

Q: How would you describe academic freedom?

A: "Carpe diem! Seize the day!"

An academic love story

The Alumni Interview: Randi and Gunnar Håland

Professors Randi and Gunnar Håland have added colour and spice to life and research at UiB, and have built relations that have put Bergen on the world map. **TEXT** ELIN STENSVAND

For 50 of the almost 70 years since the University of Bergen (UiB) was founded, Randi and Gunnar Håland have written history: as researchers, writers, and as a married couple. Randi is now professor emerita at UiB's Department of Archaeology, while Gunnar is professor emeritus at UiB's Department of Social Anthropology.

Now retired, they spend a little bit more of their time at home than they used to. But, as the décor of their home shows, with walls and floors covered with books, pictures and artefacts from the couple's travels around the world, they still find time to travel and build on their international relations.

Of all their international work, the one with the University of Khartoum (UofK) stands out, and in September 2013, they were both back in Sudan to celebrate 50 years of collaboration between UiB and UofK; a collaboration they both pioneered.

The early years in Sudan

"In the early 1960s, the famous Norwegian social anthropologist Fredrik Barth was working on a UNESCO-funded professorship at UofK. During fieldwork in Darfur, he gave a lecture for the staff of an agricultural development project which the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) was executing in the region," says Gunnar.

"The project leadership became convinced that development was not only a matter of natural and economic resources, but also of human resources. Barth was asked if he would be available for a one-year consultancy, advising the project on how development inputs could be adapted to the existing social and cultural conditions of the population."

Having just received a professorship in Bergen, Barth was not able to accept the offer himself.

"He suggested that FAO could take me as his field assistant while he would be responsible for the report writing. FAO agreed, and employed me as a consultant. This was my first involvement in applied anthropology



^ **MAKING HISTORY:** Professors Randi and Gunnar Håland have left deep tracks in the history of UiB and beyond during their 50 years at the university. In 2008, the couple were both awarded the Norwegian King's Medal of Merit. This is the first time that a married couple has been awarded the medal on the same occasion. **PHOTO:** EIVIND SENNESET

and it came to shape my anthropological career fundamentally," explains Gunnar. "It made me aware of the importance of the interconnection between applied and basic research, the importance of interdisciplinary research, and the importance of exploring the interplay of local and global processes."

Randi's first involvement in Sudan started in 1965, when she joined Gunnar while he was an FAO consultant in Darfur.

"At that time we had a two-year old son, and this helped me to get closer to the local women. As an archaeology student at UiB, I became interested in how people in Darfur made pottery and brewed beer. These

are important parts of cultural traditions that archaeologists study on the basis of prehistoric remains," says Randi. "Here I had the opportunity to

“ To conduct interesting research, you need to have time to ‘fumble’ a bit. ”

explore these traditions in the world of living people. The insights I got from anthropology-like investigation is something I have benefitted enormously from in my attempts to

interpret remains of such traditions going 10,000 years back in time.”

Building respect

The fieldwork in Darfur alerted Gunnar to a range of questions that he wanted to explore further, and led him to take a two-year leave from UiB and work at the UofK on local wages – quite a risky prospect for a just married man with two young children.

"Luckily, Randi was soon employed by UofK on a similar contract, with responsibility to contribute to the establishment of their new Department of Archaeology. We did get by financially, but it was hard as nails. The kids struggled too; one in ▶

FACTS

Randi and Gunnar Håland

- Randi Håland was born in 1941 in Løten, in Hedmark County.
- Gunnar Håland was born in 1938 in Randaberg, outside Stavanger.
- The couple met at the last lecture given by the famous Norwegian historian and politician, Halvdan Koht, when Randi was 19 and Gunnar was 22.
- The couple has two sons, both now adults.
- Randi Håland became professor of African and Middle Eastern archaeology in 1988. She became the first female professor in archaeology in Norway. Her professorship was then the only on non-European archaeology in Norway.
- In the same year, 1988, Gunnar Håland became professor in social anthropology.
- They have conducted fieldwork and excavations from 1965 until the present.
- In 2006, they were awarded a prize for excellent research in comparative culture-historical studies by the Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture.
- Randi is a life member at the University of Cambridge.
- For the period 2000–2002, Randi was the first female President of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists (SAFA), and in 2004, she organised the biannual SAFA meeting in Bergen.

Randi agrees, up to a point, and mentions her early work securing funding from the Norwegian state aid organisation, NORAD, as an example.

“I had the opportunity to organise joint projects in research and teaching, a part of the quota programme, with staff and students from developing countries,” Randi says. “In consultation with my cooperating partners I could choose students I found promising for a project.”

Both Randi and Gunnar believe this degree of freedom is not present in today’s academia and that bureaucracy has taken over.

This freedom that you talk about; how would you describe it?

“Carpe diem! Seize the day,” exclaims Gunnar. “We were always

guided by our research interests. We were initially interested in history, and this led us both to the social sciences as the first disciplines in our undergraduate studies – Randi to sociology and anthropology, before she specialised in archaeology; and me to political science and economics, before I took on anthropology.”

Professional and personal

Being free spirits and seizing the day could, however, be stressful from time to time. Randi’s master’s degree and PhD were both in a discipline called Nordic Archaeology, but to square this with her work in Sudan was not always an easy task.

“There were times when I got depressed and thought, ‘Randi, why can’t you just work on something within the established way of doing archaeology in Norway? Something safe like our own cultural heritage of ‘sacred’ stones; why work on material so far from home?’ While I agree that our cultural heritage is important, I also believe that comparative studies might lead to insights that can stimulate new ways of exploring the Nordic pre-history,” she argues.

Is it possible at all to separate work and private life in your relationship?

“No! We always discuss academic issues, mainly because we have so many overlapping fields of interest. We approach each other with questions and play ideas back and forth,” replies Gunnar. “Many have the impression that we work as a unit – the Hålands. Sometimes we do work together, but most of the time we work in different places individually and with different material and conceptual approaches. But it’s probably good that we studied different disciplines and have worked in different departments at UiB. If we had worked at the same institute,

▶ an English school and the other in an English kindergarten,” he says about the family’s early days in Khartoum.

Did you ever hesitate about taking your young children to Sudan?

“Our parents were worried sick, but we found that we had to gamble in order to realise our professional interests, and it was unconceivable that we should not bring the children along. For us, it was obvious to travel to Sudan as a family, and that included the children,” says Randi.

However, arriving at UofK as a young woman academic from a small country was not easy.

“I think many expatriates in the archaeological community found it strange that I should play a central part in building the archaeology studies in Khartoum”, Randi says. “But gradually, the respect for my work grew and I built a solid network of researchers in Sudan, as well as internationally. By working within a Sudanese institution on a local salary, I became rather sensitive to the way foreign archaeological ‘missions’, with their access to financial resources, felt they could interfere in policies at national institutions.”

Freedom and fumbling

In the years since Randi and Gunnar first came to UiB, much has changed, in their lives, as well as in academia.

“The freedom we had in the past was amazing. Today there is more money around, but there is not the same degree of freedom that we had, particularly if your research interests are curiosity-oriented and not confined to the ideas formulated in a pre-conceived project proposal,” Gunnar argues about the ever more bureaucratic approach to project funding. “To conduct interesting research, I believe that you need to have time to ‘fumble’ a bit.”

BUILDING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: In their professional capacities (research, teaching and conferences), the couple have visited 7 countries in America, 13 in Europe, 14 in Africa and 14 in Asia, plus Australia and Easter Island. Their ties with Sudan, and in particular the Darfur region, have been strong. The top photo shows Randi riding a camel, while Gunnar is socialising with locals in the second photo from top. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF RANDI AND GUNNAR HÅLAND

4 The more you learn, the more curious you become. 99

our home probably would have been a madhouse!”

They both laugh.

A global perspective

In 1982, the Norwegian publisher Aschehoug published the first of 15 volumes in their encyclopaedic world history. The first volume, *I begynnelsen: fra de første mennesker til de første sivilisasjoner* (In the beginning: From the first humans to the first civilisations), was written by Randi and Gunnar Håland.

“We were at a Christmas party, with plenty of beer and aquavit, when Randi was asked to write the first chapter of the publisher’s comprehensive world history series,” says Gunnar.

Randi was reluctant to take on more work at the time, but after gentle persuasion by Gunnar, the couple decided to write the first volume together.

“This process affected us greatly. We had to deliver one chapter every month and became extremely overworked for a long period of time. Our Valium and Mogadon use rose sharply, as we both struggled to sleep. But we got through it somehow,” he says.

“Work on the book broadened our knowledge of the global perspectives that overarch the local observations that constitute the primary material of our fieldwork. This process gave us perspectives on related academic topics and broadened our knowledge base. This made it possible to discover how local phenomena were shaped by interactions that connected with much wider systems of interdepend-

ence,” says Randi. “Detailed knowledge of local material is important, but so is use of methodological and theoretical approaches that may lead you to discover wider global interconnections.”

Regrets? Too few to mention

You two don’t quite come across as ‘properly’ retired?

“No, I don’t think I could do that,” says Randi.

“Still today, as we travel abroad or at home, we often attend small everyday events that may trigger our curiosity,” adds Gunnar.

“The more you learn, the more curious you become, and there is this never-ending urge to discover new variations of the human condition. Nothing is ever final. In a way I consider us very privileged, being paid to do our hobby,” Randi says.

“Add to the curiosity, you also need to have love and passion for what you do,” Gunnar points out.

Randi and Gunnar Håland have had an adventurous life, but admit that they have taken great risks with both their life and health. But as for regrets?

“No, not really. We can’t see any more attractive life style than the one we have lived,” Gunnar says.

“Here we sit and are completely healthy, even after all the risks we have taken. We have walked and walked, and both experienced diseases that almost killed us. I contracted hepatitis in South Sudan, and Gunnar has had cerebral malaria and relapsing fever. The main thing that worries us is that our children may have suffered during our absences. Admittedly there have been periods of frustrations, but overall, life has been exciting, and there is still so much interesting stuff to explore,” says Randi. ●

