

WENDY JAMES

Wendy Rosalind James

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Summary. Wendy James was a social anthropologist who produced both profound ethnographic studies and influential theoretical work. Formed at Oxford and making her career there, she championed and extended Oxford's historically-oriented, humanities approach to anthropology. Her ethnographic fieldwork among the Uduk, a small group in southern Sudan, was sustained in successive visits over forty years, during which time Uduk communities were repeatedly displaced by war. From this experience she produced three major ethnographic monographs. In her key theoretical work, *The Ceremonial Animal*, she placed artistic impulses and the creation of form at the centre of human sociality. She also played a notable role in humanitarian activities in northeastern Africa.



Wendy James

Wendy James was a remarkable, original social anthropologist who produced both profound ethnographic studies and broader theoretical and reflective work that amounted to a statement of what British anthropology is and can become.

Born in Timperley, Cheshire, the daughter of William Stanley James and Isabel James (née Lunt), she grew up in the Lake District and went to the Kelsick grammar school in Ambleside, Cumbria. Her father, a chemistry graduate, became a secondary school science teacher and later a teacher trainer and examinations officer for the 11+ exam. After the war, he was seconded from a position at Bristol University to several Commonwealth countries, among them Jamaica and Uganda, to set up curricula for teacher training in the sciences. His stories about his experiences helped to inspire Wendy with her interest in other cultures and particularly in Eastern Africa. This drew her initially to geography, and she won an exhibition in 1959 to read that subject at St Hugh's College, Oxford. There she became aware of the Oxford school of social anthropology, and especially of the work of E.E. Evans-Pritchard to which she was greatly attracted. In the summer vacation of 1961, drawing on her father's contacts but also on links provided by African fellow students, she went to East Africa where she taught at a girls' school in Tanganyika, visited Uganda and Kenya, and did some fieldwork for her undergraduate dissertation. These experiences confirmed her shift in discipline, and after completing her BA Geography in 1962 she switched to anthropology, which at the time was available only as a graduate programme at Oxford. She took the Diploma and BLitt in anthropology and then embarked, in 1964, on a DPhil. Her chosen topic was the Uduk people of southern Sudan, neighbours to the Nuer and Dinka on which her mentors and supervisors, Evans-Pritchard and Godfrey Lienhardt, had done groundbreaking research. Unlike the Nuer and Dinka, however, the Uduk were a very small, fragmented and vulnerable group, an 'ethnographic remnant' as she put it. This inspired an original turn in her anthropological thinking which she continued to develop throughout her research career. On her return from the Sudan she was awarded a two-year Leverhulme Research Fellowship, completed her DPhil in 1970, and spent a year as lecturer at the University of Bergen, Norway (1971-2). She then returned to Oxford, having secured a university lectureship in Social Anthropology and a fellowship at St Cross College. She remained at Oxford for the rest of her career, promoted to a professorship in 1996, and retiring as Emeritus Fellow of St Cross College in 2007.

Wendy was unusually reflective about her own positionality, what made her what she was and how her interactions with the people, places and institutions she lived with shaped her outlook. In a long interview with Alan Macfarlane (15 May 2009) and in her chapter in a volume on anthropological field research that she co-edited with Paul Dresch and David Parkin (2000), factors that could superficially be seen as incidental are woven into a rounded picture of how her work came to be as it was. One thing she talks about is the fact that both sides of her family were descended from long lines of

independent-minded progressives. Her father was of Welsh ancestry, and was brought up as a 'strong rationalist agnostic' who spontaneously took up vegetarianism at the age of eleven, which at the time was considered strange. Her mother's parents, Quaker pacifists, were also vegetarian, and in fact Wendy's parents first met at a vegetarian summer camp. These relatively unusual affiliations generated not only a sense of being required to carve one's own path and hold one's own, but also a sense of belonging to a strong but non-localised community. During the war, her father, along with his school, were evacuated to a small Welsh village. But there was not enough accommodation for the whole family, so Wendy's mother took the baby to stay with a friend in the Lake District. Her friend ran a guest-house in Grasmere and Wendy's mother helped out with it, eventually taking it over and expanding it into a flourishing centre for vegetarian visitors. These visitors came from all over the world – there weren't many vegetarian guest houses available at the time – but were united by a sense of belonging to a confraternity. This, in Wendy's account, gave her an early sense of the networks and linkages which extend far beyond one geographical location and can be based on elective traits. This realisation fed into Wendy's understanding, ahead of her time, that humanity is not made up of mosaic-like self-contained 'societies' that come first, before linkages across borders may be tentatively established – an implicit assumption in much early social anthropology, still attracting criticism in the 1980s (Hannerz 1987).

A second key factor in the formation of Wendy's anthropological outlook was the fact that funding for doctoral fieldwork was drying up at the time she embarked on her DPhil. She therefore secured a five-year appointment as lecturer in social anthropology at the University of Khartoum (1964-9), and after making a survey of possible field areas in the southern Blue Nile she conducted fieldwork in Uduk communities in vacations. While this was seen by some senior colleagues as a drawback or deficiency – a perceived lack of sustained immersion in life on the ground – Wendy came to see it as a source of illumination. Working in a place, forming relationships with students and colleagues, fitting into a local institutional structure, seeing the 'field site' from the perspective of the capital as well as on the ground, experiencing the tensions and liaisons among Sudanese of different religions and languages, and between Sudanese and foreign colleagues, all helped her understand the Uduk people's experience in a larger perspective – something she insisted was essential to grasping their conceptual world. The intermittence and recurrence of her stays in her first fieldwork location, Chali, a village on the Ethiopian border and close to the cultural boundary with northern Sudan, echoed the Uduk people's own sense of marginality, refraction, mobility, resilience and return. Events beyond her control, more serious than a lack of doctoral funding, continued to shape her research projects and anthropological thinking. After finishing her DPhil, she planned to widen her perspective – a trajectory already implicit in her first fieldwork – by shifting to Ethiopia and tracing lives of minorities, some of them related to the Uduk, on the borders

of a great historic kingdom with an ancient scribal culture. An SSRC grant enabled her to spend a term of study leave and two long vacations on this project, but then the Mengistu revolution of 1974-5 made it impossible to continue. The experience, however, strengthened her vision of an anthropology that understood how small marginal communities could be imbricated in wider historical and political forces – a perspective that was developed in an influential edited collection (Donham & James 1986). The experience also paved the way to her next major fieldwork. Ten years of relative peace after the end of the first Sudanese civil war (1955-72) was shattered by the outbreak of the second Sudanese civil war (1983-2005). Uduk people, whose lives had already been fraught with uncertainty during her first period of fieldwork, were now forced to flee from their homes and take refuge in a succession of temporary refugee camps in Ethiopia. Wendy's study of their displacement, marginality and survival was both powerful and ahead of its time.

Thirdly, Wendy was equally thoughtful about what made social anthropology what it was at the time and place of her entry into it. The presence of Edward Evans-Pritchard, Godfrey and Peter Lienhardt, and Rodney Needham made Oxford anthropology a distinctive centre for the humanistic, historically-minded version of the subject. Wendy worked very much within the Oxford school, but characteristically opened anthropology's arms to neighbouring disciplines – especially history, which was integral to her work, but also philosophy, literature, archaeology, and some strands of evolutionary theory – more generously and fully than most anthropologists of the time. Her interest in philosophy gave rise to major contributions to the scholarship on the Oxford archaeologist-philosopher R.G. Collingwood; it also helped shape her orientation to Uduk moral worlds, her interest in personhood before it became a major theme in social anthropology, and in forms of knowledge which cannot be modelled as unified 'cosmologies' but are partial, sometimes unstated, evinced in ritual action as much as in verbal precepts. Her lifelong interest in the arts – from her childhood participation in dance and theatre, to her enduring love of English literature – became the source of her most distinctive contributions to anthropological theory, present in all her monographs and stated in full in her 'portrait' of anthropology as a discipline, *The Ceremonial Animal* (2003).

In 1977 she married Douglas H. Johnson, who was and is a historian of the peoples of South Sudan and their neighbours in Eastern Africa. His *Nuer Prophets*, based on decades of meticulous archival work and oral history, was acclaimed as a major rethinking of the role and reasons for emergence of prophet-figures during times of crisis in southern Sudan. Douglas and Wendy collaborated, bringing an ethnographic sensibility to history and a historical depth to anthropology. Both of them belonged and contributed to the Oxford tradition of long-term, close-grained fieldwork, the prioritisation of the voices and experiences of real people, and a human sympathy and respect for interlocutors evident in the work of Evans-Pritchard and Godfrey Lienhardt, and in a less direct lineage, Collingwood.

The Uduk

Fieldwork, for Wendy as for most anthropologists, was the foundation and inspiration for her wider theoretical thinking as well as for her intensely detailed, engaged ethnographic interpretation of a community's everyday life, ritual practice, marriage, mobility and memory. Her major ethnographic work was presented in a trilogy of monographs spanning four decades of research in southern Sudan and western Ethiopia.

The Uduk are a Nilo-Saharan people with a long history of displacement and destruction at the hands of more powerful neighbours. Their settlements were in non-contiguous clumps interspersed by the settlements of other, non-Uduk groups; and the northern and southern Uduk had little contact and spoke different dialects. This patchwork, the probable result of a long history of displacements, meant that most people spoke more than one language, and many of the Uduk people's treasured customs were borrowed from other groups. As a small, vulnerable group, numbering only about ten thousand in the 1960s, their own self-conception as a people was built around themes of resilience and remaking. Wendy entered into Uduk life through long, sensitive conversations carefully recounted in the books; through Uduk narratives and comments on the narratives; through their songs; and through intimate, on-the-ground observation of people's movements between natal and marital groups, their rituals, their practices of sharing with each other and confining monetary relationships to outsiders. What she revealed was in keeping with the great classic ethnographies of Evans-Pritchard and Godfrey Lienhardt. Like them, she worked with a people lacking in material wealth, and making a sparse living in inhospitable terrain; and like them she entered into the experience of the people she worked with, showing the sophistication, complexity and sometimes salty originality of their interpretations of their past and present.

When she first met them in the 1960s, the Uduk led a relatively quiet existence in small settlements like Chali, which Wendy made her base. Chali had been the site of a mission station, but the missionaries had left two years earlier – making the place more attractive to Wendy as a field site. This first phase of her research resulted in *'Kwanim Pa*, the first volume of the trilogy. The full title encapsulates several key themes from the start: *'Kwanim Pa: The Making of the Uduk People; An ethnographic study of survival in the Sudan-Ethiopian borderlands* (1979). This book focuses on history: about how the past of a battered remnant of a people grounded their conceptions of themselves and their community. 'Making' is key in the title, because the book is about how the Uduk constituted themselves, constantly rebuilding. *'Kwanim* (people) and *pa* (homeland, homestead or hamlet) are what they call themselves, Uduk being a label applied by administrators and missionaries. The *pa* means safety and security, but not stasis or homogeneity. Their mobility was not all enforced by outsiders: it was also a home-grown, chosen flexibility. The hamlets were only built to last around five years, as the

people practised shifting cultivation supplemented by gathering and some hunting. The hamlets themselves often split and recombined; marriages were not expected to last; social ties were fluid; people moved from one group to another at different stages in their lives (a detailed account of Uduk social fluidity is provided in James 1970). Thus, building the home and community was constantly and consciously a work in progress, and the given was always individual independence and freedom to act as one saw fit, improvising as one went along

If 'their past is ... a central point of reference for their living society, from which their moral thought and symbolic representations commonly take bearings' (1979: 19), this is not because they see the past as 'tradition' to be received from their forebears and handed on, with modifications, to their heirs: rather, it is because their sense of their past, in which they were reduced to a kind of remnant, 'weak and politically unsuccessful' (18), became a generative resource, an archive of materials with which to keep on making themselves and their community. The making of individual persons, through rites such as the Gurunya ritual to save vulnerable children from death, 'show remarkable parallels with the history of the people as a whole. Historical themes are consciously used in the elaboration of these rites, which can even be seen as a dramatic play upon Uduk historical self-knowledge, a collective "work of art" nourished by roots in a particular past' (19). 'Making' their community or society involves much more than keeping things going as before; on the contrary, Uduk were social inventors who 'constructed a "new society" of their own, distinguished particularly by its matrilineal bias' in response to the vicissitudes of repeated scattering and decimation (20). Their 'making', then, was at multiple levels: they remade their society; they made and remade persons through rites; and the rites themselves were a 'making', a creative construction of those past events and conditions which forced them continually to reconstitute themselves and their communities.

Myths of origin provided not a starting point for a narrative of unfolding progress, but a scene which was fundamental to Uduk self-conceptions and was thought to recur. If humans emerged from a state of animality, they could also revert to it. The *'kwanim pa*, the moral community, was distinguished by contrast with the *çin̄kina/*, a thing, animal, waif without home or kin, a dependant or a wage labourer. Uduk avoided dependence on cash income, and limited their market transactions to sales of surplus produce to outsiders, not within the *'kwanim pa*. Depending on cash income for necessities of life is putting your survival in the hands of others, and would make the Uduk the *çin̄kina/* of the richer, more competitive peoples around them (1979: 110–11). People who had become *çin̄kina/* could be rescued and incorporated into the *'kwanim pa*: that, indeed, was how the Uduk explained their ability to survive as a people. The ever-present substrate to experience was a sense of loss and helplessness. Identity was not based on a sense of completeness and fullness as a self-sufficient community, and did not mean

repudiation of all aspects of alterity. The very term *pa* was a Nilotic loan word, and the people's conceptual resources include many borrowed elements. They borrow even their 'origin' stories from other peoples, and this is crucial:

they have taken elements of foreign origin and made them into a core representation of themselves, and of their own origins as a divided and disrupted people. Disruption and foreign contact is central to their self-image: and it is apt that a tale, or a rite, of foreign origin should become an emblem of their inner incompleteness, the overcoming of which made of them a distinctive people, the *'kwanim pa* (1979: 73–4).

'Kwanim Pa was followed by James's masterpiece, *The Listening Ebony: Moral Knowledge, Religion, and Power among the Uduk of Sudan* (1988). It is a work, in one critic's view, of 'quite staggering depth and quality of ethnographic detail' (Jedrej 1990). It explores the competing claims of Muslims, Christians and the continuing adherence to Uduk healing rituals. The listening ebony of the title is a thin, peeled wand of the wild ebony tree, used by the fraternity of diviners to diagnose the causes of individuals' afflictions and restore them to wholeness. There could hardly be a better central image for a book drawn from such intent, empathetic listening to Uduk people's words and practices. The wild – as we already learned in *'Kwanim Pa* – is for the Uduk a source of knowledge and spiritual insight. The diviner lights the wand in a fire and then holds it over a gourd of water to observe the patterns that form in the wood and water as the wand burns. The diviners draw on a diverse 'archive' of moral knowledge about human beings' relations to nature and to other animals; what makes a person; how to strengthen and care for the person. This archive, she emphasises, is not best described as a 'cosmology', 'pantheon' or 'world view'. As many anthropologists of religion and of thought had begun to recognise, people's cosmologies were rarely as consistent and perfectly, comprehensively structured as earlier anthropology had assumed; nor did all members of the community necessarily say the same things about it. The Uduk archive was not systematic, it had contradictory elements, and it contained many borrowed elements: but it was nonetheless a 'bedrock resource'. James drew the Uduk archive from language and still-extant ritual practices, and illustrated it with Uduk people's narratives and conversations, presented in vivid detail and with great attention to nuance. Especially striking is the attention she pays to the complex Uduk language, which has been retained despite all external pressures. Uduk circumstances have changed, the argument runs, but the bedrock has not. It rests on fundamental conceptions of animals and persons, and their relations. Formerly hunters, Uduk metaphorical resources are anchored in a template of animals: patterns and markings are perceived in terms of animal skins; star constellations are seen as animal figures; humorous insults are inventive animal comparisons. Indeed, human beings were once animals, with hooves. Then there came a point when they separated themselves off and their hooves split into fingers and toes. *Arum*,

the vitality or principle of life, animates living animals and can cross to humans and take possession of them. 'The forest and bushland is the depository of the Uduk archive' (1988: 66). Francis Deng (1973) and Godfrey Lienhardt (1961) showed that the neighbouring Dinka, a pastoral people, saw the world through the lens of cattle – their colours and patterns of markings. Uduk, foragers and shifting cultivators, saw it through the forest and wild animals.

The most surprising things were what the Uduk archive said about persons. Persons, grammatically, were singular – unlike most nouns which are plural or collective by default; names are unique to each person, rather than being inherited or passed on after the person's death. Names do not plug a person into a descent group. The individual has moral autonomy. The integrity and self-responsibility of the individual is seen in the freedom to choose which relatives to settle with, and who to marry. When a man and woman have a child, they become 'new people': 'social relations are fresh-made by individual persons as they establish their lives with others' (1988: 91). A person has a right to live as they choose: no one can demand the labour of another, even within marriage. Rites are developmental (fostering the growth and making of individuals) and healing (repairing and maintaining the person that has been built). In this exploration, James emphasises the centrality of the 'experiencing person' (144), a person with resources to draw on, including 'the whole range of (probably conflicting) ideas, words, advice, and encounters which have formed my previous experience' (145). She observes that the personhood debate in anthropology may have overemphasised systems, conventions and structures rather than the real, actual person. Uduk do have rigidly-adhered-to rules of behaviour, as outlined in '*Kwanim Pa*: strict reciprocity; joint responsibility; no individual enterprise; limited scope for cash transactions and profit; no bridewealth; and definitely no big men competing to outdo each other. But rules may change, while Uduk 'basic notions of human nature and the character of human interaction are not so changeable' (147): the morally intelligible behaviour of persons, and resources with which to understand this, is bedrock.

The third volume in the trilogy, *War and Survival in Sudan's Frontierlands: Voices from the Blue Nile* (2007), describes, as James notes in her preface, things that could not have been imagined when she first went to the southern Blue Nile in 1965. *War and Survival* is about what happened to the Uduk as a result of the second Sudanese civil war. The world described in the first two books of the trilogy had been physically destroyed: the villages burnt to the ground in 1987, the people repeatedly displaced. Her response to this was to lengthen and widen her historical perspective, to see how marginal, borderland groups like the Uduk could be incorporated by more powerful neighbouring peoples at one time, then excluded, then reincorporated, and how they could keep re-creating themselves. Going back to the early 19th century, Uduk people were periodically captured into military slavery, tied down with feudal obligations, or recruited as

temporary or seasonal workers. Most studies of displaced populations do not provide this deep historical contextualisation. This study reflects on how borderland peoples are conceptualised by the central political powers: always connected to the centre, yet forgettable when convenient; diverse marginal peoples lumped together as one group, but without adding weight to their collective presence. The lens has now widened to include two nation states, as displaced Uduk groups first fled to Ethiopia, then with the fall of Mengistu's regime in 1991 fled back, zig-zagging southwards, and crossing the international frontier five times in as many years. The central ethnographic data in the book are near-contemporary, from 1983 when the Sudan People's Liberation Army was founded, to 2005, the year of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Omer el Beshir government and the SPLA. The framework within which to understand these events, however, spans two centuries and a wide territory.

James's subtitle, 'Voices from the Blue Nile', is no anthropological cliché: it is the key to the orientation of the entire project. This book is made from what Uduk people said: in conversation; in long, often painful narratives; once, in a radio broadcast (the only time James heard the Uduk language on the airwaves); and, prominently, in songs composed by people about their experience. It is in this book, which describes the most extreme conditions of distress and deprivation, the greatest pressure to change their way of life, that James draws most fully on her insights into Uduk creativity and artistry. The theme is developed through the trilogy. In *War and Survival* it becomes a thread that unifies the whole account and epitomises Uduk sense of continuity through continual re-making: for poems and songs are forms that are consciously and deliberately made – made to attract attention to the art of making. Uduk people tried 'to turn their experiences into "art", into fun with language, dramatic narratives, provocative enactment, witty songs, resurgent dances, and music' (James 2007: xv). Focusing initially on Chali, the 'sleepy village' of the previous volumes, James listens to the experiences of those overtaken by war, recounted in long first-hand testimonies: the Uduk experience of being helpless and despised by Arabs from the north; the destruction of Chali and its church.

After the historical introduction, all chapters except one open with a song, or in some cases a fragment of first-person commentary or description of a dream. These songs are not embellishments but the red thread that keeps alive the sense of what the Uduk were experiencing and how it felt, transmuted into shareable, quotable text which nonetheless remains highly personal, distinctive and idiosyncratic. The vitality of these compositions shines out in this song dating from around 1988, composed by a woman called Denge who fled from her home towards Chali but found it already destroyed (James 2007: 90):

How can I carry the children,
And make it to Chali?
The men were chased away.
Doctor, come and set me free!

My foodstores were set on fire
 Children, let's take the left-hand path
 Let's flee to the SPLA
 The way the people fled
 Along a tangled path.
 John, come and give me freedom!
 The baboons are calling in the hills
 As I run away to Chali.
 But now our Chali's smashed to pieces!
 The people have fled and left it cold.
 The lions are grunting in the deserted village, *awuh-wuh!*
 Wild things are calling in the old village, *awuh-wuh!*
 I cry for my home
 I am exhausted from crying
 The infants are dying from crying
 The great grain sheaves were burning...

James pays attention to voices from different sides of the conflict and divergent views within the same side. She brings to the surface the potential of songs (unlike personal testimonies, for example) to be multivocal, combining different voices, shifting from one standpoint to another: a transpersonal form that can express complexity and multiplicity rather than an undifferentiated collective view. Towards the end of the book she expands on the theme of art, creativity and poetry in Uduk life. Chapter 9 opens with a brief song, utterly baffling at first sight, which includes an allusion to the myth of how death becomes irreversible but also includes what sound like voices raised in sarcasm or argument:

'Jaws so coarse and ugly, from crunching funeral goats!'
 'Macha, just leave Bonya alone – They are the fiercest fighters!'
 'You're so ugly from all this funeral feasting'!

James elucidates: 'Macha of Bigon village is warned by his own people against fighting Bellila but replies by ridiculing their overdeveloped jaws from gorging too much funeral meat, that is to say, being afraid of losing more people in battle' (2007: 216). Poetry allows such concatenations of disparate elements, different speakers and speaking positions, elements drawn from myths of remote origin with something someone might have shouted in the village yesterday; the lack of framing and contextualisation assumes those who hear the song will know how to construe it.

In this chapter she goes on to engage with dance forms, language games, the incompatibility of the music of the churches and the dance ground, and the wealth of songs sung to the five-stringed lyres played solo by men. We learn that songs making direct political criticism were usually in Arabic; the Uduk style is more oblique, and often 'conversational' in form. The book closes with a chapter on sermons, visions and

dreams, and a final discussion of ‘reunions, retrospectives, and ironies’. Though built on the most arid and daunting scenes of suffering and loss, this third volume of the trilogy also blossoms most surprisingly and beautifully into a demonstration of the deep connection between cultural creativity and social resilience.

A portrait of anthropology

This insistence on the centrality of the making of form by humans in all their activities, and the inseparability of creative, artistic impulses in human life from what have sometimes been seen as more basic activities – reproduction, food, shelter, defence from enemies – is the hallmark of Wendy James’s anthropology. In *The Ceremonial Animal* (2003) the themes emerging through the Uduk trilogy – history, memory, moral community, the making of persons, the centrality of the arts to human experience – are elaborated theoretically and grounded in a history of anthropology and comparative case studies from all parts of the world. Michael Lambek, in his Preface, rightly calls it ‘a remarkably comprehensive, confident and generous account of contemporary anthropology’, characterised by ‘comfortable forthrightness’.

It is not a history of the discipline in the traditional sense of a chronological account of great figures organised as a genealogy or as warring schools. Great figures abound, alongside many lesser-known ones, but they are selected because they were inspirational in constituting the humanities-oriented, historically-minded style of anthropology that James is portraying and that she believes lies at the heart of the discipline. Many of them were associated with Oxford, though Malinowski, Durkheim and Mauss get plenty of attention. Many others, seen as significant in their time, are left out, and chronology is not the organising principle. Nor is the book a comprehensive map of current regional and theoretical disciplinary subfields: it is, as the title indicates, a portrait, implying selection, viewpoint, light and shade, highlighted features and significant background. The key figures return in different chapters to provide ways of thinking about different anthropological themes. These themes look at first sight like bread-and-butter anthropological topics: classification and categories; ritual and religion; language and speech; gender and generation; bodies and personhood; livelihoods, place and home; large-scale modern forms including cities, global movements, international political and economic linkages; peace and war. But in every chapter, they turn out to do the unexpected: and a clue to the originality of James’s vision is in the unusual prominence of the arts, especially dance.

In this she went beyond British social anthropology’s conventional treatment of verbal, visual and musical genres as enjoyable but minor subfields of the discipline. From her earliest work, in the days before the arts were repositioned in anthropology – by, among others, Alfred Gell, Trevor Marchand and Tim Ingold – James was already

proposing a view of sociality as founded upon an aesthetic feeling for form. This view is still profoundly suggestive and still awaits fuller elaboration and implementation in ethnography worldwide. She put forward a gently-expressed but bold claim. Without calling it a theory, she shows that human societies not only make themselves – a truism – but also reflect on the process, and that this reflection is most concentrated in music, dance, and verbal arts. The arts bring to consciousness the processes by which human sociality itself is constituted. All aspects of human life are given form or pattern, or in her simile are ‘choreographed’ – even apparently informal and ephemeral behaviours; and when people make songs, dances, narratives, poems, pictures, what they are doing is making form apparent, and making the collective creation of form an object of attention and reflection. Thus, on the one hand, all aspects of society can be seen as works of art; and, on the other hand, certain works are highlighted for special attention, and are in a sense acts of meta-making – making that draws attention to the ‘made-ness’ of human life by foregrounding the conventions, insisting on participation and response, eliciting evaluation, and in the case of verbal arts most prominently, requiring interpretation. James does not overstate this call to put arts at the centre of an anthropology that is built upon listening to people’s own interpretation of their experience. But she leads by example and by quietly refusing to quarantine dance, music, literature as minor sidelines in anthropological theory. She makes them central, insisting on ‘the overwhelming presence of art in our shared social being’ (2003: 78).

In pointilliste style, her portrait of anthropology is carefully built up out of a multiplicity of case studies, each given a close sympathetic reading that does justice to its own centre of gravity, with the same attentiveness and sensitivity to nuance that characterises her fieldwork. But this respect for idiosyncratic detail is combined with an openness to a wide range of theoretical inspirations and intellectual reference points drawn from philosophy and history as well as different subfields of anthropology. However, she rejects two influential approaches she sees as reductive: evolutionary biological models which treat human culture as a direct product of genetic inheritance; and rational choice models based on the primacy of individual actors pursuing personal economic advantage. This does not mean a wholesale rejection of approaches drawing on evolutionary theory. Indeed, she contributed significantly to the British Academy’s major multidisciplinary ‘Lucy to Language’ research project on human cognitive and social evolution. Consistently, however, she upheld what could be seen as social anthropology’s foundational insight, that individuals and societies are mutually constitutive. While the book sets out to present a picture of what is distinctive about anthropology, the impulse is not to build barriers but open doors.

As she noted in her discussion of her own research style, what she does is assemble and fit together elements that she senses have potential to illuminate a topic or question; she moves them around until they form a coherent picture. Some social science models

claim that social science method starts with a survey of existing data, identifies gaps, forms a hypothesis, gathers new data to confirm, contradict or revise the hypothesis, and *voilà*. This, however, predetermines the kind of questions that will be asked and how they will be framed, what will be considered a relevant response and what will be ignored. Wendy James instead voices the views and experiences of many anthropological fieldworkers who take ethnography to be based on dialogue and exploration, such that the researcher's interlocutors in the field may play a key role in defining what the questions are and how they are answered. Thus the making of persons, the making of communities and the making of ethnographic texts are of a piece, in being collaborative, 'collusive', dialogic and creative.

Connecting with Collingwood

Wendy James's interdisciplinary interests included philosophy as well as history and literature – the very title of her portrait of anthropology is a quotation from Wittgenstein. This interest was most fully expressed in her collaborative work on the Oxford philosopher R.G. Collingwood. Collingwood was a professional archaeologist as well as a philosopher, and his most influential work was on the interpretation of literature, history and anthropology. It was taken up by scholars in all these disciplines. He died young, with some of his work still unpublished – notably an almost-completed book manuscript on folktales and magic. In an act of interdisciplinary co-operation reminiscent of Collingwood's own approach, Wendy James joined with David Boucher, a political theorist and philosopher of international relations, and Philip Smallwood, a literary scholar, to produce a scholarly edition of this manuscript and other unpublished pieces, with a substantial introduction (Boucher, James & Smallwood 2005).

Collingwood insisted that, to understand history, literature or indeed anything humans make or have made in the past, the scholar has to recreate, relive, or think again the thoughts of the original creators and the cultural context of their time. He sharply distinguished between the study of the natural world, which could be treated as an object separate from human experience, and forms that were shaped by humans, which required what he called a historical approach. 'Anthropology ... is a historical science, where by calling it historical as opposed to naturalistic I mean that its true method is ... to get inside its object or recreate its object inside itself' (Boucher *et al.* 2005: 153–4)). If studying ancient Greek mathematics meant that we need to 'think again for ourselves the thoughts of those early geometers' (154), the same applied to studying other cultures of the present day. Such 'recreation' assumed translatability, and in Collingwood's view this was underwritten by our shared human nature and human experience. Just as 'any historical present contains within itself its own past', so our present-day world contains

within itself elements of other, apparently alien contemporary worlds – the worlds of ‘savages’ in his ironical use of the terminology of the day. Twinned with this emphasis on shared human experience was an equal insistence on the need to study human-created forms – human life – in their particularity, in themselves and not as instances of more general categories.

In her section of the introduction, headed ‘A fieldworker’s philosopher: perspectives from anthropology’, James describes the 1930s context in which Collingwood championed the idea of anthropology as a ‘historical’ discipline: a context in which Collingwood’s contemporaries Marett and Radcliffe-Brown both saw anthropology as a natural science, and in which rising anthropologists, especially Evans-Pritchard, were responding by rejecting naïve evolutionism and developing a view of the rationality of other cultures. James also draws attention to the fact that, as well as his emphasis on ‘re-enactment’ as a prerequisite to understanding, Collingwood was significant for his ‘recognition of social and cultural form as the context of individual experience and expression’ (lxxii). He looks at the ‘*composed* quality of thought within a particular cultural setting and the social processes of *recomposition* which are fundamental to the transmission (as against the passive ‘survival’) of any cultural practice’ (Boucher *et al.* 2005: lxxiii).

In the meticulous work of co-editing Collingwood’s manuscripts, as well as in her essay identifying and highlighting some of the most productive and consequential aspects of his multi-faceted thought for anthropology, James shows a characteristic boundary-erasing conviviality with thinkers in other disciplines, and a firm adherence to what should be selected and ‘recomposed’ from the work of past scholars and what should not.

Outreach, advisory and humanitarian roles

Wendy’s support for Sudan went far beyond scholarly publications. She put her knowledge and experience to the service of humanitarian organisations and public communicators. She was consulted by UN bodies, by NGOs working with refugees, and by the then Foreign and Commonwealth Office during and after the second Sudan civil war.

Her first major involvement in international humanitarian efforts was with Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), a consortium of UN agencies and more than 30 NGOs, established in 1989 to provide emergency food aid to civilians on all sides of the conflict during civil war and drought. OLS, in which Douglas Johnson had already been working, was faced with a new crisis in 1991 when the Ethiopian president Mengistu Haile Mariam – a supporter of the SPLA – was overthrown, precipitating a rush by south Sudanese refugees back across the border from Ethiopia. Many of these refugees were Uduk, and Wendy worked directly with them – camping among them in a tent and sleeping bag rather than staying with official agencies, to find out what their needs and

experiences were. This experience shaped her third monograph on the Uduk, as noted above, but its immediate objective was a report for UNICEF, the lead agency in the OLS consortium, to inform humanitarian policy. In 1992 and 1995 she went back to the region to report further and to take part in the decision-making process that led to the establishment by the UNHCR of a large refugee scheme near Gambela, and subsequently to report on its progress. 'I have become in a way part of my own field of study', she wrote, 'a minor but effective voice within the UN' (Dresch, James & Parkin 2000: 87). This was followed by a further report in 2000 for ZOA, a Dutch Christian relief and recovery organisation. In 2003, in the lead-up to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, both Douglas and Wendy were invited by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to serve as resource persons in the Sudan peace talks in Nairobi. In this case, however, the outcome was disappointing: Douglas remembers the talks as a dialogue of the deaf, in which the plight of the Blue Nile areas that Wendy worked in – a region that was administratively part of north Sudan, though culturally part of the south – was ignored by Khartoum and left out of the negotiations. This ended their temporary involvement in the peace negotiations (Douglas Johnson, personal communication).

During the early 1990s Wendy was also the anthropologist for *Orphans of Passage*, a documentary film in Granada TV's Disappearing World series directed by Bruce MacDonald, which aired in 1993. This film depicted the displacement and survival of Uduk during the second Sudan civil war. It drew on Wendy's personal archive of field recordings of Uduk songs and narratives of the past, exploring the themes of displacement, bereavement and memory in a transit camp for asylum seekers in Ethiopia. Through this experience she became involved in the Royal African Institute's ethnographic film programme.

John Ryle, the humanitarian activist and anthropologist (another product of the Institute of Social Anthropology at Oxford), recalls that Wendy was one of the earliest Fellows of the Rift Valley Institute, which he founded in 2004 as the Sudan peace agreement was taking shape. The aim of the RVI was to bring local knowledge to bear on international policy-making and development planning in Sudan, and later also the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region. Both Wendy and Douglas contributed many times to the RVI's annual week-long residential courses on the Sudan and South Sudan, and are remembered by participants as bringing humour and friendship to the events as well as on-the-ground knowledge (John Ryle, personal communication).

Giving and receiving recognition

The Collingwood volume was an act of respect for the work of a precursor whose ideas Wendy helped to reanimate. Throughout her career she had shown similar respect to

other scholars who shaped humanities-oriented anthropology, editing and co-editing volumes in honour of Evans-Pritchard (Cunnison & James, 1972), Godfrey Lienhardt (James & Johnson 1988), and Marcel Mauss (James 1998). She also collaborated with Gerd Bauman and Douglas Johnson to rescue the writings of a 19th-century Dutch traveller and adventurer, Juan Maria Schuver (1852-1883), who wrote reports in several languages on his journeys in north-east Africa, many of which were not translated or in some cases not even published, but were discovered hidden in a secret attic in his apartment in Amsterdam – a multilingual treasure trove of original manuscripts. The edited and translated volume is a gift to future scholarship, containing some of the earliest records of encounters in the Blue Nile region between a European and Sudanese people. As can be seen from the range and variety of topics with which Wendy engaged, she was always open to new ideas and always a tireless collaborator with other scholars – foremost among them her life partner Douglas Johnson. Her willingness to put her energies into shared projects did much to develop and stimulate the work of younger colleagues.

The respect she showed others was heartily reciprocated. Honours flowed in. Among the first was the Amaury Talbot book prize for *The Listening Ebony* in 1988. She was elected to the British Academy in 1999. She served as President of the Royal Anthropological Institute 2001-2004, and Vice-President of the British Institute in Eastern Africa 2001-2011. She received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Copenhagen in 2005. The RAI honoured her with the Rivers Memorial Medal in 2009, and in 2011 she was appointed CBE for services to scholarship. And in 2022, when a new endowed associate professorship in human sciences was established at Oxford, with a tutorial fellowship at St Hugh's College, it was named in honour of Wendy James.

There is much in her work that continues to animate and inspire discussion; a wealth of insights, the full implications of which await further exploration by her many readers and admirers.

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