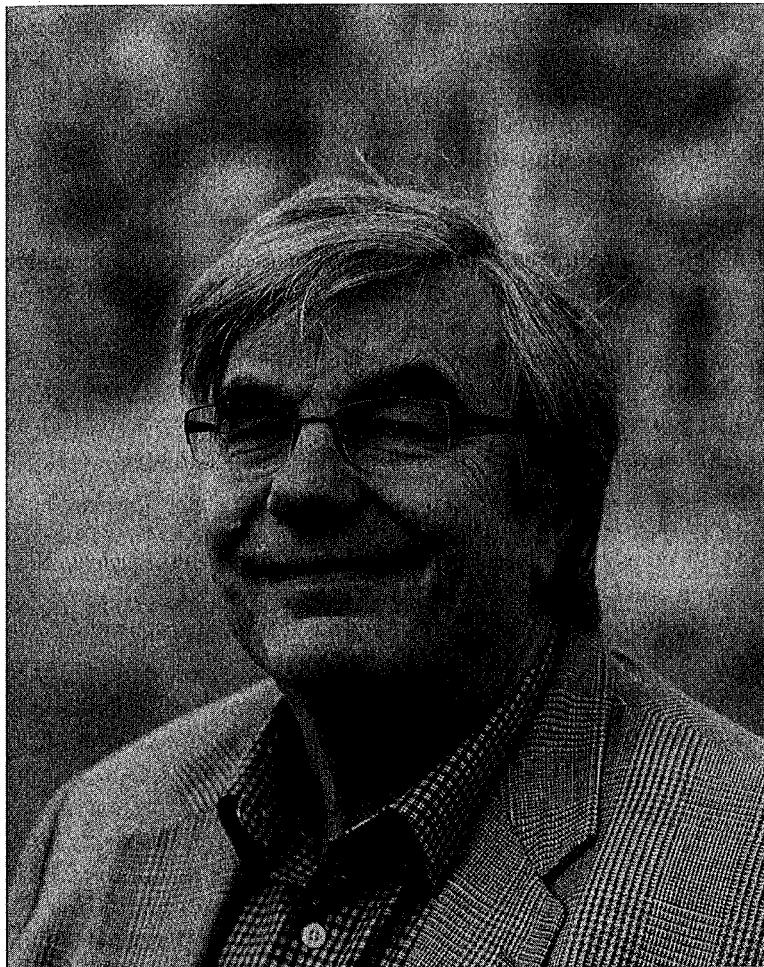


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Howard Morphy



Date of Birth: 1947

Place of Birth: Hampton, Middlesex (UK)

PhD: 'Too Many Meanings: An Analysis of the Artistic System of the Yolngu People of Northeast Arnhem Land', 1978, The Australian National University.

Fieldwork: Australia

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Positions held: Morphy began his career as a research assistant at the British Museum (1971–73). He subsequently lectured at the Australian National University (1978–86), before taking the position of curator of anthropology at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford University (1986–96) and junior proctor (1991–92). Morphy was also professor of anthropology at University College London (1996–99) and an ARC Senior Research Fellow at the Australian National University (1997–2003). He became director of the Centre for Cross-cultural Research in 1999, before taking up his present position in 2007.

Major works

- 2008, co-director with P. Deveson. *In Gentle Hands*, film available from the Research School of Humanities and the Arts, Canberra: Australian National University.
- 2006, with Frances Morphy. 'Tasting the Waters: Discriminating Identities in the Waters of Blue Mud Bay'. *Journal of Material Culture* 11(2): 67–85.
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Chapter 6

ART AS ACTION
The Yolngu
Howard Morphy

In Australia and New Zealand you are known for your work in the anthropology of art and for your work on the Yolngu people of north-eastern Australia. You have recently completed a film about the Yolngu. Tell us more about this work.

My film is entitled *In Gentle Hands* (Morphy and Deveson 2008), and it focuses on a Yolngu circumcision ceremony, at Yilpara, on Blue Mud Bay. I filmed the ceremony myself and edited the footage with Pip Deveson, who has had long experience working with Yolngu and editing films with Ian Dunlop. The film centres on the participants' experience of the ritual action, and I try to capture the positive emotions that are created. The title refers to the essentially nurturing dimension of the ritual and counters the initial likely audience preconceptions of circumcision as a violent act.

Much of my work with the Yolngu people of northeast Arnhem Land explores how they engage with the wider world through their art. My argument is that artwork has always been a form of action in Yolngu society, undertaken in order to demonstrate rights of ownership. Particularly in the Yolngu case, painting and other aspects of ritual performance are all connected to land and the rights that people have to land (Morphy 1991, 2006a). My research has also been concerned with how the Yolngu *problematize* the concept of appropriation, because in many respects they are actually quite outgoing in the world; that is, they want to convert other people to a sense of understanding the values that their culture and their aesthetic performances hold for

them. They are oriented toward sharing aspects of their culture. So although outsiders may perceive the incorporation of Yolngu art and performance into Australia's self-representation and self-promotion to the wider world as an appropriation of an indigenous culture on behalf of the nation-state, that is not how the Yolngu see it.

You mention the importance of land and appropriation for people in northeast Arnhem Land. How important are concepts of 'ownership' and 'appropriation' for anthropology in general today?

They are incredibly relevant subjects. At a very general level, the discourses of ownership and appropriation are part of the history of anthropology and its relationship to the cultural production of other societies. But in this day and age, they are particularly salient in the context of Australia, New Zealand and other settler colonial societies, where anthropological work on ownership has often resulted in great improvements in the lives of indigenous people and has been useful in their struggles for their rights. It's also an important topic for anthropology more generally, as ownership is a concept that is embedded in a particular way in the history of Western cultures. Even though anthropology had part of its origin in that context, by looking at that concept cross-culturally, anthropology challenges the presuppositions that Western societies and Western legal discourses may have, showing alternative ways in which you can look at things like property rights and so forth.

Let us go back to your own encounter with different ways of looking at things. How did you first discover anthropology?

Well, I had originally applied to university to study law, but having got a place to study law I decided that I didn't really want to be a lawyer. Not that there is anything wrong with being a lawyer, I hasten to add, rather I wanted to learn more about the world before deciding on what my profession would eventually be. At the time I was working as a volunteer for the charity Oxfam. I was also helping to run a folk club, in the Mitre Hotel in Oxford, called Fennario Folk – which was named after a line from a song sung by Bob Dylan on his first album. We managed this folk club on behalf of Oxfam, and I got very interested in Oxfam's agenda. I thought it would be rather important to be able to study and get an idea of what societies in Africa or *wherever* really needed in terms of non-government organizations and aid. I thought that if one was going to help those societies, one ought to know a

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great deal about them and how they saw themselves in the world. I went to see my geography schoolmaster and I said, 'I've decided that I would like to do human geography in order to better understand the needs of developing societies'. He looked at me and replied, 'For that purpose, human geography is the poor man's anthropology'. And I said, 'Oh really? What's anthropology?' [laughs]. He outlined what anthropology was to me, and so I quickly whipped in an application to go to university to study anthropology, in order to work as an applied anthropologist in the third world.

I got offered a place at University College London, which was absolutely the right place for me. At that particular time it was a tremendous privilege to go to university; that was when universities were just beginning to open up – there was government funding, there were no fees, and there were student grants. Without those benefits I would never have gone to university. But the places were very limited, and not knowing anything about the subject, I applied to six or seven different universities where you could study anthropology. But UCL [University College London] was the one that, after the interviews, I eventually chose. The anthropology programme at UCL was distinctive in Britain, as it was one of the few places that were based on the American 'four-field' model, even though it only had the three fields of social anthropology, biological anthropology and material culture, and did not include linguistics. I learnt a very different anthropology from what was being taught elsewhere in Britain. The head of department at UCL, Darryl Forde, was basically trained in American anthropology – so the core courses we did included a theory paper called 'The Analysis of Culture', which focused on the work of figures such as Talcott Parsons, Clyde Kluckhohn and others. I received a very broad education in American anthropology, but our teachers also included Phyllis Kaberry, Mary Douglas and I. M. Lewis, so I was taught by a really *diverse* set of anthropologists who had very different theoretical frameworks and who introduced us to the full breadth of anthropology.

A key figure for me was Peter Ucko, who had developed courses in material culture. Peter was a magnificent, charismatic teacher. He was also very analytical in his approach to topics, and I think that theoretical perspective was something that attracted me very strongly. We also had excellent lecturers in biological anthropology, so I acquired a very broad set of perspectives on anthropology. Being in London, we were close to the Royal Anthropological Institute, which at that point was pioneering areas that had been neglected in anthropology. There was an RAI [The Royal Anthropological Institute] 'art panel' and an RAI

'film panel'. I went to all their meetings and really became a visual anthropologist through being in London and having that kind of access and being interested in that approach to material culture. In some ways, material culture has always been the continuing thread of my anthropological interests. It's the thing that brings everything in my life back into focus, because I do have a tendency to look very broadly. But then, one of the great things about anthropology is its breadth and its natural interdisciplinarity.

So I did a master's degree, an MPhil at University College, and I studied the '*toas*', which are direction signs of the Lake Eyre tribes in Central Australia (Morphy 1978a). I came across that interest because I actually wrote a theoretical master's thesis. I handed it in to Peter Ucko when it was more or less completed, and he looked at it and said, 'Well, this is all very interesting and very good, but where's the data?' So I had to go back and find some data. I thought at that point, 'well, I may as well give up'. I'd written this theoretical discourse which I thought was really quite good – and after all, it was only a master's thesis, but so be it. So I went to the Royal Anthropological Institute to look for some data [smiles], and I came across a wonderful publication from 1919, I think, on the *toas* of the Lake Eyre region of Central Australia, written by Sterling and Waite. It illustrated some 460 of these objects with all of their meanings but very little about the context, very little about what they were used for. It was a fantastic body of data which lent itself really well to a formal analysis of the structure of its representational system. That was great.

At that stage you could only get one ESRC scholarship, and anthropologists, unlike sociologists, required people to do the MA degree: you couldn't go straight on to do a doctorate. But once you'd used the scholarship for the MA, then you didn't have enough money, or the opportunity, to do a doctorate. So after finishing my MA, I got a job in the British Museum, on something called the 'no number' project. 'No number' reflected the fact that a large number of objects in the ethnographic collection didn't have any numbers, i.e. they hadn't been registered. My job was to register these objects, and I spent something like two and a half years working there as a research assistant, wondering what my future career would be. I really wanted to do a doctorate. Then suddenly I saw an advertisement in a newspaper for scholarships at The Australian National University (ANU). I wrote to the anthropology department at the ANU saying that I wanted to apply linguistic models to the analysis of the art in Vanuatu. I got a letter back from a completely different and recently created department, Prehistory and Anthropology, in the School of General Studies, say-

ing, 'We would be interested in giving you a scholarship as long as you follow up the research you've already done in Australia and carry on working on Australian Aboriginal art' [smiling and clapping hands together]. And so I said 'yes'. My wife, Frances, had *just* finished her master's thesis, so the timing was very good. That was how I came to Australia to study Aboriginal art.

That was 1973. Peter Ucko had been appointed the Principal of the Institute of Aboriginal Studies. He had just received an application from a very famous person, or one who ought to be very famous in Australian history, the Reverend Edgar Wells, who had been the missionary at Yirrkala at the time of the Bark Petition. This was a petition from the people at Yirrkala asking for recognition of their rights (Morphy 2007). Reverend Wells wanted to go back in order to document the collection of bark paintings made by the founding missionary at Yirrkala, the Reverend Wilbur Chaseling. Hearing that I was coming out, Peter Ucko encouraged Wells to undertake the task and suggested that it might be helpful to him if he was accompanied by a newly arrived anthropology graduate student who was looking for a field situation. So I was introduced to eastern Arnhem Land, to Yirrkala, Milingimbi and Maningrida, under the auspices of a returning missionary hero. Because the Yolngu really welcomed him back as someone who had led their struggle for land rights, this was a really good way for me to enter the field. It also helped me with my goal to apply anthropology in order to further the rights and development of indigenous and third world communities.

I could've done fieldwork in any of those communities, but Edgar Wells introduced me to a man called Narritjin Maymuru (Morphy and Deveson 2005). The minute I met him I thought, 'this is one of the most extraordinary intellectuals I have ever met in my life'. He spoke his own kind of English, but it was quite clear that this was a man of incredible knowledge, reason and judgement. I felt that I could learn an enormous amount from him. I decided that I would go to Yirrkala, as opposed to one of the other communities, in the hope that I would be able to work with him.

What would you specify as your main research interests, and how do they relate to your work among the Yolngu?

Obviously I'm an anthropologist of art. Initially I was looking at art as a system of communication. I was interested in formal analysis as an analytical method. I was very interested in creating wider bodies of data that might be used to analyze objects in a context of social

change. Part of my methodology before going into the field was to get hold of all the photographs that I could of the collections from north-east Arnhem Land, so that I would have a body of material to work with. Using these, I could begin to work out what were the structures of the systems of communication. Of course, in Yolngu society, I had to look at art in its different contexts, because art was something that was all around me; art was something that would be found painted on the chest of a child in a circumcision ceremony or hanging on display and for sale in the mission art centre. Very quickly, I got the idea both that art was something that people *used* in context and in a variety of different frames. They used it in the frame of their own local institutions, but they were also using it to communicate to outsiders. That then revealed to me the much wider world in which Yolngu lived and operated.

I was very lucky in that, as an anthropologist, I was able to bring a perspective that really brought together historical sources of information with the appreciation that societies and their institutions are all connected to wider worlds. Because the Yolngu are an indigenous Australian society, you cannot work with them without engaging with issues of social organization and kinship. Yolngu were originally known in the anthropological world as the 'Murngin', and there was the renowned 'Murngin problem'. The phrase the 'Murngin problem' was, I believed, formalized by John Barnes (1967) in his monograph *Inquest on the Murngin*. Murngin was the name Lloyd Warner used to refer to the people now more commonly referred to as Yolngu. Warner (1958 [1937]) wrote a brilliant book on Yolngu society, appropriately named *A Black Civilization*. The book centred on the inter-relationship between religion and social organization. The Murngin became a key case study in Lévi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969). As a result of Warner's, Lévi Strauss's and others' writings, a number of loose ends emerged in the discourse over Yolngu kinship that eventually became referred to as the Murngin problem – it should have been problems! It would take me several hours or perhaps days to unpack them for you. Yolngu kinship is extremely complex, partly because unlike most other Australian kinship systems, an essential asymmetry lies at its heart and the core conceptual problems are involved in coming to terms with that asymmetry. One of the things that was necessary for my understanding of their artistic system was to try to work out the solution to that 'Murngin problem'. Because of the work of Frances Morphy and I, together with our fellow anthropologist Ian Keen, who conducted research at the same time at another Yolngu community, we now have a much better understanding

of Yolngu kinship (Morphy 1978b; see also Keen 1982). The main thing I was able to demonstrate was that Yolngu marriage required a minimal cycle of 'exchange', involving six groups. No one can hope to understand any aspect of Yolngu society unless they have a basic understanding of Yolngu kinship and group organization. Hence studying Yolngu art and material culture made it essential for me to contribute to ongoing debates over the structure and meaning of the Yolngu kinship system, which in turn was embedded in broader debates on theory in anthropology.

Given that art, in that form, is an integral part of visual culture, it is no wonder that those issues engaged your interest.

Much of that developed out of my interest in photography. When I was working in the British Museum in London I was a passionate amateur photographer. In those days one couldn't afford a decent camera at all. Japanese and German cameras were incredibly expensive. But there was a shop in London that sold Soviet goods very cheaply. So I bought a very good, very cheap Russian 35 mm single-lens reflex camera and did all my own developing and so on. I started using photography as a fieldwork method, and then, in the same mission house where Frances and I were staying, we met Ian Dunlop and his film crew. Ian was at the early stages of his Yirrkala project, filming the impact of the mining town on the Yolngu population there (Morphy 2006b). He watched as Frances and I went out every day, struggling out in the heat, trying to find people to talk to, while carrying our big heavy tape recorders and camera. I think he spent a lot of time laughing at us. But we soon realized that many of the people that we were working with as anthropologists were the same people that he was working with as a filmmaker, so we developed a working partnership. Ian then asked me if I would stay on with him and work as an anthropologist on a film that he was making of a Djungguwan ceremony at one of the homeland centres (Dunlop 1990; Graham 2006). I had a terrible battle with my supervisor, Anthony Forge, who felt I should be focusing on getting my thesis written. But I more or less just didn't take any notice of him. Fortunately, he was forgiving and supportive. We became involved as the anthropologist and linguist working on those films. Frances was an anthropologist who had converted during fieldwork to being a linguist, and she wrote grammars of the Yolngu language. So I – or rather we – had this incredible advantage in actually being part of a team that brought together different kinds of skills. It doubled the amount of work that we were able to do.

I gradually got more involved in the editing process and in the wider process of filmmaking. Australia at that moment was a fantastic place for ethnographic filmmaking. The Institute of Aboriginal Studies organized a huge conference, where people came from all over the world. Around that time, David and Judith MacDougall were employed at the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, and when I eventually finished my doctorate and became a lecturer at the ANU, I co-taught a class in ethnographic film with David MacDougall, Nic Peterson and Judith MacDougall. The opportunities in that area were fantastic.

Canberra is a 'mecca' for visual anthropology and ethnographic film, so you found yourself in the right spot.

Yes, I did. But it's amazing how long it's taken us to get everything together properly. We're only now in the position of producing doctoral students who have films as part of their assessment, and we've got a fantastic master's programme going in 'visual cultural research', of which visual anthropology is a central component.

Many anthropologists talk about specific events or experiences that led to major fieldwork discoveries. Were there any such revelatory or 'eureka' moments during your fieldwork?

Yes, one of the most memorable was whilst working on my master's thesis at University College London. As I said earlier, I'd been analyzing a system of representation, and I got stuck trying to work out how on earth these objects ('toas') were used to communicate, when they often seemed to convey insufficient information. Then, one night, I suddenly got an idea which I'm sure is part of what linguists call 'pragmatics', which is that, in many cases there is only a limited range of possible locations that these objects could actually refer to in each case. I called these factors 'PL' – possible locations. This is how people interact with the objects in an interpretative context. I was able to bring that context to the interpretation of this system, and so suddenly I'd solved the problem. I remember feeling a sort of 'Eureka! I've worked this out! Now I'll be able to finish my master's thesis', and I finished it very quickly.

Another moment occurred much later when I was undertaking my research into Yolngu art. There was a wonderful man called Welwe Wanambi, a *great* artist and ritual leader, who hadn't really worked with any other anthropologist. There are very few of his paintings

in existence, and he did this fantastic figurative painting where you could see a hunter chasing a kangaroo through the forest, with trees falling down left, right and centre. And then he came up to me and said, 'I've done exactly the same painting again'. I was disappointed, because I had little money as a graduate student and I was buying these paintings. But I hid my disappointment, because he was such an engaging and generous person, and so I went along to see the painting he was doing. But whereas the first one had been figurative, this one was *entirely* geometric; it sparkled! It was *wonderful*, but clearly different. And then it later struck me, 'if I can understand what he means when he says "these are the same paintings", then I'm really getting somewhere.'

There was a third important moment. Frances and I have worked with the Yolngu for about thirty-five years, but I am still uncertain at times about what exactly is my relationship with people. We feel as if we're treated as relatives, and we do have enormous obligations. However there are still moments of uncertainty. When I was filming at a funeral I was too inhibited to film the body being put into the grave, because I felt that would be too much of an intrusion. But even the Yolngu afterwards said that I was completely mad; it was a *funeral*, so what on earth was I doing *not* filming the body being put into the grave. But I had that kind of restraint. On another occasion very recently a large number of Yolngu came down to Melbourne, and there was a very distinguished gathering of people there to see some objects that had been donated to Melbourne University by Justice Woodward – who played an important role in the development of the land-rights legislation in Australia. There are all these distinguished lawyers and other dignitaries going around looking at these objects, but the Yolngu weren't sure how dangerous these objects might be. So the Yolngu said, 'Right, all of you Europeans – *balanda* – we're going to have to rub sweat on you.' We all lined up, and they rubbed their sweat on everybody. When they got to me they said, 'Oh no, no, you're one of us!' [laughs]. That was something! Although anthropologists *always* have to retain their objectivity – their capacity to step aside – at the same time you begin to strongly identify with the society you're working with as if it's your own. And then it really becomes your own. You recognize that of course, cross-culturally, many people are operating in very different kinds of frames and have strong senses of belonging in multiple contexts. Belonging isn't something that is associated with just one structured space in the world. It can be for some people, but in many cases that is not so.

These are all quite positive moments. Do you remember any negative encounters or events? Things that went utterly wrong in the field or moments you found embarrassing, but which you nevertheless learned from?

It was a struggle at the early stages of fieldwork, but in a way I *knew* it would be a struggle, because people like Phyllis Kabbery and Nancy Williams had forewarned me. You are working in a society you don't know initially, with people speaking a language you don't initially understand, and you have to intrude into people's lives. That takes a lot of courage. There are all of these people living in their own worlds, and you go up and say, 'I want to sit down and just watch you for the next few months'. That establishment of relationships is really, really hard. Interestingly, one thing that I recognized is that it's good to go away after about five or six months and then come back again, because it's only *then* that you realize how much you've actually learnt. Also, when you come back again, people have a completely different attitude to you. 'Ah, here you are, coming back, how nice to see you. Welcome.' You get that kind of change. I always try to build that process into my own doctoral students' work, getting them used to the idea of going away and coming back, if that's at all possible.

The other thing that I remember is the total physical exhaustion that you have to fight your way through. Nancy Williams told me that she'd been taught before going into the field that anything written down the following day was 'hearsay', so you had to write it down the day it happened. Frances and I would arrive back home *completely* exhausted, but one of us would always volunteer to write up our general diary for the day, and then we'd wake the other one up so that he or she could write her part of it. We forced ourselves to do that. Those diary entries are just invaluable, because journals that you've written as fully as possible become something which, in retrospect, contains all this information that at the time you didn't even know was relevant.

What would you describe as among the most exciting or relevant areas of anthropology today?

Coming from University College London and being married to a linguistic anthropologist [smiles], I have a tremendously broad interest in anthropology. I really wouldn't like to narrow it down. Our intellectual eclecticism is an important asset, and anthropologists have to be able to *handle* interdisciplinarity while at the same time creating coherent disciplinary themes. I actually think that anthropology is

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in a very good position now. We got over the necessary corrective of reflexive anthropology. A lot of things to do with reflexive anthropology and the critique of anthropology were actually already part of the discipline but were not widely acknowledged. It was very good that there was a critical discourse that enabled anthropology to make our methodologies and epistemology more transparent. Having worked through that, anthropology has been able to return to its main concern, which is driving knowledge through cross-cultural comparative research and applying that knowledge to the betterment of people's lives. A lot of the challenge for anthropology arises from the fact that much of the world is reluctant to acknowledge the complexity of the social and cultural worlds people inhabit. Anthropology reminds us that problems are complex and solutions are therefore going to be complex as well, but that is what people often don't want to hear. Deep ethnography is an important component of anthropology, but I don't think all anthropologists have to be ethnographers. Anthropology as a discipline is much wider than ethnographic research. But it does worry me that fewer people are able to spend the time doing deep, long-term ethnography.

I think that we are at the moment when visual anthropology is really coming into its own, in part because of the digital revolution. The generations coming along have great facility with visual media, and unless we follow that direction, we will fail. At the same time I think anthropologists have gained a much more sophisticated understanding of the nature of visual media as a means of communication and as part of wider social and cultural processes. In a sense we're able to use that technology precisely because we can stand outside ourselves and see its potential. Of course digital media mean that the whole archive of anthropologists' past work can be brought into the present in potentially researchable ways.

Tell us about the relevance of your work in the wider public sphere.

The 'Blue Mud Bay' native title and land claim I worked on with Frances, Nic Peterson, Marcus Barber and two archaeologists, Annie Clarke and Patrick Fawlkner, resulted in a court case that recognized Aboriginal ownership of 80 per cent of the inter-tidal zones of the Northern Territory. It was the last bit missing from the Australian land-rights legislation and it is going to have enormous long-term impact on those societies (see Morphy and Morphy 2006; F. Morphy 2007). It's not going to provide immediate solutions to all the problems, but it's recognition of long-term rights will be terribly important.

I've also played a significant role in widening people's appreciation of Aboriginal art. I've done that almost as a kind of emissary from the Yolngu, *who, themselves*, felt that they were producing the equivalent in value to what are considered works of art in the West. Working with *them*, I was able to increase people's access to, and appreciation of, indigenous art. I've also played a small part in reconnecting anthropology with museums and museum collections. That is something that the diaspora of anthropologists trained at University College London have carried with them by spreading interest in material culture. I have contributed a little to that by training a lot of doctoral students who then go out into the world and spread these concerns even further.

In Australia, unlike, say, Central Europe, anthropologists get to work on issues of major public concern, such as indigenous land rights. Is anthropology more relevant to public debates in countries like Australia?

No, it's *not*. The consciousness of people in Central Europe, Africa, America and so on – as far as the nature of cultural diversity and how it fits within a globalizing world – is just as important, and anthropology is just as relevant in that context as it is in Australia. In applying anthropology to indigenous Australians we're applying anthropology to our contemporaries. We can do that just as easily with our contemporaries in Europe, America, India or China. Indeed, that's another important change that's happening in anthropology. The idea that anthropology is the study of small-scale pre-modern societies has by now absolutely disappeared. And that's great. On the other hand, anthropology must continue to make minority cultures and local cultures visible on a global stage.

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