



The
University
of Sydney



Sydney Sawyer Seminar Friday, 27th March, 2009

Session One

The Impact of the Antipodes on Anthropological Thought: Histories of Human Order

Convenor: Jude Philp

Discussant: Warwick Anderson

Shino Konishi, Australian National University

'The Slippery Native Tongue: Aborigines, explorers, and the eighteenth-century notion of a natural language'

Ron Day, Murray Island Community Council

'Meriam-le (Mer Islanders), Anthropologists and the idea of rational understanding'

Jude Philp, University of Sydney

'Taking Torres Strait Islander culture to Cambridge University'

Elena Govor, Australian National University

'Miklouho-Maclay and Russian anthropology'

Helen Gardner, Deakin University

'Out of site: missionary/anthropologists and their informants'

With five speakers, the first session of the Mellon-Sawyer series was packed with information and insight. Shino Konishi talked of the difficulties of interpreting the gestural language used by explorers to Australia before Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples learnt English. Using pointing, touching and actions, explorers may have written that they were perfectly well understood but, as Shino's paper showed, the potential for error was vast. On one occasion in Tasmania the fledgling colonists used the local Aboriginal word they understood for 'good' in many of their dealings about things. It was only after a couple of months they realised that in fact they were using the word for 'bad'.

Ron Day's account of spirituality for Meriam-le (the people of the Murray Islands in the Torres Strait) highlighted the complexity of cross-cultural understandings. His paper urged students of his culture to be less dismissive of ideas, events and actions that could not be verified through scientific means. Only through recognising the whole of his culture could understanding be truly acquired. His paper was also a signal to those in health, education and other industries that work with Islanders to recognise the integrity of their socio-cultural world in planning and implementing programs.

We were returned to the past with Jude Philp's paper about the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait of 1898. The Expedition was a mile-stone in modern anthropology but, argued Jude, too often all credit for the results of the expedition was given to the anthropologists rather than recognising the agency of Torres Strait Islanders in the discipline. This point was made particularly in relation to W.H.R. Rivers and the people such as Pasi of Mer and Waria of Mabuiag who spent months explaining to him the social impact of genealogical information.

After a short tea break the session resumed with Elena Govor's insights into Russian anthropology. First placing the anthropologists within Russian politics and social sphere's of the 1870s, Elena showed how folk-loric studies of Siberian and other people on the fringes of the Russian Empire led to an emphasis on fieldwork (living and working with the people under study). She then followed the story of one of Russia's most famous ethnographers, Nikolai Nikolayevich Miklouho-Maclay, and his travels in New Guinea and Australia.

The last paper of the session, by Helen Gardner, brought us back to the Australian continent. She followed the story of Uniapon (father of the famous David Uniapon) of Raukkan or Point McLeay Mission Station, and his involvement with kinship studies and the church. Helen brought out the particular ways that missionaries wrote up their work, the tenses and grammatical structures that they used in their depictions of the people they worked amongst. But it was kinship that was her main story and she showed how Uniapon's information about the way that his people ordered and described each other was collected for Morgan but ultimately not used because it so clearly contradicted the assumed absence of sophistication of Aboriginal people.

With over fifty participants discussion was an integral part of the session, and after a summary by Warwick Anderson, questions and discussion ranged for over an hour.

The Sawyer Seminar was officially launched by and singer, artist and researcher Dr Joe Neparanga Gumbula. He and Dr Aaron Corn then performed a moving selection of Manakay songs, from the musical tradition of Yolngu peoples of North-east Arnhem Land. Iain McCalman thanked the performers and introduced the series, which promises more engaging and stimulating discussions over the year.