

'Anthropologies of Change: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges' Workshop

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On 25–26 August 2011, the University of Sydney's Department of Anthropology and the NTRU at AIATSIS, ran a workshop for native title anthropologists on the 'Anthropologies of Change'. Following last year's 'Turning the Tide' workshop, also a partnership between AIATSIS and the University of Sydney, anthropologists from the academy, NTRBs and consultant anthropologists again met to discuss native title anthropology. Facilitated by Toni Bauman and Gaynor Macdonald, the aims of this year's workshop were to consider approaches to continuity and change in the academy and how these might translate into the native title context. A number of papers were pre-circulated providing a focus over the two days.

Day 1 included three presentations. Gaynor Macdonald provided an overview of 'change' and 'continuity' in Western intellectual history, visiting Hegel, Freud, Weber and the relatively modern innovation of the discipline of anthropology and why it had tended to ignore change. She noted that an earlier lack of methodological self-awareness led to the relative tardiness of anthropology in coming to terms with 'continuity' and 'change', setting these within broader historical frameworks. Her presentation gave pause to reflect on how often the discipline strays from basic foundational questions guiding inquiry, noting the influence of ethnohistory in forcing the discipline to re-address these theoretical questions.

Diane Austin Broos provided a summary of her extensive field work with the Central Arrernte people which had led her to identify three broad types of change: ontological change, socio-historical change and symbolic-imaginary change. She linked these to continuity through notions of ellipsis and augmentation, hegemony and transformation as these had been elaborated in her pre-circulated paper.

Bob Tonkinson drew on his long-term fieldwork with the Mardu Desert people to develop an understanding of tradition that might serve as an important bridge between change and continuity challenging their depiction as oppositional. He reminded participants that the blurring of boundaries between local and global needs to be addressed, suggesting there has been a return of unproductive classic concepts of culture and that there is a need to be wary of 'collapse theories' that represent small communities as fragile and susceptible to change in ways that peremptorily dissolve continuity. Tonkinson emphasized the importance of sensitivity to adaptation and careful attention to the retention of cultural logic that carries forth its own 'transformative potential', one 'built into frontier interaction'. He highlighted the challenges that modernity poses to the cohesiveness of Aboriginal communities, and presented challenges for anthropology to revisit notions of tradition.

Jimmy Weiner was the discussant for these panels and his nuanced comments skillfully contributed to the cohesiveness of the workshop. He emphasised the manner in which anthropologists are restricted by the practical and legal aspects of native title. He encouraged discussion on the relevance (or otherwise) of models of change for native title practitioners.

Day 2 continued to explore the focus question for the Workshop: 'What is the anthropological paradigm change that is required to represent native title holders as capable of producing cultural meanings out of changing conditions of possibility?' A conversation between anthropologist Gaynor Macdonald and native title lawyer Simon Blackshield led to a plenary discussion about kinds of contexts which might provide evidence of continuity in unusual ways including social media, funerals and festivals.

A primary challenge is for native title practitioners to integrate notions of continuity and change from academic debates into connection reports in subtle ways which require careful attention to wording. Participants discussed how this is not the same as including anthropological theoretical discussions about the meanings of continuity and change in a connection report which those assessing connection may find unhelpful or irrelevant.

There was consensus that a path toward the improvement of native title anthropology must tread carefully for anthropology to avoid losing relevance and become marginalised. Native title anthropology

needs to be responsive and resourceful to the native title legal community, the academy and local communities and able to defend itself in professional anthropological contexts. Participants agreed that encouraging dialogue and strengthening ties across the various native title sectors, can help anthropologists to avoid talking past one another, and can foster an awareness of the limitations that are built in to the connection report process.

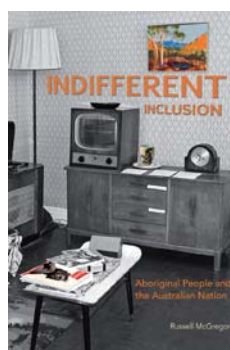
The workshop provided an opportunity for practitioners to share their experiences and insights into the challenges of working in a native title setting. Concerns about limited resources, including sufficient funds for more comprehensive connection research and the scarcity of experienced anthropologists to write connection reports were expressed.

Specific recommendations emerging from the workshop concerned the following:

- Participants agreed that the email list of workshop participants should be amalgamated with other email lists from the 'Turning the Tide' workshop and the ANU Centre for Native title Anthropology's list from the workshop at the AAS Conference in Perth in July 2011
- There was acknowledgement of the need for senior anthropologists to mentor those in their early career stages. A critical finding of the Anthropos 2007 report on mentoring was that mentors and mentorees should be based in the same location rather than communicating by telephone as was the case in the earlier pilot. It was also noted that mentoring is a skill and that custom designed mentoring training sessions for anthropologists would be useful.
- The need for better dialogue between lawyers and anthropologists working in native title was repeatedly expressed.

Conference papers and selected reading assigned to attendees before the conference is available on request by emailing the NTRU at ntru@aiatsis.gov.au. A special thanks goes to Diane, Bob, Simon, and Jimmy, for their generosity in sharing their time, support and insights that made this year's workshop a success.

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