

MIKE ROWLANDS 1944 – 2025



Another loss to anthropology and archaeology. Mike Rowlands died on July 19.

He was there at the funeral and at the tribute to Chris Tilley last November [Link] and I recalled first meeting him in 1979. It was at a conference about social theory that I helped organize with Keith Ray and Mark Gregson at St John's College Cambridge – his structural Marxist approach to prehistory was such a shaping scaffold for the development of social archaeology through the 80s and 90s.

I always admired his intellectual prowess, his inspirational Marxism, the impressively wide scope of his interests and expertise, covering archaeology, anthropology, material culture studies, heritage studies, social theory and the social sciences. Above all – the best of critical theory.



The memorial statement at the UCL website [Link] is quite a good summary of Mike's career. A more personal tribute comes from Francis B. Nyamnjoh, colleagues and collaborators in African Studies [Link].

Here's the statement from the UCL website.

Michael Rowlands was a leading figure in shaping the Department of Anthropology at UCL. As the inaugural member of what became the Material Culture section, he helped set its distinctive and globally influential intellectual agenda. Mike was UCL through and through, completing a BA in Anthropology (1966), followed by an

MPhil and PhD at UCL's Institute of Archaeology (1973). He was recruited immediately by M.G. Smith as a Lecturer, rising to Professor and serving as Head of Department (1992–1996). While his PhD focused on Bronze Age Europe, his subsequent anthropological research focused on Cameroon and other parts of West Africa, and, more recently, the study of heritage in China.

Mike was central to developing UCL Anthropology's signature broad-based approach. He uniquely reconfigured the relationships between archaeology, history, and anthropology, seeking to understand the contemporary world through the lens of long-term societal development. He actively grounded this vision in original research, conducting archaeological fieldwork (e.g. on ex-slave settlements in Brazil) alongside sustained ethnographic studies in Cameroon, demonstrating how each discipline enriches the others – an ethos that defines UCL Anthropology's distinctive profile. Our buoyant joint degree in Archaeology & Anthropology, which Mike co-founded alongside Chris Tilley, David Wengrow and others, is part of this legacy.

Mike was an integral member of an astonishing team of

West Africanists at UCL – including Mary Douglas, M.G. Smith and Phyllis Kaberry, among others – and co-founded the journal *Critique of Anthropology*. As its longstanding editor, he was known for arguing his views forcefully but always fraternally. Intellectually radical, he insisted ethnographic research must transcend the thick description of locality to engage with civilizational contexts and the *longue durée*. This approach is crystalised in his co-authored work with Stephan Feuchtwang, *Civilisation Recast* (2019). Collaboration was central to Mike's intellectual life, and he published extensively with major figures in global anthropology, including Jonathan Friedman, Peter Geschiere, Jean-Pierre Warnier, Stephan Feuchtwang, Francis Nyamnjoh, and Wang Mingming.

Mike was also a crucial presence in the ground-breaking work undertaken from the late-1990s onwards, across Anthropology and the Institute of Archaeology, that saw the synergies between material and visual culture, landscape studies and museum studies constellate into the formation of 'Heritage Studies'. This was a decisive turning point in the development of this area of research and teaching within UCL and globally. His

inspiration, thirst for knowledge and intellectual energy helped shape the MAs in Museum Ethnography and in Cultural Heritage Studies and galvanised the ever-popular course in Cultural Memory. Colleagues at the Institute of Archaeology, as well as generations of Masters' and PhD students, will continue to value and respect his significant insights, and his unerring ability to conjure up new, alternative and often unexpectedly brilliant perspectives on any and all topics under discussion.

Above all else, Mike was an intellectual. He epitomised the historical role of the university as the place where we seek a deeper understanding of our humanity and our world. Frequently, after lunch he would engage colleagues over fundamental issues about colonialism, civilization, materiality, and society, inspiring them and raising their capacity for intellectual engagement. His Marxism was not just politics, but rather an encompassing perspective on how political economies evolve over millennia through structural change, evident in key works like *The Evolution of Social Systems* (1978, co-edited with Friedman). Yet this intellectual ambition was always empirically anchored,

as landmark papers like “The Material Culture of Success” (1988) and “A Materialist Approach to Materiality” (2005) attest.

Mike’s abiding legacy is transforming material culture studies from a focus on objects into a profound philosophical exploration of the material basis of humanity itself. His charismatic personality and generous spirit will be remembered with great warmth and affection, and his intellectual influence will continue to radiate globally.