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was also concerned about Adam's plight, and provided a letter of support:

I have known Dr. Leonhard Adam personally for the last four or five years. I have heard him lecture and take part in discussions and seminars; and, of course, as every anthropologist, I know his published work and his reputation among scholars.

The qualities of Dr. Adam's scientific work are well known, so I have only to add that I am one of those who appreciate his contributions to the comparative study of Law and Primitive Jurisprudence very highly. He also has a good experience of museum work, a subject, however, on which I am less qualified to speak. In his research work among the Nepalese and Indian prisoners in 1918 he shows great potentialities as a field-worker, should opportunities arise.

... There can be no doubt that Dr. Adam is highly qualified for a teaching appointment which involves some museum work and the study of law and custom with a wide sociological background.<sup>33</sup>

With this kind of support and encouragement, and given his wealth of experience in comparative law, ethnology and museum studies, Adam had the confidence and skills to deliver impressive lectures at the University of Melbourne. Despite this success, his accumulated experiences of anti-Semitism, escape from Nazi Germany, imprisonment on the *Dunera*, and internment in Australia inflected, albeit in subtle ways, his intellectual pursuits. His academic work both in Germany and then in Australia positioned him, in a sense, 'apart from' or 'outside' the dominant strands of ethnological thinking, but at the same time, he was also engaged across multiple

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31 Jell-Bahlsen, 'Ethnology and Fascism in Germany', 320.

32 Franz Boas, Department of Anthropology, Columbia University in the City of New York, to Dr. Arthur Kohler, 2514 Piedmont Avenue, Berkeley, California, 17 February 1941, Adam Papers.

33 Copy of a testimonial from Dr M. Malinowski, Prof. of Anthropology in the University of London – no date, Adam Papers.

disciplines. This complex straddling of borders and margins, of belonging but also standing outside, is likely a factor arising from his Jewish heritage and his experiences arising from that.

Following his release from Tatura in 1942, Adam worked briefly at the Melbourne Museum before taking up an appointment at the University of Melbourne.<sup>34</sup> His work there began to gain attention and made an impression on friends and colleagues. In 1942, at the height of World War II, Adam's friend and mentor, the Oxford University anthropologist R.R. Marett, wrote to Adam:

I am greatly interested to hear of your work at Melbourne. It is all-important, even in these times of stress, to keep alive the spirit of scientific research in Australia, and not least of all in relation to the anthropology and prehistory of their own vast continent and region. If they cannot do it properly, it would be a disgrace; nay, the world has a right to demand it of them.<sup>35</sup>

Adam's work in Melbourne was cosmopolitan, wide-ranging and infused with his sense of curiosity and enthusiasm for extending and crossing disciplinary boundaries and conventional schools of thought. While these qualities and values gained him support and admirers among many in the scholarly community, they may also have been a factor in setting him apart from the academic and intellectual milieu in Melbourne. As a Jewish German refugee, presenting in public in a somewhat formal European style, and having the perspective of a polymath, it is likely that he may have inculcated a sense of difference from the perspectives of some of his contemporaries.

## Adam in Melbourne: Bridging disciplines

By the time Adam arrived in Melbourne in 1940, he had already established himself professionally in Berlin, having been deeply engaged in anthropology and historical and ethnological jurisprudence, and this had enabled him to develop a wide network of contacts among the scholarly community. He maintained many of these connections throughout his life, and his correspondents included anthropologists and academics in a range of disciplines, editors and publishers of academic books and journals, museum curators, collectors, booksellers, and many others. Some of Adam's correspondence continued over many years, and included conversations about his major, long-lasting works in progress. For example, he was working on a large book project, 'Arts of Primitive Peoples', for a series edited by Nikolas Pevsner, a task that

<sup>34</sup> Sloggett, "Has Aboriginal Art a Future?"

<sup>35</sup> R. R. Marett, Exeter College, Oxford, to Adam, 27 October 1942, Adam Papers, Accession 2011.0013, University of Melbourne Archives.

became a lasting preoccupation. Writing in 1960 towards the end of his life, he explained his wide-ranging and long-term interests in anthropology to John Barnes, then head of anthropology and sociology at The Australian National University:

It is now over ten years that I have been working at the manuscript of my 'Arts of Primitive Peoples' for Pevsner's 'Pelican History of Art', and although the African chapter is ready, the Asiatic one approaching completion in a few weeks, and a few American sections also being ready, the whole volume is not yet done.<sup>36</sup>

He continued:

All the more I enjoy studying, as a welcome interruption, treatises overlooking and surveying, like your presidential address, the realm of cultural anthropology from a high level, showing achievements, shortcomings and necessary tasks for the future. It was now precisely half a century ago that I began my academic studies—mainly in law, with ethnology as a side-line at that time. But my studies in American—later also Indian—ethnology and archaeology began as early as fifty-three years ago. Thus, looking back at the international progress in both physical and cultural anthropology, one can only admire the progress made by colleagues in many countries.<sup>37</sup>

These extracts show how Adam's academic interests were pursued within a global context, and also over a considerable period. They suggest an individual who proudly maintained a European cosmopolitan intellectual ethos, working within the bounds of an academic institution in the 1950s in Melbourne.

Adam's prolific output ranged across legal anthropology and Indigenous art and ethnography. *Primitive Art*, his best-known work, was first published in 1940 and reissued in several revised and enlarged editions. In this work he employs the notion of 'primitive' in its archaic sense of hierarchy and progress, but nonetheless qualified this primitivist discourse by explaining:

'Primitive art', then, is merely a general term covering a variety of historical phenomena, the products of different races, mentalities, temperaments, historical events, and influences of environment.<sup>38</sup>

*Primitive Art* was well received, and attracted comments and reviews from a wide international readership. Inglis asserted that the book 'made Leonhard's name around the English-speaking world'.<sup>39</sup> The renowned British sculptor Henry Moore, in a brief reflection on 'primitive art', was 'prompted by an excellent, solid little book called *Primitive Art*, by L. Adam, which has just appeared'. He commended *Primitive Art* on its accessibility to the wider public. Writing during the scarcity of World War II, when the British Museum (whose collections had formed the basis

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36 Adam to Prof. J. A. Barnes, Head of the Dept. of Anthropology & Sociology, ANU, 1 May 1960, Adam Papers.

37 Adam to Prof. J. A. Barnes, 1 May 1960.

38 Leonhard Adam, *Primitive Art* (London: Cassell & Company Ltd, 1963), 31.

39 Inglis, 'The Odyssey of Leonhard Adam', 564.

for much of Adam's work in this book) was closed, Moore commented: 'It is within everyone's reach in the sixpenny Pelican Series, and if it receives the attention it deserves, it should bring a great many extra visitors to the British Museum when its Galleries reopen.' He added that Adam 'does not regard primitive art in the condescending way in which it used to be regarded'.<sup>40</sup> Another commentator stated that '[f]rom a scholarly perspective the book contained little original fieldwork, but was brilliantly written, an intelligent summary of other people's research'.<sup>41</sup>

Adam's academic interventions straddled genres, disciplines and intellectual pursuits in postwar Melbourne, placing him outside the conventional modalities of thinking. An interdisciplinarian in a milieu that was both organisationally and temporally bounded by entrenched disciplinary orientations and boundaries, he taught and practised anthropology in a university that had no anthropology department. He saw the connections between Indigenous art as art, and also as ethnography, extolling its aesthetic values. Furthermore, he envisaged commercial and economic opportunities for Indigenous artists who, as he saw it, would benefit from a viable arts and craft movement. He appreciated the educational potential in Indigenous art, and also understood its historical contexts, thus venturing into discourses of art history and historiography that were at best only just beginning to emerge in Melbourne at that time. For all of these reasons, Adam was out of time and out of place: both insider and outsider.

Adam's ability to see the connections between art, art history, aesthetics and ethnography was demonstrated in most of his publications, and in his private correspondence. In a paper published in 1944, 'Has Aboriginal Art a Future?', he argued that this art was 'a movement, defined by particular styles and particular forms and with an aesthetic sensibility that placed it within an art historical discourse, and beyond ethnography'.<sup>42</sup> Sloggett stated that 'Although not acknowledged by Adam, his 1944 essay reflects his experiences as a German Jew and his own experiences of cultural loss and physical separation'.<sup>43</sup> She suggested that Adam's views on the importance of Aboriginal art in modernising contexts derived from his own personal experience:

He saw the brutal attacks by the Nazis that expunged cultures and subcultures across Europe. He witnessed the destruction of books he had authored, and experienced his own disempowerment and the fragmentation of his family. His interest in

40 Henry Moore, 'Primitive Art. 1941', in *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, ed. Jack Flam, with Miriam Deutch (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 271. The piece by Moore included in this collection was taken from *The Listener* 25 (24 April 1941).

41 Jaynie Anderson, 'The Creation of Indigenous Collections in Melbourne: How Kenneth Clark, Charles Mountford, and Leonhard Adam Interrogated Australian Indigeneity', *Les actes de colloques du musée du quai Branly Jacques Chirac* [online], 1 | (2009): 3, 28 July 2009, accessed 7 September 2020, [journals.openedition.org/actesbranly/332; doi.org/10.4000/actesbranly](http://journals.openedition.org/actesbranly/332; doi.org/10.4000/actesbranly).

42 Sloggett, "'Has Aboriginal Art a Future?'" , 176.

43 Sloggett, "'Has Aboriginal Art a Future?'" , 169.

strengthening contemporary cultural identity was not to do with salvaging cultural material or archaic practices, but rather about art production as evidence of the preservation of culture, and as support for an intellectually robust, economically viable and culturally dynamic society. For Adam art enabled Aboriginal culture and identity to claim a place in the academy with all the benefits that thus accrued.<sup>44</sup>

The essay was perhaps the seminal piece that displayed his keenness to bridge disciplines and genres, and which also set him outside established views. Sloggett explains:

There were good reasons for Adam to publish this essay in a new and experimental magazine. He was unambiguously and provocatively discussing contemporary Aboriginal art as a modern and innovative movement. In doing so he was not addressing the question ‘Has Aboriginal art a future?’ to the anthropologists involved with the study of Aboriginal art, nor to the government administrative officers or missionaries involved in managing the lives of Aboriginal people who produced the art. Instead Adam was talking to Australia’s avant-garde intelligentsia: the artists, writers, collectors, patrons and academics who were the audience of the magazine and the taste-makers in Australia.<sup>45</sup>

Adam’s innovative, interdisciplinary views also gained attention through an exhibition he curated in 1943 for the National Gallery of Victoria, another moment that illustrated his interests in historicising Indigenous art. That exhibition, in one recent analysis, was construed as ‘radical’, in its ‘incorporation of Australian Aboriginal arts into the canon of primitive art that was accomplished by its transfer from ethnological to fine art display’.<sup>46</sup> Another writer has claimed that the 1943 exhibition ‘fundamentally re-established the way in which Australian Indigenous art, and international Indigenous art more broadly, was valued’.<sup>47</sup> The essay Adam wrote to accompany the 1943 exhibition broke new ground with this thinking around connectivity. He also understood the important role of Aboriginal art in art history, writing that while ‘the scientific study of primitive arts, art techniques and styles, the investigation of their historical developments and their religious and social functions is an important subdivision of Ethnology ... at the same time it is part of the History of Art’.<sup>48</sup> Artist and gallery director Tony Tuckson commented on this that ‘It is perhaps this, more than anything else, which attracted the interest of artists and art critics, and it was only a matter of time before the art galleries in

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44 Sloggett, “‘Has Aboriginal Art a Future?’”, 169.

45 Sloggett, “‘Has Aboriginal Art a Future?’”, 168.

46 Ruth Phillips, ‘Aesthetic Primitivism Revisited: The Global Diaspora of “Primitive Art” and the Rise of Indigenous Modernisms’, *Journal of Art Historiography* 12 (2015): 16. See also Catherine De Lorenzo, ‘The Hang and Art History’, *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 13 (2015): 1–17.

47 Benjamin Thomas, ‘Daryl Lindsay and the Appreciation of Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne in the 1940s: “No Mere Collection of Interesting Curiosities”’, *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 4 (June 2011): 4.

48 Adam, quoted in J.A. Tuckson, ‘Aboriginal Art and the Western World’, in *Australian Aboriginal Art*, ed. Ronald. M. Berndt (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1964), 63.

Australia began to form collections of Aboriginal art'.<sup>49</sup> Adam's outsider status can be construed on the basis of his unconventional views in that he saw Aboriginal art within a wider framework than was the tendency in Australia at the time. He linked this art to a modernising paradigm in which it potentially contributed to a cultural renaissance, economic development and education. These views set him apart from, or outside the prevailing approach in academic and intellectual circles, wherein Aboriginal art was considered as primarily ethnographic.

In his article 'The Abstract Art of the Aranda', Adam understood the contextualised nature of this form of expression, writing: 'It is well known that to the natives themselves even the simplest and seemingly abstract designs have an esoteric significance which, however, is not inherent in the design itself but is attributed to it in a certain context only.'<sup>50</sup> His understandings of the historical and cultural contexts of Aboriginal art was noted, too, by the anthropologist Raymond Firth, who wrote 'Adam emphasized the significance of cultural background, especially of religion, for an understanding of primitive art', although Firth also thought that Adam's 'treatment of "social implications" was very superficial, concerned mainly with the artistic role of women, dancing, and property rights'.<sup>51</sup>

Adam had begun building an ethnographic collection at the University of Melbourne with the acquisition of bark paintings from Fred Gray, at the settlement of Umbakumba on Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Keenly aware of the educative aspects of Indigenous art, Adam remarked of these Groote Eylandt bark paintings that 'apart from their decorative purpose, many (if not all) of them also have an educational function, which was established by one of our reliable informants, Mr. Perriman of the Church Missionary Society'.<sup>52</sup> Adam pursued his interests in the educational role of Aboriginal art in *Primitive Art*, where he argued for the role of this art form in education and training, and also as providing a basis for a commercially viable arts and crafts industry. His consistent concerns and interests in the aesthetic elements led him to decry what he saw as a decline in the quality of Indigenous artistic productions, with the growing introduction and influence of European tools, methods and approaches. He bemoaned the loss of 'authenticity':

Already ethnographic dealers find it hard to procure primitive objects of real value. The best of the old works are now in museums and private collections. Most of what is available to-day is of inferior quality, made carelessly for curio-hunting globetrotters by modern methods, and with European tools. New Zealand, where the beautiful

49 Tuckson, 'Aboriginal Art and the Western World', 63.

50 Leonhard Adam, 'The Abstract Art of the Aranda', *Anthropos*, Bd. 55, H. 3/4 (1960): 346.

51 Raymond Firth, 'Art and Anthropology', in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 21.

52 Adam, 'Aboriginal Bark Paintings from Groote Eylandt', *Meanjin* 9, no. 3 (1950): 189.

art of the Maori once flourished, has become a centre for such pseudo-primitive production. Before long modernization will have reached the few tribes in Africa, Indonesia, New Guinea, and Australia, where genuine primitive art is still alive.<sup>53</sup>

Adam's interest in the aesthetic value of Aboriginal art formed the basis for arguing for the role of this art in a potential Indigenous arts and crafts movement, and he stated that 'the discovery of the aesthetic value of primitive art, as well as its psychological and social functions, could not fail to attract the attention of educationists, missionaries, and colonial administrators'.<sup>54</sup> This aesthetically informed Aboriginal arts and crafts movement that Adam envisaged was founded upon his recognition of the role of individuality in Indigenous art. He commented that 'However much indebted an artist may be to his environment for impressions, ideas, and technical methods, his creative act is something altogether personal'.<sup>55</sup>

Adam's complicated, possibly ambiguous and troubled identity, what I have referred to as his outsider status, can also be attributed to his positioning at the interface between what were otherwise disparate disciplines and discourses—those of art, art history and ethnography. In this sense, his thinking was more aligned with some European centres where there was more dialogue between discourses, disciplines and practitioners in the fine arts, ethnography and anthropology.<sup>56</sup>

Adam's academic interests ranged far wider than Aboriginal art. In an obituary in 1961, the museum curator Aldo Massola wrote that Adam 'belonged before the age of specialization, when one could be expert and erudite in the many ramifications of ethnology', taking 'ethnology' to imply wide comparative studies.<sup>57</sup> Adam's theoretical and methodological orientations cannot readily be categorised. As noted, he lectured in law, Chinese language and studies, ethnology and material culture. Massola writes that 'theoretically speaking, he [Adam] may be classed amongst the old German "Diffusionist" school, and he always claimed that diffusion was more important than evolution, although the two must work together'.<sup>58</sup> Adam's 'diffusionism'—the idea that cultural traits observed in a particular society were the result of influences that had 'diffused' from some other, external cultural centre—was, in Massola's terms,

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53 Adam, *Primitive Art*, 210.

54 Adam, *Primitive Art*, 210.

55 Adam, *Primitive Art*, 65.

56 See, for example, Arnd Schneider, 'Unfinished Dialogues: Notes toward an Alternative History of Art and Anthropology', in *Made to Be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 108–35. Schneider suggests that where there was less dialogue between these disciplines, such as in Britain (with notable exceptions such as Henry Moore), this was likely because there were fewer 'transdisciplinary go-betweens'. He writes: 'One reason then, for the lack of communication between artists and anthropologists, and by the same token between art discourses and anthropological reasoning, might have been that in Britain (as in the German-speaking countries before 1933) truly transdisciplinary go-betweens were lacking. This was in clear contrast with figures such as Michel Leiris and Carl Einstein, who would move between the disciplines of art and anthropology and who were themselves accomplished writer-poets', Schneider, 'Unfinished Dialogues', 122.

57 Aldo Massola, 'In Memorium Leonhard Adam', *Oceania* 31, no. 3 (March 1961): 161.

58 Massola, 'In Memorium Leonhard Adam', 162.

‘modified by a belief that simple inventions, the basic needs of man, must have been made independently in widely distant regions; culture is thus polygenetic’.<sup>59</sup> As noted above, Adam’s anthropological views were not readily categorised within an approach such as diffusionism, whether in a ‘modified’ form or not.

Adam’s work was also influenced by his interest in historical context, whether in ethnology, law or art. His education in the development and history of comparative legal institutions, which began formally under the tutelage of Professor Josef Kohler (1849–1919), an expert in the comparative history of law, developed into another of his specialisations—what he termed ‘ethnological jurisprudence’.<sup>60</sup> This interest in jurisprudence—legal theory, the philosophy of law and legal systems, and comparative legal systems across different cultures and societies—occupied Adam for much of his early career.<sup>61</sup>

But even while pursuing this interest, Adam had ambivalent feelings about specialising in ethnological jurisprudence. Always the polymath, being within disciplines and specialisations, but also ‘standing apart’ from them, Adam’s interests also lay in other subjects, as he explained later, in 1950, in a candid remark to the publisher Hans Böhm:

My friends at the Berlin Museum f. Voelkerkunde [sic] suggested a novelty: why not follow Kohler and Wilutzky and specialize in primitive law? So I met Kohler who urged me to take up law as my main subject to start with, and in this way I eventually got entangled in a career which I never liked. But during all those years, as my long list of publications proves, I never got away from ethnology and Oriental studies.<sup>62</sup>

Adam’s interest in historical or ethnological jurisprudence, in part, may be seen as a reaction to earlier trends in ethnology in Germany and elsewhere that constructed indigenous peoples as ‘without history’, as passive, ahistorical subjects for the exoticised gaze of the imperial anthropologist. In response, some thought that the study of law, by implication, indicated the presence of social and historical contexts to peoples and societies.<sup>63</sup> But while having been steeped in this relatively specialised domain of ethnological jurisprudence, Adam’s approach was also partly situated within a ‘mainstream’ anthropological tradition, since in Australia he worked on ‘a structural-functionalist anthropology of law and art’.<sup>64</sup>

59 Massola, ‘In Memorium Leonhard Adam’, 162–63.

60 Leonhard Adam, ‘Modern Ethnological Jurisprudence in Theory and Practice’, *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law*, 3rd ser., 16, no. 4 (1934): 216–29; see also Rüdiger Schott, ‘Main Trends in German Ethnological Jurisprudence and Legal Ethnology’, *Journal of Legal Pluralism*, 14, no. 20 (1982): 37–68, doi.org/10.1080/07329113.1982.10756267.

61 Adam, ‘Modern Ethnological Jurisprudence’.

62 Adam to Hans Böhm, 23 May 1950, Adam Papers. See, for example, Sloggett, “‘Has Aboriginal Art a Future?’”

63 Adam, ‘Modern Ethnological Jurisprudence’; Schott, ‘Main Trends in German Ethnological Jurisprudence’; Thomas Hauschild, ‘Christians, Jews, and the Other in German Anthropology’, *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 4 (1997): 751, doi.org/10.1525/aa.1997.99.4.746.

64 Tigger Wise, ‘Elkin, Adolphus Peter (1891–1979)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, online, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/elkin-adolphus-peter-10109, published first in hardcopy 1996, accessed online 17 October 2020.

## Leonhard Adam in the context of anthropology and Aboriginal studies in Australia, 1940s–1950s

The experiences Adam had endured in his academic life in Germany under the Nazis were to preoccupy him throughout his life. But his cosmopolitanism and global thinking was also a factor in the way he situated himself in the context of academic life in Australia, as someone who was able to think and work across boundaries, disciplines and prevailing trends. He explained something of the manner in which he worked between various disciplines in ethnology and legal studies in a letter to Professor Sir George Whitecross Paton (1902–1985), legal scholar and vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne. Having been invited to give tutorials on primitive law, Adam explained that he would be ‘very happy indeed to run the tutorial as suggested in your letter’:

I used to be principally concerned with ethnological jurisprudence, and from 1930 to 1933 I was lecturer in primitive law at the Institute of Foreign Laws, Berlin University. Primitive law is also included in my permanent ethnological classes at Queen’s on Monday evenings, which were instituted in 1942 ...

As pr. L. [primitive law] belongs to both legal science and social anthropology, it may be approached in two different ways. To most anthropologists, primitive law is confined to recent primitive tribes. This approach is, in my opinion, too narrow. The scope of pr. l. as a section of comparative law, or else as an integral part of historical jurisprudence, is wider, including some of the more highly developed legal systems, especially Oriental laws. This more comprehensive approach is also my own. I trust this will meet with your approval.<sup>65</sup>

When Adam arrived in Melbourne, the dominant authority in Australian anthropology was A.P. Elkin, professor of anthropology at the University of Sydney from 1933 to 1956.<sup>66</sup> Adam was a regular correspondent with Elkin. In Australia a focus was on fieldwork, on the documentation and recording of Aboriginal peoples’ societies and cultures as a kind of salvage ethnology, as the Aborigines were thought to be a disappearing people.<sup>67</sup> As well as this focus on field-based methods, there have been many influences on the direction of anthropology in Australia, one of which was a close association between anthropology and colonial administration. The discipline was shaped to a considerable degree by pragmatic administrative/bureaucratic concerns, with some emphasis on colonial administration in Australia’s territories of Papua and New Guinea, and the work of assimilation in Australia’s remote northern

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65 Adam to Prof. Paton, 12 June 1945, Adam Papers.

66 Tigger Wise, *The Self-made Anthropologist: A Life of A. P. Elkin* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1985).

67 See for example Geoffrey Gray, “[The Sydney School] Seem[s] to View the Aborigines as Forever Unchanging”: Southeastern Australia and Australian Anthropology’, *Aboriginal History* 24 (2000): 175–99.

and north-western regions.<sup>68</sup> British functionalism, and the tradition of fieldwork, with exemplars in practitioners such as Malinowski and Alfred Haddon, had a strong foothold, as did variants of diffusionism.

In the context of anthropology in Australia during the years that Adam was active, the Northern Territory, including Groote Eylandt, in which Adam took a particular interest, had been a focus for the observation and recording of Aboriginal cultures for some decades.<sup>69</sup> Recording and collecting material and expressive Aboriginal culture was a very strong focus of the discipline and, during Adam's first year after arriving in Melbourne, he worked at the Melbourne Museum on the material culture collections there. He maintained a dedicated interest in collecting and collections throughout his career, and developing the University of Melbourne ethnographic collection was one of his primary activities. He studied and collected the bark paintings from the Northern Territory, including from Groote Eylandt, and these formed the core of the Adam ethnographic collection at the university. The building up of this collection was one of Adam's chief occupations during his time at the university, and his aim was to establish a museum as a teaching and research resource of widely representative cultural objects.

Once again, in this as in all his professional work, we see him involved across varied, though related disciplines, many years before it became *de rigeur* to encourage interdisciplinarity in academia. Writing to Hans Böhm in May 1950, Adam explained:

But I am also now lecturer in cultural anthropology and in charge of a small ethnographic museum, my own foundation, which I am building up at the University. Once a year I am giving a course on primitive art, with many slides. But if you think this was once my hobby, I must say this is not the whole truth. Actually, I started with ethnology, but there had to be a more solid foundation for a living in those days. There were too few well-paid jobs for ethnologists, so you had to be a medical man (for physical anthropology), or an educationist (for linguistics, geography, history).<sup>70</sup>

68 The literature on the history of Australian anthropology is very large. Some useful works are: Gillian Cowlishaw, 'Studying Aborigines: Changing Canons in Anthropology and History', *Journal of Australian Studies* 16, no. 35 (1992): 20–31; I.R. Hiatt and L.R. Hiatt, *Arguments about Aborigines: Australia and the Evolution of Social Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Nicolas Peterson, "Studying Man and Man's Nature": The History of the Institutionalisation of Aboriginal Anthropology', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 2 (1990): 3–19. Also see Gillian Cowlishaw, 'Tunnel Vision: Part One – Resisting Post-colonialism in Australian Anthropology', *The Australian Journal of Australian Anthropology* 28, no. 3 (2017): 324–41, doi.org/10.1111/taja.12242.

69 Michael Davis, *Writing Heritage: The Depiction of Indigenous Heritage in European–Australian Writings* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing and National Museum of Australia Press, 2007).

70 Adam to Hans Böhm, 23 May 1950, Adam Papers.

To conclude, Adam was forever working within, between and outside disciplines, and prevailing theoretical trends. He was at one and the same time, outsider and insider. His psychological, personal and professional humiliation under the Nazis remained with him, but he was able to maintain a worldly curiosity and enthusiasm throughout his life. A displaced European intellectual thrust into the milieu of Australian anthropology and Aboriginal studies in the 1940s, Adam's tireless energy has left an enduring legacy.

This text is taken from *Australian Journal of Biography and History*:  
*No. 4, 2020*, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National  
University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/AJBH.04.2020.06](https://doi.org/10.22459/AJBH.04.2020.06)