

INTERVIEW WITH PROF. MARCUS BANKS, PROFESSOR OF VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND FORMER HEAD OF THE SCHOOL OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND MUSEUM ETHNOGRAPHY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD¹

Rasa Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė: Prof. Marcus Banks, I would like to ask you how you got interested in anthropology and the social sciences.

Marcus Banks: Because as a teenager, a young man, I was very interested in geology, and I went to university to be interviewed for a degree place in geology. And they said you don't have enough science in your background. But we do teach archaeology, and that's sort of the same thing: digging things up. So I said OK. But they said: you can't do archaeology by itself without anthropology. And so when I started that degree I realized I had little interest in archaeology but found anthropology fascinating. So it was an accident. I had never considered it.

R. R.-P.: You never thought about it in your childhood?

M. B.: A vague idea of archaeology as a child, but just children's fantasies about Egypt - pyramids and mummies. I didn't really know what archaeology was.

R. R.-P.: Maybe your parents had an influence on the choice of your speciality?

M. B.: No. My father was a chemist, a teacher of chemistry. My mother was just a housewife. Even today, now my parents are dead, even when I had my doctorate, my parents didn't understand what I did.

R. R.-P.: So you chose yourself.

M. B.: Yes.

R. R.-P.: Why did you choose Cambridge University for your studies? Maybe you attended a private school in your childhood? What was your preparation for Cambridge University?

M. B.: Very poor. I went to a state school and... I don't know, I just was good at school, and the headmaster of my school had been to Cambridge after the Second World War. The servicemen, maybe servicewomen, who had fought in the War... There was a

¹ *Editor's note.* Interview with Prof. Marcus Banks, conducted in Oxford on 2 May 2013 by Rasa Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė, Associate Professor, Department of Cultural Studies, Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania (email: rasa.raciunaite-pauzuoliene@vdu.lt). Most of the interview was conducted in person, but the questions and responses marked with an asterisk (*) were elicited subsequently by email. The interview was subsequently published in Lithuanian in *Lithuanian Ethnology: Studies in Social Anthropology and Ethnology*, 14 (23), 237-45 (2014). I am grateful to the editor, Prof. Vytis Čiubrinskas, and Dr Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė for permission to reproduce this English version here.

scheme that certain servicemen who wanted to go to university could go for one year or two years without any entrance requirement. My headmaster had been to Cambridge and liked it. And when he saw that I was good at my exams, he suggested that I applied. I had never been in Cambridge before. So then I applied to do geology, as I said... I am very, very glad I did get to Cambridge. It's a terrific education.

R. What did you as a person get from Cambridge University? Why was it important in terms of knowledge and education?

M. B.: I discovered it was OK to be clever. My school did not have very high academic standards, so it was very difficult to be clever. When you come to Cambridge, you meet a lot of clever people who want to study. And I discovered anthropology, [which] as I said, I was not expecting. So it gave me anthropology. And I had very, very good teachers of anthropology.

R. R.-P.: Can you name some?

M. B.: Jack Goody. He was the head of the department in Cambridge University when I was a student. And my doctoral supervisor was Caroline Humphrey. Now she is retired, but she is an expert on Mongolia, on Central Asia. And I learned about museums - this was the first big thing I learned. I liked museums as a child. And Cambridge has an Archaeology and Anthropology Museum like the Pitt Rivers museum (in Oxford) here, but much smaller.

And my other doctoral supervisor, Deborah Swallow, was one of the museum curators, through whom I learned to appreciate and value material culture and got anthropological understandings of material culture. If I had gone to another university, for example, Manchester University, to do anthropology, I would never have come across material culture and museums, or not thought about them the same way back in the 1970s. And that's integral to how we teach anthropology here and how we do anthropological research here.

R. R.-P.: What did you find at Oxford University, when you came from Cambridge? What's the difference?

M. B.: The difference was – there was no undergraduate degree here. I had been an undergraduate and a graduate student at Cambridge. When I arrived here in Oxford there was just a graduate department with some anthropology teaching in Human Sciences, not very much. Then it was a much smaller department. Now it is the biggest department in the country, but I joined in 1987, and it was my first job. I finished my

PhD in 1985. I stayed in Cambridge for one year as a postdoc and then went to Film School for one year, and then I came here for my first job.

As it was a much smaller department, it was, to be honest, a little bit backward-looking, because it had such a strong presence in 1950s-60s under Evans-Pritchard. They hadn't really started looking forward after he and other members of staff retired. But over the next decade it started to recover itself. I was the youngest member of department by a very long way. All the others were near retirement age when I joined. Once it started to replace itself, the department became younger, bigger.

I discovered here a huge network of South Asian scholars, which is very good. There seemed to be a lot more South Asianists than in Cambridge. It was helpful for me to meet many people working in modern history, in sociology, anthropology. All worked in India or in South Asia more generally. I discovered migration studies, which was great, because my doctoral research was with a migrant community, but I didn't know anyone else in migration studies. It was a pleasure meeting other people working on migration. It was helpful for me thinking about my second book on ethnicity, for example. I could not have written that in Cambridge without meeting other people here who were interested in the same issues. And it is a great department, and it gives me a lot of freedom. I was able to develop my visual anthropology interests and now my forensic anthropology interests with almost complete freedom. No one tells me I can't do this, I must do that, etc.

R. R.-P.: And you didn't have such freedom at Cambridge?

M. B.: I was never employed at Cambridge. I am not sure there was such freedom as well, as I had never been in other departments. In some academic fields you really have to stick with the one thing you are hired [to do], not receiving the freedom to follow your own interests.

R. R.-P.: I have a question about the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology (ISCA). What is the difference between ISCA in the past, when you came, and at present?

M. B.: It's nice. It was a very small department when I came. I think there were some six members of staff, and now with postdocs and contract researchers there are up to eighty, which is incomparable. Plus, of course, you know, ISCA has now become the home, the hub, for a much larger vision of anthropology through the School that includes science and technology studies, cognitive anthropology, migration studies, and

includes putting an anthropological understanding of all these diverse areas of social sciences together. Whereas when I joined it was just very straight, very conventional social anthropology.

R. R. P.: What changes has ISCA undergone in 25 years?

M. B.: That was gradual, I suppose. Now I look back and realize how much we have changed, but I didn't notice it happening at the time. I suppose the first big change was with Steven Vertovec. Now he is at the Max Planck Institute in Göttingen, Germany. He had a very large grant for his Transnational Communities Program. Now, that was the first very large, seriously large, external grant this department had had, which made it very confident. And he certainly brought a new way of working, working in teams, for example, rather than working as lone researchers, and having a research center dedicated to a particular topic, in this case, transnational communities, and that gave the impetus to other people think: I can have a very large grant, I can start a research center. So all the activity that you see now, to my mind, it was not necessarily caused by Steven's initial grant, but Steven's initial grant was the first sign that we could be something other than drawing our salaries, getting small grants to pay for an air fare, etc. So we could see a much bigger vision. And as a result, it has become a much more important department in the university. I think, previously it was so small and so self-contained that the university didn't take us seriously.

R. R.-P.: Could you compare your department of anthropology with the Cambridge University department?

M. B.: Cambridge is bigger in some ways – they have a bigger undergraduate programme, for example. They are already a serious part of Cambridge University. Plus they have fellows in the central Cambridge colleges, like King's College. The college links that our staff had at that time and still have to some extent today were with graduate colleges, which are historically the less powerful colleges in the Oxford collegiate system. But now we've got such a large research income ... Because of our research income we are really one of the big departments in social sciences, and they take us seriously and we work closely with the Social Sciences Division.

R. R.-P.: How did you discover visual anthropology? Could you tell something about your visual studies? You mentioned a visual school.

M. B.: Yes. After I ended my doctoral fieldwork I went back with a couple of people, my supervisor and another student, we went back to India to do another piece of fieldwork together. In fact they did the fieldwork and someone suggested to me that I

shoot some film. I'm trying now to remember how that happened, but ... I was quite close to another anthropologist in the department, Alan Macfarlane [...] He'd worked with a very famous Austrian anthropologist, who'd come to Britain, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf. Von Fürer-Haimendorf had made films in India, and in Nepal. Alan Macfarlane was keen on films. I think he suggested to me, because he had a little Super-8 film camera, he said, why don't you just take this and shoot a little film on Super 8 camera. So I made a film, which we transferred to video. It wasn't very good.

But I became quite interested in film making as a process. And then the Royal Anthropological Institute advertised for positions for Film Fellows who'd be paid by a grant the Institute had been awarded by the Leverhulme Foundation, sent to the National Film and Television School to learn to become ethnographic documentary filmmakers. I applied on the basis of my little amateur film and got the Fellowship. So I went to film school for a year and trained in a proper documentary film programme at professional film school. I got to the end of the one year and realized that I wasn't ever going to be a filmmaker for various reasons, that I haven't that kind of skill or creativity, I think, but I was very fascinated by film as a medium, and visual representation more generally.

When I came here to Oxford, I met one of the leading people in the field of visual anthropology. Elizabeth Edwards was here at the time, at the Pitt Rivers Museum, an historian of anthropological photography: very influential, very important. Before I got the job here in Oxford, I hadn't realized Elizabeth Edwards was here and had these photographic interests, nor another colleague, Howard Morphy, who'd worked with the filmmaker [Ian Dunlop] in Australia during his fieldwork with Aboriginal people. And as I was interested in film we realized we could do something here. Elizabeth and I started running an option first of all, in film, and we eventually devised a master's degree in visual anthropology. So we got visual anthropology embedded in the university, where it still is. During this time I also worked a producer on some other people's films, because I knew how the business worked at that stage and could help them raise funds and act as a producer.

I then started thinking about visual representation, and how I'd like to organize a conference session, which led to a book, the book I co-edited with Howard Morphy, *Rethinking visual anthropology* (Yale, 1997). And that's where it really took off, and I realized I could spend the rest of my career working with images. So I had a big cataloguing project, where I tried to track up all the films from the UK and elsewhere that were historically important to anthropology. I then started my own research on

some of these films, shot in India during the colonial period. And so I made research trips to India to work in the archives there, and teamed up with other colleagues who work on historical film. And that kept me going till now: I've just been co-organizing a workshop in Cambridge on historical film and other images in India, so I am still working in that field.

In the last couple of years I've developed a new interest in forensic science, and science practice, and how science is visualized. I haven't really had enough time to do any proper fieldwork on that, but I've done a little fieldwork in a couple of laboratories, and had a research assistant working for me for a few months; I was in India last year doing a bit of work in the laboratory there. So I am gradually building my contacts and working out a way to make this project more visual, to look how forensic scientists use photographs, fingerprints, and DNA plots in the laboratory to make a narrative about a series of actions.

(* R. R.-P.: Could you tell more about your HADDON project to catalogue archival ethnographic film footage at the Pitt Rivers Museum?)

M. B.: You asked about the HADDON Catalogue of ethnographic film. Sadly, that is not available at the moment, for technical reasons, though a colleague at another university has a grant which we hope can be used to revive it. The Pitt Rivers Museum does not have an extensive archival film collection, but several of the films have been digitized and are online (<http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/film.html>), together with the very extensive photographic collections (<http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/photocollection.html>)

(* R. R.-P.: What are the relationships between ISCA and the Pitt Rivers Museum? How do ISCA's anthropologists collaborate with the Pitt Rivers Museum?)

M. B.: There is a very close relationship between ISCA and the Pitt Rivers Museum. Three of our colleagues – Clare Harris, Christopher Morton and Laura Peers – are Curators at the Museum and also Lecturers in the Institute, and together with our ISCA colleague Inge Daniels we all teach on the Master's programme in Visual, Material and Museum Anthropology. Most of our teaching is done in the Museum. As well as my colleagues, several of our doctoral students conduct research using or related to the Museum's collections.

(* R. R.-P.: How do you imagine the future of ethnographic and anthropological museums, and what might be their perspectives?)

M. B.: Good question. Certainly from recent work at the Pitt Rivers Museum the future seems to lie with helping museums to engage (or re-engage) with the so-called source

communities from which the museum artefacts were originally collected. The experience of my colleagues Clare Harris, Chris Morton and Laura Peers at the Museum is that working together with members of source communities on collections of objects or photographs is enriching for both parties.

R. R.-P.: How did you find Jainism? Why did you choose to research Jainism in India and England?

M. B.: That's more easily answered. I wanted to do a PhD, and I applied for funding, and initially I was going to work on pottery. I used to be a potter - you know, ceramics. And a colleague of mine, who was in the middle of his PhD, told me about a town in Nepal which is a town given over to ceramic production. And initially I thought I would study that. When I talked with people I wanted to supervise me, Caroline Humphrey and Debbie [Deborah] Swallow, they were less keen, I don't really know why, but at the time Caroline was just developing her own project on Jainism. She said, why don't you work with me on the project, so since the very early days there was a team of us working in anthropology. Caroline took on eventually three students, and we looked at different aspects of Jainism from an anthropological perspective. At the time, in the early 1980s, Jack Goody was the head of the department, and he was already worrying that there wouldn't be jobs in the higher education academic sector for all the doctoral students he was training, from the department. He encouraged us to think about other kinds of careers. One career that became appealing to me was a career working in the public museum sector in the UK, where special funding had just been announced to pay for museum curators who'd perform outreach work with ethnic minority communities.

And so I decided I could try and do the PhD I wanted to do (or the one Caroline wanted me to do), on Jainism, but instead of working in Rajasthan, where she worked, I went to Gujarat, the state to the south of Rajasthan. Many migrants in this country come from Gujarat. I went there to learn the language [so] that I could later transfer to a nonacademic position afterwards. As I said earlier, I'd already developed interests in museums anyway, which seemed to me like a perfect career. So I thought instead of just learning Gujarati, I should probably do some of my work in this country with Gujarati-speakers. And when I discovered there were migrant Jains in this country (Jains migrated from India in the late nineteenth century), I decided to do a comparison, to study how Jain migrants were making sense of Jainism outside India, which for technical reasons is quite difficult. So I ended up with a half and half study, half of my fieldwork here, half fieldwork there, in India. There was a combination of sort of being

in the right place at the right time, accident, future thinking, and it all ended up in creating this PhD package as it were. But then I got this job in higher education, and I never needed to worry about these museum jobs.

R. R.-P.: Later your research topics were ethnicity and nationalism. Why did you choose these topics?

M. B.: That's easily answered: because I'd worked with an ethnic minority group in this country, I already had been engaged with the ethnicity literature to make sense on my fieldwork experiences here in the UK. As I said, when I came to Oxford, I met other people, like Steven Vertovec, who was also interested in ethnicity, and also a lot of people who have since left Oxford. And it seemed to me that was a topic that I could develop and make my own; I was giving lectures at that time on ethnicity theory and nationalism. So I did it.

R. R.-P.: Could you tell more about your current research, funded by the John Fell Fund?

M. B.: Okay. So, as you know, there are many sociologists and some anthropologists who study science; they are not actually doing science, but they are studying scientists and how scientists make science, which has also interested me for various reasons. But there's a particular branch, a particular set of scholars working in visual anthropology who work with what is called 'expert vision' or 'skilled vision'. Certain groups of people learned to develop particular ways of seeing the world, often in a technical way, such as radiologists, for example. That interested me, too, and I realized that studying scientists and how scientists look at things could be quite interesting, but I wanted some field of activity, a fieldwork location for my study where the things scientists look at and make pictures of really matter in some sense beyond the laboratory. So pure science isn't very interesting to me, and biological science is a bit too complicated, because I don't really understand genetics properly, but I settled on forensic science, because there you've got other people, non-technical people, who need to have stories told to them about what evidence means, sometimes in material forms, sometimes in visual forms. And at that time the US drama serial *CSI* was very popular on television. Everybody was watching, everybody was talking about forensic science in the public realm. I said OK, why not study something that people are actually interested in, as supposed to studying something people aren't very interested in. So I started to study forensic science. Initially I obtained permission to work in a fingerprint laboratory for a while. And more recently I obtained Fell Fund funding, which paid for my research

assistant, who is working in a mixed forensic laboratory just outside Oxford. So it's still very early days: when I finish my work as the head of the department, I will actually do the main fieldwork for this project.

R. R.-P.: You wrote some books, two books deal with visual research methods and visual methodology, other books deal with ethnicity, nationalism, etc. Which book do you like most of all? Why do you like it?

M. B.: My first book on the Jains is the best because I've put most work into that. That was my doctorate, my PhD.

You know, it was the thing that turned me from just being a student into a professional anthropologist. Plus, although no one ever reads that book, I still think it's got some important data about the lives of Jain people. It's now very old, though. My other books, most of them, are written from secondary sources: they contain some original data but not to the same depth. My book on the Jains is the most serious piece of ethnography I've ever done, and I am quite proud of it.

R. R.-P: What are your future plans?

M. B.: To survive the next two years as the head of the department without losing my hair! And sometime in the next year or so to apply for a big grant to do the work on my forensic science project. I suppose I am nibbling at it around the edges, which is all I can do at the moment because I have two years before I leave as the head of the department, and I can only do small pieces of work. That's my plan anyway!

R. R.-P.: Thank you very much for your exciting interview.

M. B.: Not at all.