

A recent history of the professionalisation of Australian applied anthropology and its relevance to native title practice

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***Abstract:** This paper describes collective efforts over the past 30 years by Australian anthropologists towards achieving national representation and accreditation for applied practitioners. The intention is to better understand the viability of various strategies aimed at strengthening a community of practice for native title anthropologists today. The ‘professionalisation’ issue has recently re-emerged as a topic for discussion and debate in the context of an identified shortage of suitably qualified and experienced anthropologists in the area of native title research. This shortage is reportedly contributing to delays in the processing of native title claims and raises concerns about professional standards. The potential consequences for those Aboriginal groups seeking recognition of their native title are profound. Drawing on a range of historical sources, this paper documents the rise and fall of a number of professional networks, organisations and training programs for applied anthropologists established since the early 1980s, including the Professional Association for Applied Anthropology and Sociology, the Queensland Association of Professional Anthropologists and Archaeologists, and the Australian Association of Applied Anthropology. What this short history reveals is that past efforts to organise and accredit applied anthropologists coincided with significant changes to the political, legal and commercial frameworks in which they were required to work, with the uncertainties and anxieties that accompanied change driving the desire for a more robust and supportive community of professional practice. The ultimate failure of these organisations suggests that improving the professionalism of applied practice in native title anthropology cannot be achieved solely from within the discipline itself. Rather, it will require engagement with and the support of external stakeholders who also have interests in ensuring high quality native title research outcomes.*

In May 2010, in response to a 2008 departmental review of ‘blockages’ in the native title system, the Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department (AGD) launched a funding program for native title anthropologists. The Native Title Anthropologist Grants Program (NTAGP) was

established to address an identified shortage of experienced native title practitioners and difficulties attracting and retaining early career anthropologists (AGD 2010:1). The extent of this crisis was first described in a report into the capacity of anthropologists working in native title authored

by David Martin (2004a). Drawing on data gleaned from a national survey of anthropologists, Martin's report identified that less than 30 percent of Native Title Representative Body (NTRB) anthropologists had higher degrees, or more than five years' experience in native title work, and a quarter of them had less than one year's experience (Martin 2004a:1). Anthropologists working as consultants were considerably better qualified and more experienced. And yet only 20 percent of consultant anthropologists saw native title work as potentially enhancing their careers; almost twice as many considered it a limitation (Martin 2004a:3). Although Martin had insufficient data to determine whether there was an actual shortage of anthropologists to do native title work, he reported anecdotal shortfalls and chronic difficulties on the part of NTRBs in locating consultants and recruiting and keeping staff anthropologists (Martin 2004:5).¹

One of the key challenges identified in Martin's (2004a:6) report was the professionalisation of native title anthropology. He argued that this is an area of anthropological specialisation that requires a range of skills and knowledge beyond what is usually taught within the academy. The allocation of \$1.4 million over three years to the NTAGP suggests that the challenge of professionalisation is increasingly recognised by major stakeholders such as the AGD as a matter for concern, and reflects a growing awareness of the significance of anthropologists as authors and assessors of native title reports, as well as contributors to other areas of native title business such as agreement making and governance.

The NTAPG has responded to the challenge of professionalisation by funding activities in three priority areas: training initiatives for new graduates seeking work in the native title sector; initiatives that strengthen linkages between academia and applied anthropology; and professional development and 'support' initiatives for anthropologists already working in the sector (AGD 2010:2). When reflecting on the possibilities offered by this last priority area, anthropologists (including the author of this paper) involved with one of the first NTAGP initiatives, The Australian National University's Centre for Native Title Anthropology (CNTA), considered addressing these problems through the establishment of a national repre-

sentative organisation and a formal accreditation process. But as early scoping research progressed it became clear that similar efforts in the past had not been successful. The history that follows is primarily descriptive and draws on a wide range of sources, including minutes from meetings, newsletters and journal articles, to examine the motivations behind these earlier projects and the reasons for their failure so as to better understand the challenges facing native title practitioners as we once again attempt to organise ourselves in new ways.

Many of the more experienced anthropologists working in native title today are implicated in the history I document here, and for them the revival of these old debates may seem unnecessary to the point of tedium. But for newer generations of practitioners who are increasingly presented with difficult professional choices in the complex realm of native title, there is a desire to understand what our options are and why creating and sustaining professional standards has to date been so difficult. Anecdotes seem to continually circulate among colleagues about incompetent or compromised anthropologists and the damage they do to Aboriginal people's native title claims and the profession as a whole: thousands of dollars of funding wasted on unusable reports, 'guns for hire' who will produce any opinion required, and professional practices that little resemble the expectations of the discipline. This is more than a professional indulgence on the part of anthropologists, for as the recent work of Paul Burke (2011) clearly demonstrates, the Federal Court and respondent parties to native title claims pay close attention to the rigour of anthropological research and their judgments have serious implications for the success or otherwise of native title claims in both litigation and mediation.

Over the past 30 years a great deal of effort has been expended in the pursuit of a national representative organisation for applied anthropologists. The reasons why none have survived are both pragmatic and ideological, related to inadequate resourcing and an ongoing debate among anthropologists about the quality, ethics and intellectual integrity of applied anthropology — or 'private practice anthropology', as John Gordon (1999:9) once referred to it. Aspects of this debate have recently been reviewed in other

publications and are not covered here. In particular, David Trigger's article about the politics of applied research in Aboriginal Australia addresses the longstanding argument among Australian anthropologists about the intellectual robustness of applied research in the area of land rights and native title (Trigger 2011; see also Austin-Broos 2010; Bauman 2010:6; Birkhead 1999:196). The deeper history of intellectual tensions between 'applied', 'professional' and 'amateur' anthropologists in Australia is told in *A Cautious Silence*, Geoff Gray's (2007) seminal exploration of modern Australian social anthropology. Similar conversations about the relationship between applied anthropology and Indigenous peoples in settler states such as Canada and New Zealand have been ongoing internationally for a number of years (see, for example, Field 2003; Medicine 1998; Purcell 1998; Rigsby 1995; Smith, L 1999; Toussaint and Taylor 1999).

As Trigger (2011:236) points out, in Australia applied anthropology continues to be the subject of rigorous post-colonial critique, criticised for its function as an instrument of government power from both within the discipline and without (see, for example, Cowlishaw 2003, 2010; Lattas and Morris 2010; Nakata 2007). Nonetheless, many Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders continue to seek the involvement of anthropologists in their native title and culture heritage activities. Notwithstanding critical analysis of the native title system as a whole and anthropology's implication in it (see, for example, Claudie 2007; Glaskin 2007; Ritter 2009), the discussion that follows here assumes the informed participation of Aboriginal people in native title research projects and an ongoing demand for anthropological services as they pursue land recognition of rights and interests in land. As was clear from statements made by native title claimants during a forum on native title anthropology held at the 2011 AIATSIS Native Title conference in Brisbane, Indigenous Australians involved in native title claims want their anthropologists to have the requisite skills and experience to enable them to do their jobs well. What is at stake is no less than Aboriginal people's future life circumstances (Trigger 2011:244).

The 1980s: a local drive to organise

Although applied anthropology has been a part of the discipline of anthropology in Australia since its inception (see Berndt 1983; Gray 2007), attempts at establishing a national organisation representing the interests of applied anthropologists working in Aboriginal Australia date back to the beginning of the 1980s, when members of the Australian Anthropological Society (AAS, established in 1973) formed a 'Working Group on Consultative Anthropology'. But even before this effort, anthropologists based in Western Australia and Queensland, who were operating at a distance from larger academic communities located in other states, had already begun to organise on their own terms in order to address a raft of concerns about professional practice in their local context. These state-based forums appear to have been more responsive and better equipped to deal with many of the issues facing their members than the AAS was at this time. Despite considerable effort on the part of their members, however, none endured beyond the end of the decade into what could be described as the modern era of native title anthropology.

One of the earliest efforts towards national representation involved the establishment of the Professional Association for Applied Anthropology and Sociology (PAAAS). In 1982 the recently formed Anthropological Society of Western Australia (ASWA) sponsored an informal meeting of applied anthropologists in Perth to discuss a range of issues related to professional ethics and consultancy. According to Western Australian anthropologists Greg Acciaioli, Edward McDonald and Chris Griffen (forthcoming:8), who have researched in detail the history of ASWA, discussions led to general agreement that existing Australian anthropological organisations lacked the structure and charter to adequately represent the needs of a growing number of anthropologists working in applied fields. And so, at a meeting of 15 interested anthropologists held at The University of Western Australia — attended by, among others, Ron Berndt, Mike Robinson, Katrin Wilson and Eddie MacDonald — they decided to create their own and the idea of PAAAS was born. Representative but not accrediting, PAAAS initially achieved a great deal on

behalf of its membership. In its first year it hosted an Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) Congress in Perth in May 1983, was involved in the Western Australian Aboriginal Land Rights Inquiry 1983–84, contributed to a review of the Western Australian *Aboriginal Heritage Act* (1972) and provided submissions to the development of the Western Australian *Environmental Protection Act* (1986). PAAAS also provided administrative support for five members who were caught up in a legal matter regarding Aboriginal heritage (Acciaoli et al. forthcoming:9).

At the same time in Queensland a group of anthropologists, including Peter Sutton, David Trigger, Jay Hall and Athol Chase, was organising in similar ways. In 1983 this small but committed group of anthropologists successfully incorporated the Queensland Association of Professional Anthropologists and Archaeologists (QAPAA) (Clarke 1986:19). There is very little documentation publically available about the organisation and its activities. It is apparent, however, that QAPAA was created partly in response to what Peter Sutton has described as ‘a need for self-protection’ during the reign of the conservative Bjelke-Petersen government. This was an era when anthropologists who worked with Aboriginal people regularly found themselves challenging the status quo and at times even under police surveillance. QAPAA provided a legitimate professional forum for anthropologists to comment publicly on issues such as land rights and mining on Aboriginal lands (Sutton 2008:1).

In this same year the various efforts of anthropologists involved in PAAAS and QAPAA coalesced in an attempt to organise nationally. A ‘Workshop on Applied Anthropology’ was held as part of the ANZAAS Congress in Perth and attracted a diverse range of practitioners from across the country. The event was attended by more than 55 anthropologists variously employed by universities, museums, government and industry, as well as a number of consultants (Clarke and Stanton 1983:6). Discussions at the workshop were dominated by issues of ethical practice, professionalisation and training, and arguments about a definition of ‘applied anthropology’. There was ‘universal’ agreement among participants on the need for a specialised curriculum in

applied anthropology to be available nationally across tertiary institutions, and to this end Peter Sutton and John von Sturmer presented model outlines for postgraduate courses on the subject (Clarke and Stanton 1983:10). By the workshop’s end it had been agreed that a professional association of applied anthropologists should be formed ‘as a matter of urgency’, and such an organisation should be separately incorporated from the AAS. An interim committee of the new Australian Association of Applied Anthropology (AAAA) was duly formed, its inaugural members including Diane Bell, Chris Clarke, Peter Sutton, John von Sturmer, Ron Berndt, Pat Grimoldby and Dan Vachon (Clarke and Stanton 1983:22). A special edition of The University of Western Australia’s anthropology journal, *Anthropological Forum*, was dedicated to applied anthropology and published shortly afterwards.

What was the catalyst for this flurry of professional anxiety and collective effort among applied anthropologists in the early 1980s? Much of the effort was triggered, it seems, by events occurring well outside the anthropological discipline and certainly the academy. The ‘energy boom’ of the late 1970s had resulted in rapid changes to the nature of anthropological field work and an unprecedented demand for practitioners. Government enthusiasm for mining, fuelled by the prospect of huge profits from the exploitation of Australia’s coal, oil and gas reserves (Battellino 2010:6), collided with emerging expectations among Aboriginal people for the delivery of land rights and protection of sacred sites following the passing of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* in 1976. Anthropologists were in demand as never before as Aboriginal people increasingly found themselves standing in the way of the national interest. One of the most public and difficult confrontations of this era was at Noonkanbah in the Kimberley, where in 1980 a dispute over the validity of a sacred site on a petroleum exploration lease turned violent (see Hawke and Gallagher 1989 for a detailed account of this dispute). One of the unexpected outcomes of the Noonkanbah affair was a huge increase in demand for Aboriginal site surveys in Western Australia. The need was such that it overwhelmed the resources of the Department of Aboriginal Sites and led to an unprecedented and uncon-

trolled market in anthropological consultancy (Clarke 1986:18).

Greater involvement in the high-stakes business of mining in turn exposed anthropologists working in private practice to increasing critique and criticism from both inside and outside the academy. The involvement of anthropologists as expert witnesses in Northern Territory land rights hearings also meant an expansion of accountability beyond research subjects and the discipline to include the law of the Crown (Edmunds 2001). The Warumungu Land Claim of 1982, during which the court issued a subpoena for the field notes of claim anthropologists, was a turning point and prompted what Kingsley Palmer has described as 'a good deal of agonising debate about the ethics and the practice of the profession' (Palmer in Chalk 2001:5). On a more positive note, many anthropologists working in the early 1980s appear to have been optimistic about the possibility that long-promised national land rights legislation might finally be delivered following the election of multiple Labor governments at both state and Commonwealth level (Clarke 1986:18). The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now AIATSIS), which organised a number of anthropologists for Northern Territory land rights research contracts, subsequently ramped up its research agenda into issues of Aboriginal land tenure. This in turn led to an increase in research dollars and opportunities for anthropological field work across Australia more broadly (Sutton 2008:2).

This complex, high-stakes mix of mining, money, law and sacred geography generated many compelling reasons why anthropologists might have wanted to seek out others with whom they could build a stronger sense of professional identity and community. If ever there was a need for a national representative organisation for applied anthropologists, it was then. But even before it got off the ground, the idea of the AAAA that was first mooted at the 1983 ANZAAS workshop proved controversial among those whose interests it sought to represent. For while there was agreement that professionalisation was important, there was no consensus about who should do it, let alone how it should be done.

Why did national representation fail?

Understanding why the AAAA failed requires an examination of the major debates occurring between variously positioned anthropologists at this time. The first meeting of the newly established AAAA committee was held in Adelaide in August 1983. The momentum to organise generated at the initial AAAA workshop in Perth remained strong, with nominated committee members joined by the likes of David Trigger, Chris Anderson, Diane Austin, Kingsley Palmer and Lee Sackett (Clarke 1986:22). The inaugural meeting of its general membership happened nine months later in 1984 at The Australian National University in Canberra. Again, the event was well attended by the AAAA interim committee, as well as by a number of other university-based anthropologists (many of whom continue to work in the area of land rights and native title research today), including Andrew McWilliam, Ian Keen, Eric Michaels, David Nash, Gaynor Macdonald and Nic Peterson (minutes of meeting, in AAAA *Bulletin* 4, 1984:4).

At the same time Western Australian-based anthropologists continued to pursue the establishment of PAAAS. The two fledgling organisations shared information and ideas and there was a genuine attempt to collaborate. In late 1983, for example, PAAAS hosted a conference on 'Professionalism and Practice in Anthropology' in Yanchep, Western Australia, which was also attended by a number of AAAA members. At this meeting Western Australian anthropologist Michael Robinson presented scoping research on four possible models for an incorporated national representative body for applied anthropologists. Each of the proposed models was a complex structure that sought to accommodate the interests of individual practitioners, as well as existing organisations, through a layering of local and state forums. A national professional body with state affiliates was one model proposed that would enable state bodies such as ASWA to continue to operate under their own constitutions and rules. A second model involved establishing a national body with state-based management under which existing organisations could choose to affiliate or remain separate. The third option (Robinson's preferred) proposed a national body with state

chapters that operated in a similar way to political parties. This body would replace existing organisations, potentially unifying anthropologists while keeping local members informed and involved. The final model was a federation of state professional bodies, which would permit state organisations to continue but would facilitate a common association (Robinson 1986:11–14). This research was shared with AAAA.

No decision was ever reached by either PAAAS or AAAA members about which representative model best suited their needs. It seems that there were too few practitioners and far too many organisational complexities, and participation began to wane. In April 1984 consideration was given to the idea of consolidating ASWA, PAAAS and AAAA in order to address the increasing burden of maintaining separate organisations with overlapping memberships and executives (Acciaioletti et al. forthcoming:10). All three organisations, however, had different membership criteria and incorporation status, rendering them effectively incompatible and making the idea of merging a complicated proposition. By the end of 1985, two years after the AAAA had been conceived, the organisation could claim only 12 financial members, with a further 11 applications under consideration (minutes of meeting, in AAAA *Bulletin* 6, 1985:5). In the case of PAAAS, running the organisation was becoming a ‘crippling burden’ on those already implicated in the problems it was trying to address. A number of individuals on the PAAAS executive had duplicate functions on other organisations, such as ASWA and AAAA. At its peak PAAAS had more than 60 members, and yet attendance at meetings dwindled, raising the question about the organisation’s long-term viability. As PAAAS member Chris Clarke (1986:20) frankly expressed it, ‘Executive duties became “pass-the-parcel”, and committee meetings were at times slightly hysterical encounters of the same exhausted group of persons unsure whether this time they were ASWA, ANZAAS, PAAAS, AAAA or the Aboriginal Land Inquiry Workshop’.

And so, by the middle of 1985, there remained three separate associations for Australian applied anthropologists — PAAAS, AAAA and QAPAA — with no national organisation in sight. In order to progress the matter to the point of decisive

action, a meeting of AAAA was hosted by the AAS in Darwin in August 1985. Those present at the meeting (which was not as well attended as earlier AAAA forums) agreed that a national organisation for professional anthropologists was still worth pursuing, and that the best vehicle to drive this was the AAS. The organisational models proposed, however, potentially involved considerable changes to the structure and function of the AAS itself, and therefore required the support of all AAS members to implement it, not just those involved in applied work and consultancies.

In the end, securing this broad support across the discipline proved impossible and less than a year later the AAAA was absorbed into the AAS under a broader agenda of disciplinary professionalisation. In the intervening months between the Darwin meeting in August 1985 and the official death of the AAAA idea at an AAS meeting in July 1986, a vigorous debate occurred about proposed changes to the AAS, which would see the implementation of a new constitution, new categories of membership and a code of ethics. The main forum for this debate was a special two-day meeting of the AAS held in Sydney in May 1986. More than 40 anthropologists attended, including Bob Tonkinson, Margaret Jolly, Annette Hamilton, Peter Sutton, David Trigger, Maggie Brady, Gillian Cowlshaw, Julie Marcus, Marie Reay, Michael Allen, Kingsley Palmer, Jeff Stead, Nicholas Thomas, Martha Macintyre, Gaynor Macdonald, Kim Ackerman and John von Sturmer. Possible models for an applied anthropology association based on research by Annette Hamilton were circulated to AAS members, along with those previously proposed by Michael Robinson through PAAAS (Hamilton 1986). A draft code of ethics developed by Peter Sutton was also circulated.

Fears of exclusion and the possible creation of a monopoly of ‘applied’ or private practice anthropologists, coupled with a dislike of the market and concerns about its influence on the objectivity and quality of anthropological research, were at the heart of protests against professionalisation at this time. Although many of those present at the Sydney AAS meeting recognised the need for greater professional support for colleagues working in the increasingly unpredictable business of land rights, the majority voted down a proposal

to establish the AAAA. This was not simply a numbers game between those operating 'inside' universities and those consultants located on the 'outside'. The politics of the moment made for a far more complicated coalition of positions. As Gillian Cowlshaw observed at the time, the argument *against* professionalisation was coming from two distinct quarters. On the one hand, some opposition was conservative in character, based on a desire to 'keep anthropology out of the market place and away from complex and controversial political questions'. Other objections emerged from more radically positioned anthropologists who saw moves towards professionalisation as representing 'the wrong kind of politics' (Cowlshaw 1986:15). Those in favour of professionalisation considered both positions radical and unhelpful for those practitioners who took up the challenge of applied research. Cowlshaw (1986:16), herself, while sympathetic to the concerns of consultants and seeing some benefit in AAS attempting to find ways to respond to events in the public arena, made it clear that she believed 'the dilemmas and conflicts faced by anthropologists in relation to land claims...are a part of the body of anthropology...and do not warrant being split off in to another realm called "professional"'. Others expressed outrage at the idea that those involved with the AAAA would name themselves as the 'professionals', fearing that all those who were not involved in land rights research and who chose not to join the AAAA would therefore be perceived as 'unprofessional' (Crick 1986:18). Anthropologist Chris Eipper (1986:43) wrote a scathing submission in which he accused anthropological consultants of attempting to hijack the AAS and remake it in their own image. Eipper was most concerned about accreditation and the implications of a single organisation presuming the authority to legitimise anthropological credentials in place of academic doctorates:

The end result of the proposed changes will be a hierarchical, exclusivist fraternity/sorority of elders and juniors, big apes and others. The primary concern will not be to legitimate anthropology according to criteria relevant to a distinctively anthropological worldview, but in subservience to criteria acceptable to those with authority and status independent

of the discipline and ultimately indifferent to its concerns and values (Eipper 1986:51).

Although at the end of the day the AAAA proposal was squashed, some fundamental changes to the AAS resulted from this debate. The organisation was incorporated for the first time and a new constitution adopted which laid out three tiers of membership categories based on experience and qualifications. Sutton's draft code of ethics was also successfully adopted despite strong opposition from some anthropologists who criticised it for being unrealistic, overly prescriptive and Australian-centric (Fegan 1986:14, 25). These changes were not what those pushing for a national organisation necessarily wanted, but they were nevertheless a significant step towards greater professionalisation of the discipline as a whole.

Deflated but not defeated, those anthropologists committed to the idea of professional representation for applied anthropologists retreated to their respective corners and remained active locally. This localism — a pervasive idea of an impassable geo-cultural divide between anthropologists on different sides of the country — was not insignificant in the failure of AAAA (Clarke 1986). In a colourful introduction to an issue of the *PAAASWord* newsletter dedicated to professionalisation, editor Ralph Locke — an applied sociologist whose primary research interest was cross-cultural analysis of states of altered consciousness — described the interactions between the various organisations interested in contending for national auspices of applied anthropology as yielding 'little more than the gloomy and repetitive picture of rival factions struggling for turf, and the indeterminate results of committee procedures'; critical of what he perceived to be an unsupportive professional culture among anthropologists in the eastern Australian states, Locke was vocal in his advocacy of a local rather than a national solution, suggesting instead that Western Australian anthropologists take care of their own (Locke 1986:i).

The efforts of Western Australian applied anthropologists continued for a few more years but their energy soon petered out and PAAAS was formally disbanded and the final issue of *PAAASWord* was published in 1989. After consid-

erable political action in relation to issues such as the Aurukun land conflicts with the Queensland state government, QAPAA also disappeared into history. Nothing emerged over the following decade to replace either organisation at the local level. Other anthropology associations, including AAS, ASWA and the Anthropological Society of South Australia, continued to provide forums for debate and disciplinary advocacy more broadly, but were not formally dedicated to the needs of consultants. The exception was a Western Australian organisation, the Australasian Association of Professional and Consulting Anthropologists and Archaeologists (AAPCAA), established in 1992 by anthropologist Rory O'Connor. O'Connor had been involved in the establishment of PAAAS, but appears to have stepped away from that forum early on. Despite the international ambitions of its name and its relative longevity (it is still around), AAPCAA remains small and local. At the time of writing it had 15 members, all based in Western Australia. The organisation appears to have done little towards creating and supporting a broader community of professional practice for those whose interests it seeks to represent.²

The late 1990s: more talk but still no national organisation

Despite the absence of a national representative organisation dedicated to private practice anthropology, the 1990s was nevertheless a time of 'reflorescence' for applied anthropology as demand for anthropological expertise grew in line with a burgeoning resources sector (Gordon 1999:22). As in the early 1980s, in the 1990s anthropologists were increasingly involved in a wide range of civil and criminal cases, in particular those resulting from native title claims (Sutton 1995:83). The *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) may have renewed the hopes of the land rights era that land justice for Indigenous Australians would finally be achieved, but this extraordinary legislation has turned out to be extraordinarily complicated and quickly created a complex landscape of legal obligations, political expectations and professional relationships. The 1995 Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission and the related 2001 civil trial, which saw anthropologist Deane Fergie unsuccessfully sued over provision of expert advice on the legitimacy of a sacred site, further fuelled a

sense of vulnerability and (based on personal experience) had the added effect of increasing the cost of professional indemnity insurance for consultant anthropologists.³

There was one significant development in the mid-1990s, however, that has provided anthropologists working across the discipline with an effective and enduring forum for information exchange and debate. At the 1996 AAS annual general meeting in Albury, during what he describes as 'one of those somewhat divisive discussions about professionalism that the [AAS] have been having since I was a graduate student in the 1970s', anthropologist Don Gardner (pers. comm., June 2011) observed that better communications might be of help. The following year Gardner successfully launched the email discussion list AASNet, an independently moderated forum associated with but not owned by the AAS.

AASNet currently has close to 1000 subscribers, many of whom regularly circulate information about jobs, conferences and publications and raise topical issues for discussion. Since its inception the forum has been a space where debates about applied and professional practice anthropology, in particular, have been played out among variously positioned members of Australia's anthropological community (see, for example, Fegan 2000).⁴ These conversations have at times been highly charged but they have encouraged collegial consideration about the state of the discipline with a sense of immediacy that few other professional forums — academic journals and annual conferences, for example — allow.⁵ Although debates on AASNet usually seem to involve small numbers of more senior anthropologists with established academic profiles, their audience extends well beyond these elites to include many anthropologists located outside of university networks.

The furore that erupted following the posting of a link to an article by Mary Edmunds (2010) on the Northern Territory 'Intervention' into Aboriginal communities is a recent and relevant example of the ideological debate that continues about the intellectual merit and politics of applied anthropology projects. The substance of this particular exchange also demonstrates the extent to which the professionalisation debate has moved well beyond the old 'academic' versus 'applied' dichotomy and remains highly ideologi-

ical. One particularly inflammatory comment posted during this exchange by Norwegian-based Australian anthropologist Andrew Lattas targeted universities, as well as applied anthropologists, for encouraging the wrong kind of politics. Lattas' argument, that 'Aboriginal anthropology is becoming a very new kind of discipline [and] that it exists within a corporate and governmental field that is radically reshaping it', represents the more radical of critiques of the contemporary applied domain (AASNet email post, 12 December 2010). The responses that followed indicate the degree of frustration felt by some practitioners when the intellectual complexity, methodological robustness and social benefits of much consultancy work is ignored by critics who are themselves implicated in academic systems of power (see, for example, Julie Finlayson, AASNet post, 14 December 2010; Trigger 2011:234).

AASNet alone, however, was not enough to satisfy the enduring aspiration of some practitioners for a national representative structure specifically for applied anthropologists. In 1999, a decade after AAAA was attempted and failed, AAS again convened a 'professionalisation committee' to conduct research into ways to support consultant and applied anthropologists. The professionalisation committee had four subcommittees, including a native title subcommittee. This new effort included many involved in previous efforts: David Trigger, Kingsley Palmer, Martha Macintyre, Peter Sutton, Sandy Toussaint, Gaynor Macdonald and Jeremy Beckett, to name only a few. Sandy Toussaint was commissioned to conduct research into issues relating to professionalisation. Her report to the AAS Executive recommended, among other things, that AAS look into establishing a Board of Review to mediate professional and ethical disputes (Toussaint 1999:5). The then AAS President, Grant McCall, also investigated the possibility of the organisation registering an ISO 9000 standard for professional practice (McCall 1999:10). Neither of these ideas was successful. The first proved ethically and legally too difficult, the second too costly. Toussaint's report also recommended increased specialised tertiary-level training in applied anthropology in order to address the perceived lack of an adequate skill base among recent anthropological graduates.

According to one observer of the 1999 AAS annual general meeting, where Toussaint's recommendations were tabled, the debate stalled early on when the proponents of professionalisation were unable to clearly articulate to the general membership the kinds of services they collectively required and what the cost of these might be. Further, some 'non-consultant' anthropologists expressed concern that not only would 'going professional' expose AAS to legal problems, but that fees would increase and force many members to revoke their membership (Fegan 2000:1). A compromise of sorts was reached, with the annual general meeting voting to establish an applied anthropology 'wing' that would be open to any AAS member to join. Julie Finlayson was initially appointed to undertake further research in order to identify and implement the services required, and it was Finlayson who ultimately became the driving force behind the establishment in 2001 of the AAS Clearing House.

The Clearing House was a user-pays online portal that offered applied anthropologists services such as advice on fees, contracts and insurance, and a consultants' register. Although its membership was small and reportedly recruited only 12 members, it had some successes. During its short life the Clearing House held a number of workshops for members, including one providing practical advice on running a small business, something few anthropologists are otherwise trained for. The Clearing House folded when the task of maintaining it became too much for Finlayson, who was at the time working full time as a consultant anthropologist (David Martin, pers. comm., June 2011). As with PAAAS, the demands of running a professional organisation on a voluntary basis proved too much for the anthropologists involved.

Another short-lived professional development project from this period was a pilot Mentoring Project for Junior Native Title Representative Anthropologists. The primary aim of this project was to improve the capacity of NTRBs to perform their functions by improving the anthropological expertise of in-house staff. The outcomes from this small-scale mentoring pilot were reportedly mixed. There were some clear benefits for participants, most of whom were early career researchers employed by NTRBs, but the primary lesson

learned was that mentoring at a distance does not work (Martin 2004b:2).

Lessons from history: professionalisation requires more than the profession

A consistent pattern that emerges in this potted history of professionalisation is the tendency of applied anthropologists to seek out and build a community of practice at times of rapid professional growth and increased public scrutiny. The intensification of activity towards greater professionalisation that occurred in the mid-1980s, and again in late 1990s, coincided with periods of professional change that resulted in a rapid expansion of the legal and ethical parameters of applied anthropological practice. And yet few past professionalisation efforts have succeeded. An important lesson to be gleaned from these past failures is, I suggest, that establishing a successful representative and accrediting organisation for applied anthropologists working in native title will not be achieved from within the ranks of the small sub-discipline of applied anthropology alone. Such ambitions will require more than the voluntary involvement of a few individuals. Successful national representation will require adequate long-term funding and the support of the discipline more broadly. It will also need to very accurately target its potential membership. Pitched too broadly, such as the AAAA, the idea of a national organisation may be unable to serve the interests of all its members and may further exacerbate existing divisions among anthropologists about the role of private practice anthropology. But pitched too narrowly, such as the AAS Clearing House arguably was, such an endeavour will lack the necessary resources to make it sustainable.

The idea of accrediting native title and cultural heritage practitioners to ensure minimum standards for qualifications and experience has repeatedly been raised under the mantle of professionalism and was again mooted at the professionalisation workshop held at the 2011 AIATSIS Native Title Conference. Accreditation has remained an elusive idea over the years, and, at times, pursuing it has resulted in the stalling of other initiatives. As early as 1983 Ron Berndt blamed a lack of headway on matters of professionalisation on 'difficulties' associ-

ated with establishing formal accreditation (Berndt 1983:171). Similarly, research by John Stanton on behalf of PAAAS led him to present a very pessimistic assessment of the likelihood of accreditation ever occurring for Australian anthropologists. As Stanton documented, both the British and American anthropological associations attempted accreditation in the 1980s and both organisations ultimately decided against it. The lesson Stanton (1986:25) took from their experiences was that 'procrastination and indecision is the most efficient means of stalling any proposal for professionalisation'. Organisational politics aside, the questions of who should accredit and how remain unanswerable today. Prohibitive costs, arguments over standards and enforceability, complicated legal arrangements and concerns about legal action from disgruntled practitioners have to date prevented any national accreditation scheme getting beyond the conceptual stage.⁶ Accreditation for native title practitioners in the current environment will only be feasible if those organisations that employ native title anthropologists, or who fund others to employ native title anthropologists, buy in to the idea and commit to only employing anthropologists who meet agreed national standards. Given the diversity of employers of native title anthropologists — which includes NTRBs funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), state governments and private law firms — and the current shortage of practitioners, this may continue to prove an impossible undertaking.

The issue of better tertiary training, on the other hand, has been consistently and universally acknowledged as crucial to improving the capacity of applied anthropologists and appears an easier goal. For the past 30 years, Australian anthropologists have recommended better training to prepare anthropologists for applied work, and have suggested that universities are the best place for this training to occur (see Berndt 1983; Clarke and Stanton 1983; Hamilton 1986; Robinson 1986). More recently, the need for training and mentoring has been reiterated (Bauman 2010:6; Martin 2004a:5; Trigger 2010:157). To the extent that the AGD is supporting training for anthropologists through the NTAGP (which funds the CNTA, as well as a number of other initiatives

at The University of Adelaide, The University of Sydney and James Cook University), this advice is being acted on. But universities themselves seem reluctant to address this need. A number of Australian universities, including The Australian National University, Macquarie University, The University of Melbourne and The University of Queensland, currently run either undergraduate course subjects or postgraduate programs in applied anthropology. However, the only postgraduate applied anthropology program aimed specifically at native title and heritage, established by The University of Western Australia in the late 2000s, has recently been withdrawn, apparently on the grounds that it was no longer financially viable. The University of Adelaide is driving a project to establish a nationally-distributed postgraduate curriculum in native title anthropology, but achieving this is some way off. In the meantime, anthropologists seeking to develop their skills in native title are limited to one-off postgraduate courses, short workshops run through the FaHCSIA-funded Aurora program, or non-accredited university-based activities funded by the NTAGP.

Notably, the endurance of AASNet demonstrates that embracing new technologies to improve communication is well worth the effort and an online forum can be a valuable asset for such a geographically dispersed and variously positioned community of practitioners. Indeed, in the age of social networking and expanding online communities, it is questionable whether there is a need for a national representative organisation at all. A question for native title anthropologists moving into the future will be whether or not they require a specialised forum dedicated to applied anthropology. While this will allow conversations about private practice anthropology to occur in an environment free of criticism from its detractors, it will also potentially isolate subscribers from discussions about broader disciplinary issues of significance to their practice.

It makes sense that anthropologists have been moved to increase their skills and organise collectively at times of professional growth and change. The political and ethical complexities of working in Aboriginal Australia have not, I suggest, relented since the Hindmarsh Island affair and the early days of native title. On the contrary, they

have intensified with the mining ‘super-boom’ of the past decade and the ongoing native title project, the original objective of which — achieving land justice for Aboriginal people — has been muddled in the wake of various legal decisions and political agendas. Add to this an anecdotal increase in the number of anthropologists working for mining companies and it is easy to see just how fraught the business has become. Anthropologists working in Aboriginal Australia today are increasingly faced with difficult choices about how to do their jobs so as not to compromise their professional integrity, their intellectual objectivity or their relationships with the Indigenous people with whom they work. Ideas about what constitutes best practice, ethical engagement and appropriate accountability are by no means agreed,⁷ making native title anthropology a nerve-wracking prospect at the best of times. This anxiety belongs not only to anthropologists; Aboriginal people have the most to lose when anthropological projects are compromised because of unclear standards or a lack of resources. Moreover, if native title anthropology is to extend its scope to include involvement in post-determination issues such as agreement-making, Indigenous governance and mediation — as foreshadowed by Martin et al. (2011:27) — then even greater professional complexity awaits us.

That building a better community of practice for native title anthropologists requires an outward view is not a new idea. From the earliest days of the native title era anthropologists have been calling for their colleagues not only to be more critically self-regulating, but also to be ‘more publically communicative, more policy attentive and more politically astute’ (Smith, D and Finlayson 1995:xxii). Influencing the legal and commercial processes that shape our professional practices and relationships requires more than dialogue between anthropologists. The profession also needs to engage with those other institutions whose agendas most profoundly determine the parameters of our professional lives; for example, state governments, the National Native Title Tribunal, FaHCSIA, NTRBs, the Federal Court of Australia and the AGD. As commissioners, funders and consumers of the products of native title anthropology, each of these institutions has its own expectations of applied anthropology.

Further, recent discussions about professionalism have rarely involved Aboriginal people, and there is little appreciation of native title claimants' views about the discipline and what constitutes best practice. They, too, need to be brought into the conversation. An outwardly focused professionalisation agenda has the potential to more closely align others' expectations of anthropology with those of its practitioners, thereby positioning anthropologists to have a greater influence on policy frameworks and to better serve the interests of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders whose personal fates remain inextricably linked to prevailing standards of professional practice in native title anthropology.

NOTES

1. Martin estimated in 2004 that there were more than 100 anthropologists working in Australian universities. Fewer than 20 of these individuals engaged in native title work. There was a total of 45 staff native title anthropologist positions within NTRBs nationwide, and likely fewer than 20 anthropologists employed in government agencies working on native title-related issues (Martin 2004a:4).
2. In 1992 the AAS lodged an objection with the Commissioner of Corporate Affairs requesting that AAPCAA's application for incorporation be declined on the basis that, among other things, it was not representative of the discipline and it discouraged professionalisation because members would not be required to hold formal qualifications in either anthropology or archaeology. The AAS objection was ultimately unsuccessful (Fergie to AAS Executive, 8/4/1992, AAS archives, AAS, Canberra).
3. See Brunton 1996, Edmunds 2001, Tonkinson 1997 and Weiner 2004 for variously positioned commentary on anthropology's complicity in the Hindmarsh Island Bridge dispute.
4. AASNet subscribers can access the AASNet archives at the 'AASNet — Australian Anthropological Society Discussion Group' web page at <<http://mailman.anu.edu.au/mailman/listinfo/aasnet>>.
5. The AAS recently surveyed its members and AASNet subscribers about their use of AASNet. The majority of respondents indicated that they consider it an important professional resource. Results of this survey can be viewed online at the 'News — AAS Communications Survey, 2011' web page at <www.aas.asn.au/News/news_item.php?s=&ce_num=599>.

6. CNTA recently shelved an accreditation project after preliminary scoping research indicated that it was unlikely to be financially viable given the size of the native title anthropology industry.
7. The AAS Code of Ethics has been revisited a number of times since it was first adopted and is again currently under review.

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