



Interview with Emeritus Professor James J Fox – anthropologist and environmentalist

Interview conducted April 2015, at Emeritus Faculty

Producer, Interviewer and Editor - Peter Stewart

Engineer - Nik Fominas

PLAY AUDIO

▼ DOWNLOAD AUDIO

Interview Synopsis: James Joseph Fox was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1940, the eldest of six children. Jim's father, a professor of neuro-anatomy at Marquette University, encouraged Jim from his school days to pursue a career in science. Accordingly, as a teenager Jim spent many days and summers assisting his father in his research laboratory, cutting brain-tissue sections and tracing connections among neurones. Jim's younger siblings were not scientifically inclined, so Jim provided interpretation of their father's work. Despite his early and compelling apprenticeship in medical science, Jim Fox opted for the social sciences, winning a National Scholarship to Harvard in 1958, and completing his bachelor's degree in 1962, with first class honours. Before beginning his studies at Harvard, Jim spent a summer in Greece, intending among other things to take a look at archaeology as a possible discipline for his later career. However, as an undergraduate Jim soon fell under the sway of the eminent social anthropologists at Harvard: first, Clyde Kluckhohn (1905-1960), then David Maybury-Lewis (1929-2007), adopting them as his teachers and mentors.



On graduation from Harvard, Jim won a Rhodes Scholarship tenable at the University of Oxford. Initially, he intended to focus his anthropological studies on India, but his tutor Rodney Needham (1923-2006) persuaded Jim to turn instead to Indonesia, influenced importantly too by Professor Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973). Jim met his wife, Irmgard, in his first year at Oxford; they were married and together went off to do fieldwork in eastern Indonesia.

Jim completed his B Litt in 1965 and D Phil in 1968, with his doctoral fieldwork focused on the Indonesian island of Rote, an ethnographically unstudied island community located on the south-west tip of Timor. There, despite an initial start analysing the marriage systems of the island, he soon developed broader ethnographic and linguistic interests. Having been prepared so well at Harvard and Oxford, Jim 'followed the grain' of ethnography on Rote, prospecting obvious seams of culture and language, an approach which has served him well ever since. He also used his time well to establish collaborations and friendships with many European and Indonesian anthropologists and linguists, generating networks that would be invaluable over the coming decades. One continuing focus of his research was on the ancient practice of oral composition, still pursued on Rote: a linguistic phenomenon that the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson described as 'canonical semantic parallelism'.

Jim returned to the US from Oxford in 1968, as an assistant professor at Duke University. There he taught an array of undergraduate sub-disciplines in anthropology which by their diversity broadened his outlook as a scholar and teacher. Perhaps it was the breadth of this experience that led Jim's six-year old son (by now with budding linguistic skills of his own), as their plane approached Boston airport, to ask: "Daddy, what language will they speak when we land?". Jim learned various languages using an immersion process when possible to accelerate his learning. As a student, Jim learnt Dutch in Holland by becoming a 'student boarder' in a Dutch professor's family.

In 1969, Jim was appointed associate professor at Harvard University. Over the next six years, he was also a visiting professor at Cornell University (1969), and a fellow in the Institute for Advanced Study (1971-72). The latter was an important learning experience for Jim, illustrating for him how a well-endowed research institute staffed by outstanding visiting scholars can be a potent intellectual mix. During his time at Harvard, Jim travelled to Indonesia to continue his field-work on Rote, where the people and culture became his central focus. Later, in the 1980s, he moved that focus to eastern Java, and took an increasing interest in agriculture, and later, the environmental aspects and ecological impacts of pesticide and fertilizer use and overuse in rice cropping.

In the course of his research, Jim met and became friends with the ANU anthropologists Derek Freeman (1916-2001) and Anthony Forge (1929-1991). These international figures would prove instrumental in attracting Jim eventually to take an appointment as Professorial Fellow in Anthropology at the ANU in 1975.

At various times Jim held visiting appointments at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands; the University of Bielefeld, Germany; the Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, France; the National University of Singapore; and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in Wassenaar. Jim's interest in resource management grew out of his earlier studies on the local management of the environment. His first book *Harvest of the Palm: Ecological Change in Eastern Indonesia* (1977) explored environmental change on

Rote and Timor, foreshadowing the future directions of his work at ANU. His growing expertise in resource management, as well as his sensitivity to and understanding of Indonesian agriculture and fishing, was sought after by governmental and non-governmental agencies alike in south-east Asia. The East Timorese, Indonesian and Australian governments, and support agencies such as AusAID, the United Nations, the World Bank, and the Carter Center, have all consulted with and used Jim's skills and experience in planning and policy development, including humanitarian programs. His understanding of and engagement with Indonesian Islamic communities, an interest he developed in his early days as a research anthropologist, are also widely respected.

Jim Fox built an enviable record in research, teaching, and academic leadership over more than four decades at ANU, and during many visiting appointments beyond ANU. He was recognised for his broad academic skills by appointment as Director of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (1999-2006), and as Chair of Australian Studies at Harvard University (2006-2007). Following notional retirement in 2006, Jim continued to contribute to Asian and Pacific studies at ANU as a visiting fellow and a member of Emeritus Faculty.

In 2012 Jim was elected Chair of Emeritus Faculty, a voluntary but purposeful college of retired ANU staff (now more than 200 strong) who continue their contributions as scholars and consultants beyond official retirement from the university – sometimes in their primary disciplines, at others developing new interests and activities to satisfy long standing hopes and dreams. As an active member of Emeritus Faculty, Jim shares in the work of many permanent staff and passing students of the university, and to the wider international world of learning and scholarship. His skills and experience are greatly valued by both old, and new, colleagues.

Like many academics of his era, Jim shares and mourns the loss of innocence that many of his contemporaries note when comparing the earlier days of ANU, when he and his colleagues were less constrained by the new and always growing rules of academic enterprise. This is not some whimsical moan about 'the good old days', but a protest that modern managers and administrators have taken on too much of the decision making in universities and research centres, decisions that once were the territory of those engaged in fundamental exploration and discovery. The consequence is a weakening of connectivity between discovery and application of knowledge. From this, there is a loss of impact for all who rely on the outcomes of university teaching and learning, and diminished opportunities, particularly for younger and mid-career scholars. In short, a loss of the excitement and imaginative opportunities that were so much a part of Jim's earlier days as a scholar-explorer. Jim, and many of his colleagues, worry that this decline in opportunity for younger researchers and writers continues to grow, with who-knows-what ultimate cost to research, discovery, and therefore progress.

Looking back on his own fortunate decades as anthropologist, linguist, and environmentalist, Jim Fox counts as his most important contribution to ANU scholarship the mentorship and guidance he has provided to nearly 60 graduate scholars (and still counting). ANU recognised these achievements in 2010 by awarding Jim the *Chancellor's Award for Distinguished Contribution to the University*. As a member now of the Emeritus Faculty and a Visiting Fellow, Jim continues to win research and survey grants for the university. He is also Chair of *ANU E Press*, an institution that he helped establish. He is a Foreign Fellow of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences and a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Social Sciences.

Jim Fox lives in Canberra with his wife Irmgard, and has two adult sons, Christopher James and Andrew William.