



# In Conversation with Janet Carsten

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Janet Carsten has conducted research in Malaysia and Britain. After completing her PhD at the London School of Economics, she was a Post-doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge, and Lecturer at the University of Manchester. She has given guest lectures and keynote addresses at Johns Hopkins University, the National University of Taiwan, UCLA, the University of Copenhagen, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, University of Michigan, University of Toronto, the University of Sao Paulo, and at the Museu Nacional, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. She delivered the Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture in 2012. During a three-year Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship from September 2007-10 she conducted research on articulations between popular and medical ideas about blood in Britain and Malaysia. Janet Carsten is a Fellow of the British Academy and of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Indira Arumugam (IA): Thank you Janet for being here for today's interview. So we are just going to find out a little more about the anthropologist behind the work. So let's start off with some of your... How did you become interested in anthropology? A bit about your training.

Janet Carsten (JC): Ok. So I was an undergraduate at the London School of Economics, but a rather confused undergraduate I should say. And I originally came in to the LSE to do a degree in social science and administration. The main reason I chose that was it was a very general social science course, so that you could do psychology, sociology, social history... it was

a kind of general thing. I wasn't very interested in the administration. Anyway I didn't like that for various reasons. Partly it was quite policy-oriented towards... it was producing social policy experts I guess. And at the end of the first year, I changed to economics, which you could do. So I went into the second year of economics, because I did quite well in the first year of economics courses. But when I was doing second year economics, things became a bit more serious. I discovered that economics was definitely not my thing, as it was a very deadly combination of being very difficult and [to me] very boring. So I didn't really like that, but while I was doing that I had... In fact I was doing kind of economic planning, which included some stuff on Soviet planning, which was quite interesting, because it was history and I liked that. And as an outside option in the LSE system, which is quite flexible, I took an introduction to anthropology course, which had lectures by Ioan Lewis and class teaching by someone called Tom Selwyn, who went on to become an expert in the anthropology of tourism, who was a really fantastic class teacher. It was really those classes that made me realise that I kind of fell in love with anthropology. And so at the end of my second year, this would absolutely never be allowed now, in my second year, I decided that I would really like to switch to anthropology, and it was quite complicated to switch into the third and final year. The LSE had two streams - you could do, the B.Sc.Econ in which you could do a major in anthropology, or you could do an anthropology degree. So I was already on the B.Sc.Econ and so the question was whether I could switch to a major in anthropology. My tutor in economics phoned the anthropology

department and the secretary there said 'there's no one really here except for Maurice Bloch, and maybe she should come and see Maurice Bloch'. Then I had a conversation with Maurice Bloch and I said that I would very much like to do this. And so at the end of this conversation it seemed that I had transferred... These were the days when things were more flexible so he just was very... and he said, "I think that will be alright." Then he gave me a very very long reading list to do over the summer, which was sort of all the classics: *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, and then *The Nuer* and *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* and *Malay Fishermen* and I don't know what else. So it was a huge... I mean you know, if you have gone through one over the course of summer you would be doing quite well. I can't remember whether I did all of them. The result of that was that I did in my third and final year, I did a kind of double load of anthropology courses and by the skin of my teeth I sort of got through that, because it was quite hard - at least just the course loads, which were a bit heavy. And then you know, I thought, well, if I could have the opportunity to go on with anthropology, that would be wonderful. So I was very very lucky because I got... In those days the LSE had the ESRC (which was then the SSRC in Britain), had a quota system. So they devolved the acceptance of students on to the institution, and the LSE had, I think, four quota places that year for students doing PhDs or PhD track as it was before it was confirmed in the first year I think. Anyway, so I got a quota place on that, so I was completely delighted But I always felt that I didn't have a really thorough undergraduate training in anthropology, which was true. Because basically I did one year, so it's a bit like doing a masters or a conversion course. But I didn't have, I hadn't had the full three years.

IA: And how did you happen to choose Malaysia? Why Malaysia?

JC: Why Malaysia? Well, that was a combination of different things actually. And so, there were several things about... I wanted to work on women particularly. This was the beginning, so we are talking, end of the 1970s, so it was sort of second wave of feminist

stuff in anthropology. That was just getting going, and that was quite important to me. So I really wanted to work somewhere where women were not thoroughly oppressed and miserable. So I wasn't particularly interested in going somewhere like China or South Asia. I wanted to go somewhere where women seemed to be sort of reasonably autonomous. So that was one of the things about Southeast Asia. And when I started reading about Southeast Asia in general, it was just such a rich and complicated and wonderful... I mean I read quite a lot of historical stuff, and I thought it was extremely fascinating. And I think also in my mind was that I had been given this gift of this studentship, which was quite well funded and there was extra money for language training, and I should go somewhere as far away as possible and do something that I could never otherwise do. So that was Southeast Asia. The other part of that was that at that time, because, as Steven Morris had just recently retired at LSE... So Maurice Bloch was supervising basically the Southeast Asia students because of the Austronesian-Madagascar connection. And he was a fantastic teacher. So that was very, I really wanted to be supervised by him. Originally I had actually thought about doing something in the Middle East. But as time went on, I took a very long first year, actually working out what I wanted to do, and part of that was reading about Southeast Asia. So I wasn't particularly fixed on Malaysia, and in fact I did... You had to get as a foreign researcher you had to go through this quite complicated lengthy procedure of getting research permission. So I did one for Indonesia... And I did a couple of different applications for Borneo, one in Brunei, and one in Sarawak. And then, one for mainland Malaysia, thinking about the east coast and Kelantan, Terengganu, where the Firths had worked. And it was partly a question of which came through first, thinking that I might not get permission. So that was one thing. And partly where the LSE had, you know, quite good connections. So Malaysia, what was crucial there, was that, was that Wazir Jahan Karim had recently completed her PhD at LSE and was back in Malaysia teaching at Universiti Sains Malaysia. And I had very briefly met her in London, and she very kindly agreed - you needed a local academic sponsor,

which is still the case. And she very kindly agreed to be that for me. And so it was the chain of connections through LSE. And in the end, it was Malaysia that came through first and where we were best connected. And that was through her particularly, and I was extremely grateful to have that. And in fact she was very crucial because when I got to Malaysia, I had the federal permission from the Prime Minister's department but I didn't have the state permission, which proved to be more complicated. And in fact, I didn't get it, so I set off to do a round of visits to the State government offices in Kelantan and Terengganu, which was fairly disastrous. They took one look at me and said, "no!". And I think it was partly a kind of, you know, something that as a young graduate student at the LSE, I couldn't really imagine to be thought of as part of the colonial apparatus you know, we were all very radical. How could colonialism have anything to do with me? So, you know, it was nothing to do with me, so that was quite a bit of a surprise, but it was a kind of, in those state offices, there was a kind of anti-colonial feeling and... Anyway, I didn't get that permission. So then I was sitting in Penang with an affiliation at USM and kind of learning about Malaysia, doing lots of reading and having to re-think where to do the research. And there, Wazir and her husband, Razha Rashid, came up with the idea of Langkawi... partly because Razha had very good connections in the Kedah state government. So we kind of worked out a much simpler, less worrying research proposal that was 5 pages and not 50 pages, and the Kedah government gave permission for that. So I did more or less the same project as I would have done on the East Coast, but in Langkawi.

IA: So, can you tell as a little bit more about your fieldwork experiences? How did you find Langkawi?

JC: Okay, so I was introduced into Langkawi partly through Razha's family, and then I was introduced into the village there. And really, I would say, (laughs), once I installed myself, which was October 1980, although I arrived in Malaysia towards the end of June I think... so quite a long time. It was a family that agreed to take me in, and they had a reasonably spa-

acious place, so they were at the wealthier end, but not sort of very wealthy, and they had a nice house. Two room, a normal house, the front half and then the main living room. And they had plenty of room inside the space, but absolutely no privacy whatsoever. So that was quite difficult. There were, I think, about ten of us living in this two-room house, a three-generation family. So there were huge advantages to that, to me, because I got to live with a family and I stayed with that family for 18 months or so, but going back to Penang every month or so. And you know, honestly, living with a family like that, you learn enormously, even if you are, you know, you get tired or depressed, you get kind of stuff going on around you. The disadvantage is that, of course, you are under quite a lot of control. The people that you are living with... in particular my foster mother who was a very warm and humorous person. I liked her a lot, but the whole situation was quite controlling. And I think that's the... sense I had. At that time I thought this was something about me in doing fieldwork, but in fact I much much later discovered that all the foreign women, I am not so sure about Malaysian sociologists and anthropologists, but certainly the foreign female researchers... I think for men it is quite different because there is much more possibility of coming and going and you don't get questioned constantly about where you are going, so you are less under control. But my experience was quite a strong one of being kind of taken over, which I have described a little in the *Heat of the Hearth*. Being taken over, and kind of remade in the Malay form, so renamed, redressed, told how to sit, how to eat. You know, proper ways to behave and corrected when I did it incorrectly. And of course, it was also a fantastic learning experience, but quite a painful one, I would say, because, you know, I was on my own there. Nobody spoke to me in English. So I was also learning Malay, because I had learnt standard Indonesian, but it wasn't hugely useful. The vocabulary, obviously, is pretty much the same apart from some words, but the Kedah dialect is very, sounds very, different. It took me quite a while to get used to that, to understand what people were saying. And I don't think I ever became a terribly fluent speaker, but I was quite a fluent listener. In my

view, anthropologists need to be much better listeners than speakers; so speaking the language beautifully is not, I think, a necessary skill. But being a good, being able to understand what people are saying to you is quite important. So that was fine after some time, but I would say there was a kind of... my experience was that it was a sort of complete barrage of, you know, being told how to behave and what to do. And the way I dealt with that, which might not have been the best way, was to get out from time to time, to spend a few days over in Penang where I had another life also. USM was a pretty lively place and there were lots of foreign and local researchers who were very friendly, and one particular friend who was there was Jean de Bernardi who was doing her research on Chinese religion at the same time. We became pretty good friends. But it was a very difficult experience which I only processed really much later. I just kind of lived it at that time. And I processed it much later when I came to write about what happened, partly Maurice Bloch helped me a huge amount, because he came to visit and I think he was quite shocked because at that time, I'm sure he's had students who had similar experiences since. But at that time, he said that he had never seen a student work in those circumstances become that familiar with the people they were studying, and of being incorporated into a household. So that made me already start to think why had this happened and how did it happen, and try to intellectualise that a bit and think about the social processes and the history that made what happened to me not particularly special. And obviously it was special for me but in local terms, why the people get incorporated in that way. So the book partly became about that. But then, as I said earlier, people, when I started to started to talk to a slightly older generation of female researchers who worked in Malay villages, it turned out that most if not all of them had not actually lived with families. They had lived in the local town and gone to and fro. It was quite a different way of working. So then I realised, "ah, I had done it in a different way". And that partly also comes back to something that I said earlier about the kind of radical spirit of the 1970s that was also present in other places than Britain, very much anti-colonial and anti-hier-

archical. So I knew I didn't want to work in a very hierarchical way. I didn't want to have, you know, be seen as part of a whole apparatus of, you know, colonial stuff. And that was really important to me. But I hadn't, what I hadn't worked out was the implications, which I partly couldn't have known, working in a different way, because they were so much to do with local kinship patterns and history and the way that outsiders are absorbed, and the way that you make people kin, really. Or that's a possibility in, I think, in Malay kinship. And I don't know whether it always happens but certainly in Langkawi, there was a very strong impetus to. So I couldn't have possibly have known that in advance.

IA: So you didn't think about working on kinship before you went, is that how...

JC: Not so much, and I was more... I mean kinship was part of it, but one of the shocks of fieldwork was discovering why kinship was important. So of course I had done courses on kinship at LSE, but somehow they always seemed rather dry and abstract, and they hadn't conveyed to me, perhaps I wasn't a very good student in kinship, why kinship mattered, what was important about it. So the more experiential aspects of kinship or the fact that if you sit yourself down in a village in Malaysia and in a lot of other places around the world, the way you understand the house that you are living in or the houses around is through kinship connections and the transmission of kinship connections over time. And so, somehow I hadn't, the training hadn't showed why kinship really mattered. You know, I had done all these things in a rather theoretical way, father-son relations, mother's brother's sister's son, whatever it was. Affinal relations, affinity versus descent, but it was kind of completely without understanding why it would matter to the people concerned. So from the very beginning of my fieldwork, I suppose that was what kind of gripped me, why does this matter? Why is it important and how is it important? In what ways does kinship matter? How did children learn about kinship, and what does it mean to grow up in a Malay village? What is the universe of kin like, and what is it like to live in a house, a

Malay house, and to experience that? So it is sort of, I kind of began to build up that picture from first principles but not so much from what I had learned, which I kind of jettisoned for the moment and came back to it later when I was writing about it. But while I was doing fieldwork I didn't find that particularly helpful really.

IA: So that brings us very nicely to sort of the state of kinship at the time when you were doing fieldwork. So why do you think kinship looms so large in the anthropological imagination?

JC: Then or now? Or historically?

IA: Then, of course, it leads on...

JC: Well, I think that goes back to, you know, the way... I have written about this a little bit. But the important thing is that for the generation before my generation, and two generations back, you know, there is the genealogy if you think about it, so Maurice Bloch who taught me was taught, supervised by Stanley Tambiah and Meyer Fortes. And then you are kind of only one generation back from the founding fathers, really, and mothers of the discipline. So that felt quite close, and for those, you couldn't really understand how society worked in non-Industrial, non-Western contexts without understanding about kinship because it was kinship that gave you the social order, as Fortes phrased it in one of his books. So everything operated through kinship, and particularly, if you think about Fortes' work, religion and politics worked through kinship. So they were all strongly intermeshed. But if you kind of think about... it's a bit stupid to probably think about what comes first, because they all come together. They imply each other, and that is part of the importance of that work. But certainly you couldn't do, for example, Fortes' work without thinking about kinship because the religion and the politics and the economics kind of emerge out of that, or within it. Embedded is the phrase we used to use...

IA: The time that you were embarking on fieldwork,

had kinship fallen from favour?

JC: Well, not so much with the people who taught me at all. With me, I think. But you know, gender was really more at the forefront. So I was interested in, I remember... stamped in my passport at that time, you know, the Malaysian government had written "permitted to carry out a study of the position of women in coastal communities in Kedah". So "the position of women" was kind of the motivating question, you know, how, particularly in a Muslim society, could women be, really pretty much in control of their lives. I know this is not the current orthodoxy among sociologists in Malaysia, but in spite of Islam, or together with Islam, and if you compare it to women's situation in South Asia or in China, women have a huge amount of control over their lives. And of course, the visibility of women traders and in markets, and thinking of Alice Dewey's work on "markets in Java", you know, that was very striking at that time. So there were all sorts of questions there about the position of women. And when you got into the position of women, then of course kinship and the active role of women in producing kinship kind of emerged partly through what I was doing.

IA: And of course your work has now become classic. So, Schneider and then Carsten and for students who are going into the field, and I found it personally very inspiring as well. So now twenty, almost twenty years after coming up with the concept of "relatedness", what are your thoughts about that?

JC: Yeah, I am personally not very wedded to relatedness (laughs), and I am not a very dogmatic anthropologist. I think I found it useful at that time as a way of indicating that we might want to kind of set aside the distinction between the 'social' and the 'biological', which Schneider had said, kind of organised the way Western-trained anthropologists thought about kinship in a rather confused way, and that they imported their own implicit assumptions about kinship into what they studied. So you know, the idea behind relatedness was really a way to leave that baggage with something called "kinship" in quotes, and use

relatedness as a way of building up from first principles what kinship is all about. But you know, as soon as you say something like that, somebody, Ladislav Holy says, 'hang on a minute', because relatedness is going to be just as problematic, and these are the reasons why... And of course he was correct in that sense, but I was also really not waving a banner for this new term. In what I have written since, I have used kinship as much as, the term "kinship", as much as I have used relatedness, and what I tend to do is mix the two up. To really indicate that it doesn't so much matter what you call it as long as you are kind of clear about what is the analytic trajectory that you are following and what it is that you are trying to do. So if you are trying to tease apart the social and the biological, then you have to make that clear. I think there is quite a lot of muddle still in, and in fact that muddle, I have to say, is often very visible in people who use my work... it's a bit ungracious to say this... but who think that relatedness solves everything and who think I have said something that I have never actually said, or if I said it, it is a mistake on my part - that for Malay people, procreation is not important, it is all about feeding and living together in a house, which is not true because what I was trying to say it was both, and that the importance of that is that you can bring out one thing or another at different times. So if you are talking about fostering a child, of course you emphasise feeding and living in a house. But there are moments where you might want to invest more in procreation. Of course, for the Malay aristocracy, Malay traditional political systems were very hierarchical, and I was looking at the very... the kind of peasants who had very little property. But in situations in which inheritance and who you are become much more important, keeping genealogies would be much more important. And I think it is very interesting and important that you can have both these things going on at the same time, but it is sort of foreground, background, you know, what you emphasise at one moment rather than another. So you can turn quite an egalitarian system in which it's all about becoming, a process, into something that is very different with just the kind of little flip of the same idioms, or bringing in slightly different ones.

And that's actually politically and historically very important. So I sometimes get a bit irritated because I review quite a few manuscripts and the use of "relatedness" can sometimes seem a bit too easy, as if it just can solve all the problems, which it definitely doesn't.

IA: So that brings us quite nicely to the question of what were the responses to your manuscript or to your book when it came out, from both sides?

JC: Okay, well, *The Heat of the Hearth*.

IA: Yeah, the *Heat of the Hearth*, yes.

JC: I think the reviews, as far as I remember, were very nice. And so that was extremely pleasing. But it was a struggle to get it published in fact. I had a struggle with the publishers, because the reviewers for the publishers didn't like it. One of them didn't like it and asked for quite major revisions, and I was soon to have a child so I was... and I had taken a very long time. I had done another lot of fieldwork after my doctoral research, more historical, and that went into the book. And so the book was pretty different from the thesis actually. I had in particular two really crucial chapters that the thesis didn't have; one was a historical one, and the other was about ideas about substance, and in particular about blood and milk. And so, I felt I had worked on this long enough, it was time to get it out, I did the revisions as requested and I also said why I wasn't going to do all of them, and I sent it all off to OUP. And then they sent it back to the reviewers and one of them came up with a whole new list of revisions, which is something that happens sometimes. And I think the reviews, the anonymous review system is not something that... I much prefer to review manuscripts and reveal who I am. The anonymous review system has the potential for, particularly, controlling younger academics actually, which I didn't like at all. So anyway, I was asked whether I would do a whole other list of revisions and quaking in my boots, I went down to Oxford because I was giving a seminar there, it was just coincidence, to see them at the OUP. I said no, and I was extremely upset and extremely anxious because I didn't know that you could,

whether you could say no to a publisher like that. And I explained why, I said, you know, I had already been delayed and I had reviews for articles, which at that point I had a prize actually for one of the articles which one of the chapters was based on. And I just said no, I am not going to do that. And to my astonishment, the editor just said, if you feel like that, that's fine (laughs). You know, it was a moment of enlightenment: oh, is that how it works? So, I didn't do that second round but I was a bit bruised and I had similar experiences in the following few years with the edited house collection [*About the House*] and *Cultures of Relatedness* too, which I had a very rough time getting through press and I had to fight for them. And again, they got great reviews. But it's not always easy and I am very aware of that particularly with younger scholars, and I think often reviewers, as opposed to being constructive, but often they are not particularly constructive and they are, to put it charitably, they kind of guard their own territory. Or they try and tell you to do something which might be a very good book, but it's not the book or the article that you were trying to write. So it's not particularly helpful. And reviewers who actually look at what you've done and think how could this be improved within its own terms rather than writing a completely different thing are quite rare I think, and much to be treasured and prized because that's a real skill and it's a huge gift to a scholar to get helpful comments of course. But to get ones that you feel that you have to fight against is not terribly helpful. Was that the question that you asked me? You might have asked me something else?

IA: No, that is part of the question, but I was asking what was the response to the book like?

JC: So then once it was reviewed, it was great. But I think much less in Malaysia, which is interesting. So the kind of foreign response was warm and good, but I never had the sense that it made any particular impact in Malaysia. And maybe I am wrong about that but anthropology, as you know, doesn't have a very high profile in Malaysia and certainly what I was doing perhaps didn't chime with... the story I was telling was a bit different from the one, you know, the

one about the patriarchal nature of the Malaysian family or the Malay family. It wasn't that story. So I think I didn't feel that it was particular hostility, but it also didn't feel that it was anything much. So I never had the sense of the sort of, this sense that it tremendously helped people. I mean, the matching book I think is *Women and Culture: Between Malay Adat and Islam* by Wazir Jahan Karim, which is along similar lines actually but takes it in a slightly different angle, which includes Islam... I wasn't really working on religion, so... but it tells a similar story. I think that's been taken up much more. So you know, my profile is a little bit odd because it is bigger in the UK and the US than it is locally. I think, and that's something that I do regret because it's quite important to me to be connected to local scholars. But it is partly, I think, to do with the position of anthropology and the social sciences in Malaysia, so it's not sort of personal. Or I don't take it personally anyway.

IA: So throughout the course of this very interesting work, what sort of intellectual kinship have you gotten? What collaborators, or who are some of the people that have inspired you?

JC: Well, collaborators have always been quite important to me. So the two formative influences who were very very strong were Maurice Bloch who I have already mentioned, who was a wonderful supervisor and a very generous one intellectually in terms of just kind of throwing out ideas and if you picked them up that was fine, and if you didn't, that was also fine. So it wasn't a very controlling intellectual relationship. And it was fantastically helpful. And then, very soon after that, Marilyn Strathern, because I went from the LSE via a postdoc in Cambridge to, I was very very lucky to get a position in Manchester when Marilyn Strathern was Head of Department. It was just, you know, the time in Britain under Thatcher where there had been kind of no jobs whatsoever in anthropology. And then there were suddenly three advertised at Manchester and very soon after, one at Edinburgh and so on. And so it was... and I got one of those three in Manchester. So I was very lucky. And Marilyn was, obviously she was an intellectual influence partly

because of the feminist anthropology, that combination, but again a very generous intellectual spirit, and she actually took the training of her new young colleagues very seriously. So she was a very demanding boss but also a very generous one in that she read your work if you wanted to have it read, and gave you ideas. She really taught me what it meant to be a lecturer in a department, to be generous to the next generation, to be a good mentor. She was a fantastic mentor. So once you've learnt... I was doubly lucky because I had a good supervisor and then a good mentor and that makes you, I think, that shows you how it's done. I mean people learn in all sorts of ways. But you can learn through having it done badly, but that can also have rather negative effects. Or you can come up and think, ah, I see, that was what was good about that relationship and this is how I can pass it on to the next generation. So now, mentoring is one of my favourite things to do. And quite important. So those two intellectual influences were the starting point. And then, a series of collaborations, which you can see working through the edited books that I have done, and also my chapters in other people's books. So, I would say Sarah Franklin, who I met at Manchester first because she came in as a research fellow on a grant that Marilyn had, and we became friends there, and we have stayed friends ever since and we have done periodic things. And Susan McKinnon at Virginia, who has popped up at almost every conference, including one that she co-organised and who is a fantastic scholar, and a very powerful, critical thinker. And other collaborators were Stephen Hugh-Jones at Cambridge who I got on very very well with, and in fact that was huge fun. And Susan McKinnon came to the workshop that became the edited book *About the House*. So those are some of the influences. I would say Gillian Feeley-Harnek's work has been important, and Emily Martin's. So scholars who worked, feminist scholars all of them, who worked partly on kinship but not wholly on kinship, in different ways to me. But very complementary. So part of that. I've probably missed out some really important person, but those are the ones that stick out in my head.

IA: So what are your opinions of the state of analysis of kinship or studies on kinship today?

JC: Well, I think there are lots of things to say about that. I mean, kinship, I am not sure how central it is. It is difficult to do kinship I think, if you are not working in villages. And that's one problem that has much broader implications for anthropology. Students today very rarely work in villages. They do occasionally but most of them do urban work, and there, in that context, it's very difficult to work on kinship, especially if you don't have a background. You know, if you have done a village study, then you might have some better idea about how to go about it. But I think most of our graduate students tend to work in institutions or around institutions where kinship is not so dominant. And it's difficult also if you are not living with the people who you are studying, but if you kind of rent a flat or whatever. So that's one thing, which is to do with matters on how you work that makes it quite difficult. Then again, another general thing is that if you look at anthropology in general, the main, impression is a sort of huge weight of 'theory' in quotes. I would say, and that I think in a lot of cases that obstructs our understanding rather than clarifying anything. So it seems that in order to publish anthropology articles in a journal, you have to have a whole load of stuff. And if you look at what historians publish, it doesn't have any of that. And it's much more enjoyable to read a really good historical book. We were talking yesterday about Sunil Amrith's book *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*. It is a lovely book to read. I could think of several other examples where you can just sit down and read the book. Isn't this pleasurable? Current anthropology books on the whole, are much more dense. They tend to be sort of somewhat light on ethnography. And actually an exception that I am actually reading at the moment is Catherine Allerton's book, *Potent Landscapes*. About Manggarai people she worked with in Flores, which is beautifully written and very ethnographic. And you open it, and you feel that you're right there. And that's a wonderful thing. But I think books like that are quite rare in current anthropology. So, and you know, to me, the way I've always worked is I can't really

think ‘theoretically’, in quotes, without doing it through the ethnography. It’s never started with any theoretical point I am trying to make. I’ll rather start with the ethnography, and think, ok, what does this tell us? Why is it important, or why is it interesting? What story could we tell about it? So, to me, the point about doing anthropology is always the ethnography. And that makes another collaborator come to mind, and that’s Sophie Day who I’ve worked with quite a lot, and who I have had many conversations with. Charles Stafford too at the LSE, so I think we come out of a very similar training in which we were taught really to place the ethnography first. And I’ve always tried to keep that lesson in mind but it is also, to me, what is special about anthropology.

IA: I am glad that you mentioned the evocative sense that anthropology can give, and it is so difficult to evoke a sense of place and living in this place. So what are some of your ways in which you tried to evoke, say, living in Malaysia among the villagers? Some forms of writing strategies, or...

JC: Well, I don’t really have writing strategies... or not consciously. Probably I do. But I suppose, trying to think about, you know, what it felt like to be in a house, how has this felt, and actually Catherine Allerton does that very beautifully in her book. So, sensory description... So food is of course a large part of that. So thinking about the clinical pathology labs I have been working in recently. So part of one of the surprising things about these labs is that you wouldn’t think that in great big modern hospitals in contemporary Penang, in a modern city, Georgetown, you know, that in these labs, relationships will be constituted between colleagues largely through food and eating. And of course, if I hadn’t worked already in Malaysia, I think, you know, I think I wouldn’t, it wouldn’t have immediately clicked as that’s how it’s done. And it was, but of course once you have done that work before then you are kind of on the alert for it. So, getting a sense of those labs partly through the social relations that are constituted there, and how they are constituted through food, might be part of it. But also, of course, trying to describe the kinds of

people that you meet there, and so on and so forth.

IA: And of course, with the publishing of Marshall Sahlin’s new book on kinship, *What Kinship Is... And Is Not...* to which you wrote a response in the journal *Hau*, kinship is once again in the forefront of anthropological debates. What are your thoughts on this?

JC: In one way, I completely welcome Marshall’s intervention, partly because, inevitably because he is a wonderful writer, witty and clever, lots of people are going to read it. So that’s going to give a new impetus to kinship studies. And that’s terrific. And it’s a nice slim volume, and you know, I’ve used it in teaching. So the last two or three times I’ve taught kinship courses, we’ve done a debate at the end using Marshall Sahlin’s book, and saying, you know, so is it ‘mutuality of being’ or what are the problems with that? So I think I come down firmly on saying this is great, it is positive. My criticism is that it’s a little bit, it concentrates too much, there’s only so much he can say in a short essay, so what he’s done, and Marshall Sahlin is very far from being a stupid person, so he’s done it for a reason, he’s concentrated on the positive aspects of kinship. And I think the thing to say about that is kinship is also the way many negative things can be accomplished under the guise of kinship, which... which of course is true for everyone around the world. One of the interesting things about it, is we know already kinship is premised as an ethical way of behaving. So you know, what does it mean to beat your wife or to say, disinherit a son or daughter who misbehaves, or to cut off relations or to accuse somebody of witchcraft? All these things are done under the guise of kinship, including honour killings or whatever. So I think we do need to include the capacity to look at the darker side of kinship, if you like. And that’s really really important. And of course, hierarchy is another side of it, which you know, is much more complicated. Kinship isn’t all this nice pink fluffy stuff. It also is shades of grey, and we need to think about that. So that’s the criticisms of it. And then the other part of it is things like temporality, which I am very interested in, and how temporality - I think one of the important effects of kinship is the transmission

of stuff over time. The capacity to imagine the past and the future that kinship entails, really. And that's a really interesting thing about kinship and worth theorising. And also the way that temporalities work in kinship, which is another part of it. That's already two things, that I think that we should think about. So that's not to negate, but... And other people have critiqued other aspects of what he said, which I am not going to rehearse. But, if you asked me about the stuff he had written, 'are you glad?' I would say that I am definitely glad. So, in recent work that I have been doing, which has had a long gestation, about blood and ideas about blood, and taking the labs in Penang as just one instance, and trying to unpack what goes on around blood. But of course, why, if we step back from that, and here I was already thinking about this before I started the project, why is blood interesting? Why is it so suitable, apt, for symbolic collaboration? How does that happen, what are the implications of that? And that's something that feminist anthropologists have already made us very alert to, because it's something about processes of naturalisation and kinship. And there, I think, so this is work that Yanagisako and Delaney's volume on *Naturalising Power* I think particularly alerted us to, the naturalising capacities of kinship, on why that is important. So my take on blood has that very much in view. And then to think, you know, okay, partly we are going to do a very benign ethnography of what happens to blood in this context. But the larger story is one that might not be benign at all, and doesn't just really relate to Malaysia but has much more general implications about the nature of symbolisation, what naturalisation entails, the way that a bodily substance can come to symbolise and encapsulate ideas, for example, about hierarchy or about race, which is not something very easy to talk about in the Malaysian context. And I wouldn't, you know, I wouldn't want to do that anyway, but thinking about the more general implications of what I am doing, it is very much behind that, so if you like, the darker side of kinship. It's, you know, my starting point for looking at blood. Blood is very often but not always a central substance for kinship, and the way kinship is imagined, what travels from the blood as it were. But we need to pick that

apart in particular contexts and not assume that we know it in advance.

IA: So, I am really glad that you brought up your new work, and that's what I am going to ask. So what, how did your previous work lead to you conceptualising this project? You have already mentioned some aspects of it, but could you elaborate a little bit further?

JC: Sure, there's a direct connection. So *Heat of the Hearth* already has a chapter on blood and milk and food and rice and the formation of those in Malay ideas, so going back a very long way, I have been interested in ideas about substance. And then there was a chapter in the Franklin and McKinnon volume *Relative Values* which is about substance, which kinds of critiques the use of the word 'substance' in anthropology and thinking, getting at trying to tease out what the analytic work that substance does for anthropologists, and thinking it's a rather fuzzy, loose kind of concept, and why that came to be the case and why it matters. What are the positive things about that as well as the negative... So that goes back a long way, and then I did work on adoption, fostering in the UK and that came out of thinking about what we have already talked about—relatedness, and nature and nurture. What you get in and through biological ties, sexual procreation, and what you get through nurture, the context in which you have grown up. So I had been thinking about those themes for a long time, and so it seemed to me quite a natural sort of trajectory that one might, and partly rereading Schneider's *American Kinship*, which I occasionally do, thinking about the way he uses 'blood ties', as a sort of central symbol of American kinship. Blood is, you know, a 'core symbol'. But he never really unpacks what blood is in American kinship, and equates it to - I can't remember his precise phrase - 'genetic connection' I think. And as if they were exactly the same, without picking apart what actually blood means. So it's very obscured in Schneider... what blood means and so then, you know, thinking about much older work in anthropology, Turner's work and some Africanist work, and of course Mary Douglas on blood as a 'natural symbol'. It seemed to me that we kind of assume

very often what, that we know what we are talking about. Partly because blood is such an ubiquitous and powerful symbol, that it's quite hard to sort of start taking it apart. So that's where the work came from. And where it will lead, I am not entirely sure but it might just stop there and I might just go back and take a different tack to something else.

IA: You have been back to Langkawi, your fieldsite, a couple of times. Do you see any sort of changes?

JC: Well, there are huge changes. It's totally transformed, and it's quite difficult for me to go back actually. I don't go back that often, I go back every few years but I am in touch with people in the village, on the phone actually. Yeah, it, I mean it's transformed because of tourism and I never really wanted to study tourism. And the village where I worked is very different, it has grown a lot, it was always a large village actually and somewhat bigger than what's handy to study. And so now it's got incredibly dense and I don't know, I haven't kept track really since I worked there, and I don't... You would have to have a major, a major interest in tourism to follow that up, I think, and that would be interesting. I had a PhD student who did look at tourism in Langkawi who's now a lecturer at USM. She keeps me a little bit informed about that.

IA: So, I am very glad you mentioned your student. In terms of the teaching, how does that sort of reflect upon your work? Or how does your work integrate with your teaching?

JC: Well, I love teaching and I particularly love PhD students and interacting with them, of course, especially if they are good students... you know, there's a world of difference between the good ones who are often completely inspiring and you feel they bring much more to you than you do to them, and that's a complete pleasure. And then the less good ones, and that's a bit more of a kind of chore, but so be it. So on the whole, I really like teaching, but as you go on, it does become a kind of heavier burden. What I really like these days is collaborative teaching. So devising

courses with colleagues together because that is much more interesting. So that's a really enjoyable thing, and in the same way with PhD students, the way we do it at Edinburgh, we usually have meetings with the two supervisors together or that's the way I tend to supervise. So it's a three-way conversation, and that's... You learn a huge amount that way, because the other supervisors bring as much as the student, and you get a conversation going and you learn much more about your colleagues. So I really do enjoy that a lot. And I have supervised some great projects in the last few years. Mostly outside Malaysia and Southeast Asia. Not because... I would love to have more students working on Malaysia but they don't come to us very often.

IA: So we are going to the final two questions. What are some of the debates in the field that you are particularly interested in, in terms of anthropology? What are some of the things that are going on, that you find yourself to be interested in?

JC: That's a slightly... I'm not sure about it, but I think I have already mentioned things to do with... The two themes that I am probably going to take forward now, naturalisation and how that works, and temporality and the relation between kinship and temporality, I am very interested in that. I am not sure if these fit in to any debates in a way that you are suggesting. I am not sure if I am a great debate person.

IA: Obsessions, let's say...

JC: I think ideas of mixing and separation, and transmission, change and permanence, you know. Things that make one think about kinship in a very broad sense; memory of course, lead one to... So, these are the themes that go back a long way in my work, but there's always more to do, so that's okay. And I'm beginning to think a bit more about marriage, and thinking about a new project on marriage, but we'll see whether that comes to fruition.

IA: And this is out of sheer curiosity. But what are some of your favourite ethnographies?

JC: Favourite ethnographies... Oh... The one that I am reading now, I think I would happily recommend to any student, Catherine Allerton's. I am just thinking... A student of mine, Rebecca Cassidy's work on horses, the world of horses in Newmarket, that is a fabulous ethnography, *The Sport of Kings*. Again, incredibly readable, so she didn't work in a village but she somehow managed to, and that was a very special case because she already knew a huge amount about horses before she started that fieldwork. She couldn't have done that otherwise. But it introduces you to a whole new world... Other, I mean, I like ethnographies that introduce you to a world that you otherwise wouldn't have access to. There are lots of those. Wac-

quant's work on boxers in Chicago might be one. I just finished reading recently Veena Das' new work on affliction, which is beautiful. I mean, one of the things that comes out in her work is where you see ethnography... her wonderful, wonderful ethnographic touch. And it's part about the capacity to make relationships, and to be a good listener and a good observer, and to really think about the details of people's lives that are put in front of you. Some pretty outstanding ones, I would say.

IA: Ok, I think that's the end of our interview. Thank you very much. I really enjoyed our conversation.



Indira Arumugam and Janet Carsten

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