

# Reflections from the 2009 Australian Anthropological Society's Conference on 'The Ethics and Politics of Engagement'

By Elizabeth Humphries, Research Assistant, NTRU

The Australian Anthropological Society's annual conference in December 2009 provided a valuable avenue for academic discussions and presentations amongst anthropologists involved in native title practice and research. For me, as a recent anthropology graduate, the conference provided greater insight into the roles and challenges facing anthropologists working in native title.

The presentations in the native title stream covered a range of issues from the practice and processes of anthropological native title work, to conceptual and critical analysis of native title bureaucracy, as well as descriptions and suggestions for political change in native title.

The presentations particularly illuminated some of the contestations in the relationship between the academy and anthropologists working in native title.

Two of these issues raised in the conference will be briefly discussed.

- 1) How should anthropological practitioners working in native title engage with the academy?
- 2) How does the academy inspire and train young anthropological graduates to competently work in native title?

The discussions identified a tension between anthropological practitioners working in native title and the academy. David Martin brought up an established debate within anthropology, as to whether

anthropologists should enable change through the academy in the form of social and cultural critique, or whether anthropologists should be engaged in practical change outside the academy, such as through agreement making in native title.

There is a danger, Martin continued, that the law and politics of native title changes anthropologists' thinking and talking in ways antithetical to anthropology. To me it seems that engagement with the academy simultaneous to native title practice is necessary. Katie Glaskin similarly argued that there is a need for anthropologists working in native title to deconstruct concepts used in native title practice, such as the term 'society', and hence critically engage with the academy. She adds, however, that there is a need for pragmatism in order to forge ahead.

These discussions highlighted the often challenging position that native title anthropologists straddle in using anthropology as a means of engaging in social change.

A second issue identified in the discussions relates to the role of the academy in inspiring and training graduate anthropologists to work in native title. John Morton described the process of writing native title reports as that of the work of an artisan. Continuing this metaphor, it was queried that if the native title anthropologist is an artisan, where are the artisans' apprentices? David Trigger later raised the same question more bluntly: where are the enthusiastic graduates wanting to work in native title?

In the following discussions, the lack of anthropology graduates in native title was suggested to be due to their ambivalence over the role of anthropology in native title as well as anxiety regarding the legal elements of native title.

Furthermore these discussions suggested that graduate anthropologists often lacked the practical skills to be competent native title practitioners. These skills were argued to be lacking from academic instruction.

As a young graduate anthropologist, the issues raised at the conference are of immediate concern to me. I came away from the conference feeling that there is a great need for anthropological instruction and training within Australia to address native title. In particular, undergraduate anthropologists should develop an intellectual understanding of native title as well as obtain practical anthropological skills that would be applicable for native title practice. This intellectual focus and

practical training within the academy is vital in attracting graduate anthropologists to native title work.

The responsibility of training anthropology graduates should not only fall on academia, but as Toni Bauman argued, on senior anthropologists working in native title who are in the best position to mentor young anthropological graduates.

The conference identified the many challenges for anthropologists working in native title. Despite such challenges, the presentations and discussions demonstrated the positive impact of anthropologists and the use of anthropology in creating better native title outcomes.

Further issues arising from the native title presentations at the 2009 Australian Anthropological Society's conference will be published in a forthcoming publication from the NTRU.

## Office of Native Title Connection Workshop

By Sarah Johnston,  
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Native Title

On the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of November, the Office of Native Title (ONT) hosted its 2009 Native Title Connection Workshop in Perth for native title stakeholders nationwide.

"About 100 people attended the workshop from all over the country to exchange information about the native title connection process and native title issues in general," ONT Acting Research Director Sarah Charbonneau noted.

The workshop consisted of a series of topics spread over two days regarding native title and the native title connection process. The topics were presented by lawyers and anthropologists who have worked in the area of native title within the private and public sector.

Legal professionals such as Graham Hiley QC, who co-conducted the 2006 review of the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth), and Federal Court judge Justice Barker gave presentations. This was complemented by presentations from well known native title anthropologists David Martin and Mike Robinson.

Topics included legal issues arising from connection assessments, the utilisation of pleadings, challenges facing Native Title Representative Body anthropologists, evaluation of Western Australia's connection assessment process, the value and limitations of collecting information directly from claimants, the current state of native title case law, resource issues in native title and new directions in native title.

Ms Charbonneau concluded that "Discussions following the presentations were robust and gave the ONT a good perspective of stakeholder issues regarding native title and the native title connection process."

On the second day of the workshop ONT Executive Director, Gary Hamley announced the Review of the State Government's Native Title Connection Guidelines.

Ms Charbonneau reported that the ONT had sought advice from Graham Hiley about the effect of case law developments on these Guidelines. The ONT is now internally reviewing this advice. "The Office hopes to circulate the proposed changes to the Guidelines for external comment around April 2010," she noted.

