

**‘AN EYE OPEN IN THE DARK’**

**LIFE STORY ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE  
FUTURE OF SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS**

**THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**BY  
JANE PALMER**

**2011**

## CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During the writing of this thesis I have learned a new language and lived in another culture, and have been stretched to my intellectual and emotional limits by the stories I have heard and the complex and responsible job of interpreting them and taking them to a new audience. In the process I have been intellectually and emotionally supported in extraordinary and unexpected ways,

My first acknowledgement is to the old Acehnese people whom I interviewed, who welcomed me into their homes, offered water and cake, and concerned themselves with doing the best by my research, often at physical and emotional costs to themselves. I will always be grateful for their generosity, their kindness and patience with my limited language and cultural knowledge, and, most of all, for their unique and moving recollections about the past. Their lives and their storytelling have informed every step of the thinking in this thesis.

My interpreter, Ainul Fajri, made the issues of my limited language and cultural knowledge much easier to bear, for both my interviewees and myself. She was caring, respectful and intuitive in her interactions with the interviewees, and greatly enhanced my relationship with them and with Aceh in general. Her completion of the written transcripts despite illness was generous and admirable, and has been one of the most important factors in my capacity to interpret and analyze the words of the old Acehnese back in Australia. I am also grateful to Barbara Leigh and Eka Srimulyani who facilitated my introduction to Ainul and to Aceh.

I thank Garry Shea (Asian Development Bank), Elly Kesumawati (University of Syiah Kuala) and Romi Fartia (HelpAge International Aceh) for making my fieldwork interviews possible through introductions to men and women in four rural villages in Aceh Besar, and to Jane Dunlop (at that time with Oxfam) for both facilitating and interpreting another interview.

I was fortunate to obtain an Aceh Research Training Institute (ARTI) Travel Grant to support my fieldwork. I will always be grateful for the support provided at ARTI by Eve Warburton, Leena Avonius and Ibu Meilizar, and the high quality of facilities made available to me for six months at the ARTI offices.

The student centre Al Kahfi in Darussalam was another source of friends and support, and I thank Ilham Maulana in particular for the wonderful language lessons he gave me and for his friendship. I thank also my teachers at the Realia Language School in Yogyakarta, especially Ibu Sitta and Ibu Fitri, for their patience and their friendship.

Throughout the whole adventure, my supervisor Professor Cynthia Mitchell has accompanied me unfailingly, and contributed in all aspects with her intellect, intuition and kindness. I feel fortunate indeed to have had her scholarly mind and her personal integrity to support me on the journey.

During my four years at the Institute for Sustainable Futures I have been a member of three 'Groups for Accountability and Support' of fellow doctoral candidates; I wish to thank Nicole Thornton and Chris Dunstan, Dena Fam and Sarina Kilham, and Keren Winterford

and Jennifer Kent for keeping me sane and caring about my project as I cared about theirs. Juliet Willets, Suzanne Grob and Damien Giurco have been generous sources of intellectual support at critical periods in my candidature. I am grateful too for the friendship and wisdom of Suzanne Cronan, Dana Cordell and Joanne Chong.

My Doctoral Assessment panel, Professor Stuart White, Professor Helen Bartlett and Professor Stephen Muecke gave me encouragement and wise advice in 2008 which has served me throughout the rest of the project. I am also grateful to friend and mentor Adjunct Professor Paul Pholeros AM who has supported me in this and many other enterprises since he taught me many years ago at Sydney University.

Tanzi Smith, my friend since I commenced my candidature, has been a most important source of intellectual companionship and emotional support. I am grateful for her wisdom and kindness, and for the alternative ‘family’ she and her husband Shawn Jarvey have been for me in my most recent location.

My friends Deb and Ian Wagner, Jan MacArthur and Peter Hollingworth have fed, watered and supported me in many ways over the writing phase of the project on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast. Deb also enhanced beautifully the map of Aceh at Figure 1B of this thesis.

Catherine Smith, whom I met in Aceh, has been an emotionally supportive and intellectually rigorous friend throughout the fieldwork and writing stages of my candidature. She and the friends with whom she shared a house in Darussalam contributed greatly to the happiness of my time in Aceh. Daniel Birchok, University of Michigan, has also provided insightful advice and comment during and after his doctoral fieldwork in Aceh.

My dear friends Anne Cowie, Kath Burns and Elaine Spicer have provided me with alternative homes, wonderful discussions and delicious meals over many years. Another dear friend, Campbell Clarke has continued as always to provide an unfailing source of comfort, conversation and good sense during this doctoral project. Niki Ellis has engaged with me in conversations about my research which have been illuminating and unerringly timely.

I thank my sister Margaret Palmer for her meticulous assistance in the final editing of this thesis.

Lastly, my mother Helen Palmer and sister Margaret have been my strongest support in every way throughout the project and for as long as I can remember; they have my love and gratitude always.

## FUNDING

My fieldwork in Aceh was undertaken with funding from an Aceh Research Training Institute Travel Grant and an Australian Government Endeavour Fellowship. My candidature has been funded by an Australian Postgraduate Award.

## PUBLICATIONS

Palmer, J., T. Smith, J. Willetts & C. Mitchell 2007, 'Creativity, ethics and transformation: key factors in a transdisciplinary application of systems methodology to resolving wicked problems in sustainability', *Systemic development: local solutions in a global environment: Proceedings of the Australia New Zealand Systems Conference 2007*, Auckland, NZ, ed. J. Sheffield, ISCE Publishing, 2009.

Palmer, J. 2009, 'Interviewing, memory and trauma: A case study of older people in Aceh, Indonesia', *Proceedings of the 8th National Emerging Researchers in Ageing Conference: A new era for ageing research: What's in your toolkit?*, 23 October Melbourne, pp. 165-168, Monash University, 2009.

Publications in conjunction with the Centre for Military and Veterans' Health:

Palmer, J. & N. Ellis 2008, 'A layered approach to horizon scanning: Identifying future issues in military and veterans' health', *Journal of Futures Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 77-92.

Palmer, J. & N. Ellis 2009, 'Methodology for a think tank: The future of military and veterans' health', *Foresight*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 14-27.

## PRESENTATIONS

Palmer, J., T. Smith, J. Willetts & C. Mitchell 2007, 'Creativity, ethics and transformation: key factors in a transdisciplinary application of systems methodology to resolving wicked problems in sustainability', paper presented to the *Australia New Zealand Systems Conference on Systemic Development: Local solutions in a global environment*, Auckland, NZ, 2-5 December.

Palmer, J. 2009, Panel member and presentation to *APFRN Workshop on Asia Pacific Transculturalisms: New theoretical perspectives*, University of Wollongong, 8-9 June.

Palmer, J. 2009, 'Interviewing, memory and trauma: A case study of older people in Aceh, Indonesia', paper presented to the *8th National Emerging Researchers in Ageing Conference: A new era for ageing research: What's in your toolkit?*, Melbourne, 23 October.

Palmer, J. 2010, 'The importance of the past in adaptation: Stories from old people in Aceh', paper presented to the *Indian Ocean and South Asia Research Network Conference on Advancing a Sustainable Future: Strategies for cross-disciplinary practice around the Indian Ocean*, University of Technology Sydney, 17-19 March.

Palmer, J. 2011, 'The hidden past and future trajectories of social-ecological systems: A case study from Aceh, Indonesia', paper presented to the *Conference on Re-framing Sustainability: Climate change and North-South dynamics*, Helsinki, Finland, 10-11 February.



∞

These situations are like scintillations on the historical radar. They are like phosphorescence in the wake of events. The forceful daylight of empirical reason fails to pick them up. The strength of the beam it turns on them renders them invisible. The class of ‘non-event’, whose existence and importance creative research is peculiarly fitted to describe, is like the sky at night, coruscated with self-illuminating dust. But to see this demands an eye open in the dark (Carter 2004: 170).

∞





## FIELDWORK LOCATION

(FIGURES 1A AND 1B)



FIGURE 1A

TOPOGRAPHICAL MAP OF INDONESIA  
SHOWING LOCATION OF ACEH PROVINCE

(©Enrique Indonesia Cartographic Publishing)





FIGURE 1B  
 TOPOGRAPHICAL MAP OF ACEH SHOWING FIELDWORK LOCATION

(©Enrique Indonesia Cartographic Publishing)



## CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	xvii
LIST OF TABLES.....	xvii
ABSTRACT.....	xix
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Moral project and research questions .....	1
Fieldwork.....	2
Transdisciplinarity .....	3
Contribution of the thesis.....	4
Structure of the thesis.....	4
1. PRELIMINARY: THE POLITICS OF 'OLD' .....	7
<i>INTRODUCTION.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>PROCESSES OF PROBLEMATIZATION: GROUPING, VILIFICATION AND DEMONIZATION .....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>PROBLEMATIZING 'THE OLD': THE CONFLATION OF ISSUES, GROUPS, AND PEOPLE.....</i>	<i>11</i>
Assumptions about 'the old'.....	15
'The old' versus other generations .....	16
Reframing 'old' .....	20
The non-Western 'old' .....	23
Policy response to ageing populations.....	24
<i>THE PARABLE OF ASYLUM SEEKERS: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW.....</i>	<i>27</i>
Problematization of asylum seekers .....	27
Critiques of policy on asylum seekers.....	29
Assumptions about asylum seekers.....	30
Turning away and turning back: the need for ethnography .....	33
<i>CONCLUSION .....</i>	<i>39</i>
2. 'OFFCUTS OF INFINITY': THEORY, FIELDWORK AND THE PROJECT.....	41
<i>INTRODUCTION.....</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>META-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....</i>	<i>42</i>
The transdisciplinary doctoral project: resolving problems or exploring phenomena?	42

Research questions (expanded) .....	44
Carter's 'material thinking': materializing the overlooked .....	48
Bakhtin's chronotope: time made palpable .....	51
Materialization and politics .....	53
<i>METHODOLOGY</i> .....	<i>54</i>
Exploring phenomena through new material .....	54
Framework for ethical engagement of the project with the world .....	58
Issues of interpretation .....	61
Ethics of engagement with the interviewees .....	67
Transformation and visibility of the researcher .....	74
<i>CONCLUSION</i> .....	<i>78</i>
<b>3. CONSTRUCTING THE SUBJECT: ACCRETION AND TEMPORALITY</b> .....	<b>81</b>
<i>INTRODUCTION</i> .....	<i>81</i>
<i>LESSONS FROM HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE HISTORIAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PAST</i> ...	<i>84</i>
History as a narrative reconstruction.....	84
Making sense of change.....	85
The value of evidence .....	86
Human action and structural change .....	87
The historian's point of view .....	89
History as an act in the present.....	90
Historiographical principles.....	90
<i>PERSPECTIVES ON THE PAST</i> .....	<i>91</i>
Inside and outside the past.....	92
Social memory .....	96
Sites of memory .....	99
<i>RECOLLECTING AND RECOLLECTIONS</i> .....	<i>101</i>
Recollection and memory .....	101
Events versus 'a life': framing recollection .....	105
<i>THE REMEMBERING SUBJECT</i> .....	<i>112</i>
Locating the subject.....	112

The body and memory.....	115
The evolving subject.....	117
The act of recollection .....	120
<i>THE ACCRETION OF TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE IN BODY AND MEMORY</i> .....	124
Trauma and utterance .....	124
Recollective recentness.....	129
Trauma and the body.....	131
<i>THE ESCHATOLOGICAL VIEW</i> .....	138
<i>CONCLUSION</i> .....	146
4. CONSTRUCTING THE PAST: HISTORY AND RECOLLECTION .....	149
<i>INTRODUCTION</i> .....	149
<i>PURPOSES OF HISTORY</i> .....	150
History as ‘world-making’.....	150
History as ‘memory-making’ .....	152
Historicizing the future .....	156
<i>PURPOSES OF MEMORY</i> .....	159
Memory as history-making .....	160
Life review and constructing a life narrative.....	165
Alternatives to the meaning of life 1: the episodic self.....	170
Alternatives to the meaning of life 2: just being .....	171
Alternatives to the meaning of life 3: the ‘dissensual’ and the bewildered.....	173
<i>TRAUMA AND THE PURPOSE OF TESTIMONY</i> .....	177
Testimony and past events.....	177
Reconfiguring testimony: the engagement of speaker and listener .....	182
<i>HISTORY AND LIFE STORIES IN THE SAME FRAME</i> .....	186
Experiencing history .....	186
The convergence of historiography and ethnography .....	188
<i>CONCLUSION</i> .....	190
5. (DE)CONSTRUCTING STORIES: A HERMENEUTICS.....	193

<i>INTRODUCTION</i> .....	193
<i>FRAMEWORK FOR TEXT ANALYSIS</i> .....	194
Limitations of translation.....	194
The limits of listening.....	196
<i>NARRATIVE ANALYSIS</i> .....	198
Engaging with the listener: orienting and questioning.....	202
Recounting self and recounting community.....	206
<i>BRICOLAGE, LANDSCAPE AND MACCHIARE: THE POETICS OF ACCRETION</i> .....	214
<i>THE COLLISION OF PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE</i> .....	219
The body in the interview.....	219
<i>THE SITE OF THE PAST</i> .....	221
<i>CONCLUSION</i> .....	223
6. ETHNOGRAPHY FOR THE FUTURE: REMEMBERING AS REVOLUTION	225
<i>INTRODUCTION</i> .....	225
<i>LIFE STORIES AND SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS</i> .....	227
Qualitative data and social-ecological systems.....	228
Life story recollection and system remembering.....	234
<i>ETHNOGRAPHY AND SYSTEMS</i> .....	238
Hierarchies and sites.....	238
<i>HIDDEN QUALITIES OF SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS</i> .....	241
Hidden qualities 1: The precarious and the precious.....	241
Hidden qualities 2: Assumptions of the system as construct.....	247
<i>MATERIALIZING THE PAST AND ACTUALIZING THE FUTURE</i> .....	258
<i>CONCLUSION</i> .....	263
CONCLUSION.....	265
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	271
APPENDICES.....	
<i>APPENDIX 1: MINDMAP STUDIES 2008-2011</i> .....	



*APPENDIX 2: NVIVO SUMMARY REPORTS ON TRANSCRIPT CODING,  
NODES AND SOURCE CLASSIFICATION.....*

*APPENDIX 3 (CD): ACEH FIELDWORK INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS.....*

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1A Topographical map of Indonesia showing location of Aceh Province.....	ix
Figure 1B Topographical map of Aceh showing fieldwork location .....	xi
Figure 2: Project Map.....	79
Figure 3: Panarchy: Nested cycles of adaptation.....	235
Figure 4: Human recollection and memory in adaptive cycles .....	237

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Analysis of transcripts by stanza and mode.....	210
--	-----



## ABSTRACT

I argue in this thesis that the past which is materialized in real time at the site of ‘a life’ has particular significance for social-ecological systems. This past is different from that recorded in histories, socio-economic trends or the causal explanations of science. It differs particularly in revealing the accretiveness of an individual’s experience as a force in the present – in system precariousness for example – and in revealing those false starts and ‘futures denied’ which are potentialities for renewal in the future.

The site of a life was explored through my fieldwork in Aceh, Indonesia, a place where material experience and culture are very different from those which are the subject of Western theorizing on memory, ageing, and recollection.

This doctoral project is a response to the following question:

- Can the life stories of old people be a source of understanding the past which can inform planning for sustainability in the future?

I develop a particular additive approach to transdisciplinary research in addressing this question, in which discipline-based theory from a number of fields is used to jointly illuminate a potential kinship between old people and sustainability, specifically between the remembering of the old and the remembering used in adaptive cycles of social-ecological systems.

As a result of my review of theory on memory, recollection and ageing, and my fieldwork interviews with old people in Aceh, Indonesia, I conclude that recollection in such circumstances is not the construction of identity or meaning discussed by many Western theorists of memory, but more akin to the remembering discussed by trauma theorists, where the storytelling process and the engagement of the listener are as important as the story. These life stories materialize the past as accretive at the site of the individual’s life, and in their a-chronologic, non-narrative style give prominence to particular events in a very different landscape of the past from that provided by historical narratives. They also constitute an implicit critique of Western discourses about development and progress which underlie theories of adaptation and sustainability.

I conclude that beyond culture and discourse, history and scientific explanation, life story ethnography offers a unique contribution to the intelligence gathering, assessment and predictive functions of social-ecological systems. The richest source of life stories is the old; in the face of current culture and discourses of ageing, this thesis is an essay in enabling those voices to be heard.