



Appell, George N. (1926–2020)

RAJINDRA K. PURI

University of Kent, United Kingdom

Q1 George N. Appell was born in York, Pennsylvania, son of an entrepreneur, and grew up on a dairy farm. He attended Phillips Academy at Exeter, New Hampshire, graduating early to enlist in the Army Air Forces during World War II. Following military service, he graduated from Harvard University in 1948 with a degree in general studies, returned for an MBA at the Harvard Business School in 1952, and then completed an MA in anthropology in 1957. He met his wife Laura W. Reynolds at Harvard; they married in 1957 and worked together as a husband-and-wife research team until Laura's death in 2015. In 1958, George was appointed a research scholar in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the Australian National University (ANU) and studied under John A. Barnes and Derek Freeman. It was Freeman's innovative work among the Iban of Sarawak (Freeman 1970) that led him to what was then North Borneo (Sabah, Malaysia today) and research among the Rungus Momogan. Together with his wife Laura and six-month-old daughter, he conducted his first ethnographic research there between 1959 and 1960, and a second fieldwork session between 1961 and 1963. Appell received his doctorate from ANU in 1966 for the thesis "The Nature of Social Groupings among the Rungus Dusun of Sabah, Malaysia" (published, in part, in Appell 1968a and discussed in Appell 1966, 1971a, and 1976a).

Follow-up research in Sabah was curtailed after the British withdrew from North Borneo in 1963 and the new government of Sabah declared Appell *persona non grata*, perhaps due to his deposition in support of the Rungus before the Cobbold Commission (Appell-Warren, Appell-Doolittle, and Appell McNab 2021). Instead, recognizing the value of comparative scholarship in Borneo, George and Laura embarked on a series of institution-building steps to bring together scholars (whether from the humanities or natural or social sciences) and develop a knowledge base on Bornean societies. In 1968, he cofounded the Borneo Research Council (BRC), whose journal the *Borneo Research Bulletin* has been in continuous publication since 1969 (Appell 1990; <https://borneoresearchcouncil.org>). Most importantly, the BRC connected the global academic community to Borneo's universities and other research institutions, by organizing conferences and inspiring local scholars to pursue research at home.

Refused reentry to Sabah in 1980, the Appells began research on *resettlement* among the Bulusu' peoples of East Kalimantan (Appell 1985). They were finally allowed to return to Sabah in 1986. Recognizing the health and social consequences of rapid change among the Rungus in the intervening twenty-three years, George cofounded the Sabah Oral Literature Project with Laura in 1987 to record and preserve what remained of the Rungus oral traditions (including historical accounts, epic narratives, myths and legends, agricultural ritual and prayers, and complex ritual poetry that was sung by priestesses). In doing so, they pioneered methods for community-based

The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology. Edited by Hilary Callan and Simon Coleman.

© 2024 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2024 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.



research and documentation of oral literature and traditional knowledge. They developed a process that links recording, translation, exegesis, and production of a cultural dictionary, in order to produce an intelligible ethnographic archive that can be used by future generations (Appell and Appell 2012; Sabah Oral Literature Project n.d.). The Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research, founded in 1999 by the Appells, provides research grants for the collection of oral literature around the world (Firebird Foundation n.d.).

In 1993, Appell founded the Anthropologists' Fund for Urgent Anthropological Research, which is administered by the Royal Anthropological Institute and funds postdoctoral ethnographic research on currently threatened Indigenous peoples, cultures, and languages (AFUAR n.d.; Layton 2020). For this contribution he received the Patron's Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute from Diana, Princess of Wales, Patron of the Institute, in 1994.

Appell was a research associate at the Peabody Museum at Harvard University from 1965 to 1969, then joined the Department of Anthropology at Brandeis University in Boston in 1968, becoming a Senior Research Associate from 1979 till 1993. He also had visiting fellowships at Bowdoin College, ANU, and the Smithsonian, and a Fulbright Hays Fellowship at Aarhus University in Denmark from 1971 to 1972.

In addition to his ethnographic research in Borneo, he conducted research among Dogrib Indians, Northwest Territories, Canada, and studied the structure and organization of role behavior in Denmark and the social history of a Maine community.

He served in leadership positions for many academic and philanthropic organizations, such as the human rights commission of the American Anthropological Association, Cultural Survival, Survival International, Northeastern Anthropological Association, Maine Sociological Society, the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Studies in Third World Societies, and the Fund for Astrophysical Research.

Theoretical contributions

Appell came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, when social anthropology was still concerned with describing the diversity of societies, in terms of social structure and social organization. He argued that the particularism and inductive methodology of ethnography led to an ethnocentric universalism (Appell often referred to it as "cultural contamination"), for instance in using African lineage theory as a framework for understanding other societies in New Guinea, Oceania, and Southeast Asia. In his efforts to find a more universal analytical framework, free from cultural bias, he drew on Hallowell (1943) and reframed the concept of social grouping in terms of *jural rights to property*. In moving away from kinship, and turning instead to customary law, land tenure, and property inheritance as fundamental to social structure, he made an important contribution to the development of legal anthropology. This turn also had important impacts on Appell's advocacy for Rungus land and human rights, which initially resulted in a twenty-three-year ban on further research in Sabah, but then led to a lifetime of institution building and fundraising in support of Rungus, Bornean, and, eventually, all Indigenous peoples' rights to land, language, and culture.



Cognatic societies and legal anthropology

Appell's initial research among the Rungus of Sabah set out to better understand the social structure of cognatic (or kinship-based) bilateral societies. These societies have no enduring corporate groupings with constant and unchanging membership, unlike the lineage descent groups that constituted many African societies studied by anthropologists at the time, and so might be considered inherently unstable for the perpetuation of a society. As Appell (1976b, 9) described it, "I was first concerned with the concepts of 'corporation' and 'corporate social grouping' and how these applied to the analysis of cognatic social systems." His initial problem then was how to identify the basic social units (or isolates) of a system without imposing one's own cultural categories or those of another theoretical framework (e.g., unilineal descent theory). He chose to focus on identifying "isolated social groupings that specifically had the capacity to enter into jural relations in their own jural system" (1976b, 9). He wrote:

The conjugal family also is a corporate grouping in that it holds title as a jural entity to various items of property. It is in fact the most important structural entity in the jural and ritual realms. Yet it only endures for a limited period, from the founding of it by a newly married couple until a point when their last child marries, if only one founder is then alive, or, if both are still alive, until they can no longer carry on their agricultural work due to age.

Thus, research among the Rungus established that the conjugal family, a corporate group of limited duration and not based on principles of descent, could form the basic building blocks of a bilateral society without producing any instability in the social structure or any disability to social integration. (Appell 1976b, 6)

This thesis is clarified in his *American Ethnologist* articles (Appell 1983, 1984), emphasizing the need for culture-free "abstract analytic concepts" to identify (and operationalize) elements of social structure in terms of their jural relations: "My research goals are to develop better methods for describing the jural system of a society so that indigenous distinctions are isolated and the articulation of the jural domain to other societal domains is delineated" (Appell 1984, 815). His work on Bornean property systems was a means to show that descent (and kinship) was not an appropriate general model on which to base ethnographic description of a social system.

Land tenure and emergent structuralism

Appell had a long-standing interest in environmental issues and in Borneo's cultural ecology. Picking up on early twentieth-century work by Dutch *adat* scholars (Haar 1962) and ethnographies by Freeman (1955) and Geddes (1954), he began a comparative study of Bornean land tenure and tree ownership in 1965 (Appell 1997). In 1971, he initiated a decades-long debate, sometimes acrimonious, on explanations for variation in land tenure in Borneo with the publication of "Systems of Land Tenure in Borneo: A Problem in Ecological Determinism" (Appell 1971a). He argued that heavier rainfall during the preparation of rice swiddens made cultivation in secondary forest preferable,



because smaller trees could be dried and burned faster than primary forest trees. This gave greater economic value to secondary forest, which then resulted in the development of inherited or durable use rights (*devolvable usufruct*), as was the case for the Iban and Bidayuh, instead of all land reverting to community ownership after a year of use (*circulating usufruct*), as was the case for the Rungus and others living with prolonged dry seasons.

Appell recognized that land tenure systems evolve; with increasing scarcity of preferred land, value increases and rules for use are likely to emerge (Appell 1965). He formalized this processual model of land tenure dynamics, calling it *emergent structuralism* (Appell 1988):

In this, social forms or changes in social forms come into being as a result of intersecting behaviors in three domains: the jural order, or social structure of a society, the opportunity structure, and in the antistructure, the realm of antisocial activity. Dove's (1985) very detailed work on the changes in Kantu' Dayak land tenure provides a nice case of emergent structuralism in which the rules were revised as changes in the opportunity structure occurred as a result of the prohibition of warfare and the increased scarcity of land. The Kantu' land tenure system evolved from (1) circulating usufruct to durable tenure by households, without partition or limitation of time; then (2) to durable tenure mixed with areas reserved for circulating usufruct; and (3) finally to a growing shift to partitionable usufruct. (Appell 1997, 88)

Over the years the arguments went back and forth over the relative importance of social, economic, political, and ecological factors, in time as well as space, which resulted in a more nuanced, dynamic, and multifactorial understanding of land tenure (Appell 1997; Chan 1991; Dove 1985). This work, further developed by Appell's daughter Amity Doolittle (2011), continues to have contemporary relevance, informing conflicts arising from new and competing land uses and challenges to customary land rights in Malaysia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia (e.g., Somiah 2022).

Cultural change and human rights

A seemingly natural outcome of a focus on jural systems and participation in land rights cases, Appell's third major contribution to anthropology was the study of human rights, cultural change, and the role of anthropology in both. He witnessed and documented the impacts of introduced change (e.g., Christianity, resettlement, changes in economy and cultural ecology) among the Rungus of Sabah, the Bulusu' of North Kalimantan, and other Borneo groups. Thus, in the very first issue of the *Borneo Research Bulletin* in 1969, he encouraged what he called "urgent anthropological research" in Borneo (Appell 1969).

The abiding urgent problem, which he identified in an earlier publication, "A Survey of the Social and Medical Anthropology of Sabah: Retrospect and Prospect" (Appell 1968b), was the lack of sufficient ethnographic data to be able to correctly distinguish ethnic groups and to understand the differential impacts of social and cultural change on them. He critiqued the use of generic exonyms in Sabah at the time, such as *dusun*, *murut*, and *dayak*, which hid significant variation in language, social organization,



economy, belief, and *adat* (customary law). The ethnographic record was thus deeply compromised and, worse, these ethnic groups were rapidly disappearing due to culture contact. He believed that there was an urgent need to consider ethnographic variation and the state of social processes in a society as a result of culture contact and change. His view was that the consequences of overgeneralization and ignorance of change could have ramifications for both cultural survival and policy interventions, particularly in health care:

At the medical anthropological level, they hide the degree to which health is impaired by the stress of culture change, they also disguise both (1) the degree to which the indigenous health-relevant patterns of behavior are adaptations to a specific environment and also (2) the results to the health of a population of the failure to maintain such patterns due to the pressures of social change. Thus, the recurrent problems in Sabah social anthropology of the ethnic identification of sociocultural behavior and the delineation of the state of social processes in a society are basic but frequently ignored issues in studies of the health status of Sabah populations. (Appell 1968b, 22)

Furthermore, and as a consequence of this ignorance, he argued in such publications as *Dilemmas and Ethical Conflicts in Anthropological Inquiry* (Appell 1978a) that interventions in society are inherently unethical because one can never predict the consequences (Appell 1971b), bucking the trend at the time of increasing anthropological engagements with international development policy and practice. He argued passionately that the most “pernicious effects of development” (Appell 1975) were to deprive people of their human right to access their history, literature, and cultural traditions. These losses led to what he termed “Social Separation Syndrome” (1978b), a series of social-psychological reactions such as loss of self-esteem and deterioration of social identity, leading to social death followed by “social bereavement.” He believed that anthropologists could help to mitigate these impacts through salvage ethnology, returning access to people’s lost cultural traditions:

Just as the linking of past purposes to the future can aid the individual in working through his personal bereavement, so too does access to a society’s cultural traditions. If a people have access to their cultural traditions and are able to evaluate them positively, they have the resources to cope creatively with the social change and move into the future without apprehension. Otherwise, the threat of change can overwhelm, and apathy can set in. Thus, a people without a past, without a tradition, is like an amnesiac who cannot come to terms with the future until he has discovered who he is. (Appell 1978b, 18)

Here then was the basis for his call for *urgent anthropological research* in that first issue of the *Borneo Research Bulletin*, and later on the establishment of his various foundations to fund this work in Borneo and eventually throughout the developing world. While work on the *Rungus Cultural Dictionary* is continuing, the Firebird Foundation, now run by George and Laura Appell’s daughters, is expanding the documentation of oral literature to include work to preserve traditional ecological knowledge in societies worldwide. Appell described his philanthropic activities and underlying rationale in a collection of Urgent Anthropology Fellows’ writings, *Anthropology of Displaced Communities* (Layton 2020), while more on his life and work can be found in *Reflections*



on Borneo Ethnography: A Memorial Volume in Honor of George N. Appell (Doolittle, Warren-Appell, and Appell 2023).

wbiea2054
wbiea1907
wbiea1879
wbiea2376
wbiea2349
wbiea1324
wbiea2079

SEE ALSO: Endangered Cultures and Languages, Documentation of; Human Rights; Kinship Systems; Law and Anthropology; Property; Tobias, Phillip V. (1925–2012); Transnational and Multinational Corporations

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- AFUAR. 2020. "Royal Anthropological Institute and Anthropologists' Fund for Urgent Anthropological Research (AFUAR)." Accessed June 20, 2023, <https://therai.org.uk/awards/fellowships/urgent-anthropology-fellowship>.
- Appell, George N. n.d. "Complete Bibliography." Accessed June 19, 2023, <http://www.gnappell.org/biblio/completebiblio.htm>.
- Appell, George N. 1965. "The Nature of Social Groupings among the Rungus Dusun of Sabah, Malaysia." PhD diss., Australian National University.
- Appell, George N. 1966. "Residence and Ties of Kinship in a Cognatic Society: The Rungus Dusun of Sabah, Malaysia." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 22: 280–301.
- Appell, George N. 1968a. "Social Groupings among the Rungus, a Cognatic Society of Northern Borneo." *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 41 (2): 193–202.
- Appell, George N. 1968b. "A Survey of the Social and Medical Anthropology of Sabah: Retrospect and Prospect." *Behavior Science Notes* 3 (1): 1–54.
- Appell, George N. 1969. "Inventory of Urgent Anthropological Research for Borneo: I." *Borneo Research Bulletin* 1: 10–12.
- Appell, George N. 1971a. "Systems of Land Tenure in Borneo: A Problem in Ecological Determinism." *Borneo Research Bulletin* 3: 17–20.
- Appell, George N. 1971b. "Towards an Ethics for Anthropologists: Comments." *Current Anthropology* 12: 340–41.
- Appell, George N. 1975. "The Pernicious Effects of Development." *Fields within Fields* 14: 31–41.
- Appell, George N. 1976a. "Introduction." In *The Societies of Borneo: Explorations in the Theory of Cognatic Social Structure*, 1–16. Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association.
- Appell, George N. 1976b. "The Rungus: Social Structure in a Cognatic Society and Its Symbolism." In *The Societies of Borneo: Explorations in the Theory of Cognatic Social Structure*, 66–86. Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association.
- Appell, George N. 1978a. *Dilemmas and Ethical Conflicts in Anthropological Inquiry: A Case Book*. Waltham, MA: Crossroads Press.
- Appell, George N. 1978b. "Human Rights and the Extinction of Cultures: A Proposal for Government-Financed Salvage Ethnology." *Anthropology Newsletter* 19 (3): 18–19.
- Appell, George N. 1983. "Methodological Problems with the Concept of Corporation, Corporate Social Grouping, and Cognatic Descent Group." *American Ethnologist* 10: 302–11.
- Appell, George N. 1984. "Methodological Issues in the Corporation Redux." *American Ethnologist* 11: 815–17.
- Appell, George N. 1985. "Resettlement of the Bulusu' in Indonesian Borneo: Social Consequences." In "Resettlement of Peoples in Indonesian Borneo: The Social Anthropology of Administered Peoples," edited by George N. Appell. *Borneo Research Bulletin* 17: 21–31.
- Appell, George N. 1988. "Emergent Structuralism: The Design of an Inquiry System to Delineate the Production and Reduction of Social Forms." In *Choice and Morality in Anthropological Perspective: Essays in Honor of Professor Derek Freeman*, edited by George N. Appell and Triloki N. Madan. Buffalo: State University of New York Press.



- Appell, George N. 1990. "A Brief History of the Borneo Research Council." *Borneo Research Bulletin* 22: 184–89.
- Appell, George N. 1997. "The History of Research on Traditional Land Tenure and Tree Ownership in Borneo." *Borneo Research Bulletin* 28: 82–98.
- Appell, George N., and Laura W. R. Appell. n.d. "Sabah Oral Literature Project." Firebird Foundation. Accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.firebirdresearchgrants.org/sabah-oral-literature-project.html>.
- Appell, George N., and Laura W. R. Appell. 2012. *The Collection of Oral Literature and Traditional Ecological Knowledge: A Field Guide*. Phillips, ME: Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research.
- Appell-Warren, Laura P., Amity Appell-Doolittle, and Charity Appell McNab. 2021. George N. Appell. *Borneo Research Bulletin* 51: 11–16.
- Chan Chok Kuang, Henry. 1991. "Historical Development of the Belaga Kayans and their Land Tenure System: A Case Study of a Kayan Community in Sarawak." MPhil. diss., Institute for Advance Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.
- Doolittle, Amity A. 2011. *Property and Politics in Sabah, Malaysia: Native Struggles over Land Rights*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Doolittle, Amity, Laura Warren-Appell, and Charity R. Appell, eds. 2023. *Reflections on Borneo Ethnography: A Memorial Volume in Honor of George N. Appell*. Phillips, ME: Borneo Research Council.
- Dove, M. R. 1985. "The Kantu' System of Land Tenure: The Evolution of Tribal Rights in Borneo." In *Modernization and the Emergence of a Landless Peasantry: Essays on the Integration of Peripheries to Socioeconomic Centers*, edited by George N. Appell, 159–82. Williamsburg, VA: Studies in Third World Societies.
- Firebird Foundation. n.d. "Overview." Accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.firebirdresearchgrants.org/overview-firebird-foundation.html>.
- Freeman, J. Derek. 1955. *Iban Agriculture: A Report on the Shifting Cultivation of Hill Rice by the Iban of Sarawak*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Freeman, J. Derek. 1970. *Report on the Iban*. London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology 41. London: Athlone Press.
- Geddes, W. R. 1954. "Land Tenure of Land Dayaks." *Sarawak Museum Journal* 6: 42–51.
- Haar, Barend ter. 1962. *Adat Law in Indonesia*. Jakarta: Bhratara.
- Hallowell, A. Irving. 1943. "The Nature and Function of Property as a Social Institution." *Journal of Legal and Political Sociology* 1: 115–38.
- Layton, Robert, ed. 2020. *The Anthropology of Displaced Communities*. Canon Pyon, UK: RAI / Sean Kingston.
- Somiah, Vilashini. 2022. "The Sea is Indigenous 'Land' Too." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 37 (1): 85–112.



Queries

- Q1 Please supply between three and ten keywords for your article. These should be terms readers might search for to find your article.



FIRST PAGE PROOFS

The abstract and keywords will not be included in the PDF or any printed version of your article, but are necessary for publication on Wiley's online publishing platform to increase the discoverability of your article.

If the abstract and keywords are not present below, please take this opportunity to add them now.

The abstract should be a short paragraph up to 200 words in length and keywords between 5 to 10 words.

ABSTRACT

George N. Appell was an American anthropologist and philanthropist, known primarily as the ethnographer of the Rungus Momogan, a Dusunic-speaking group of Sabah, Malaysia, and the founder of academic institutions, publications, and foundations to support anthropological research among Indigenous peoples in Borneo and elsewhere. In his efforts to find a more universal analytical framework, free from cultural bias, he reframed the concept of social grouping as *jural rights to property*. In moving away from kinship, and turning instead to customary law, land tenure, and property inheritance as fundamental to social structure, he made an important contribution to developing legal anthropology. This turn also had important impacts on Appell's advocacy for Rungus land and human rights, which initially led to a twenty-three-year ban on further research in Sabah, but then to a lifetime of institution building and fundraising in support of Rungus, Bornean, and, eventually, all Indigenous peoples' rights to land, language, and culture.

KEYWORDS