Relationships in the Making. Negotiating Knowledge Through Documentation

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Abstract

Museums these days work hard to document their collections through field research. They also work hard to negotiate the meaning and implications of gathering this knowledge. Conventional Enlightenment conceptions of knowledge form part of the context in which museums, and indeed, anthropologists within the academy, undertake these negotiations. As an approach, Enlightenment knowledge making often results in outcomes that are inaccessible or unusable to the people anthropologists claim to know about, potentially perpetuating inequalities. This paper considers this dilemma in the context of an initiative recently launched at the British Museum called the Endangered Material Knowledge Project, aiming to document 'endangered knowledge'. The paper focuses on documentation as a mode of making knowledge, using comparative historical and contemporary material about Reite villagers on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea. Reflecting on documentation in the light of their interest in it, I explore how it might be possible to develop the practice of documentation in a manner that is 'responsive' to different conceptions of knowledge, and its value.

Relationships in the Making: Negotiating knowledge through documentation. [1]

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'In art the spirit is to the matter as the soul is to the body immanent but indistinguishable, apprehensible to the eye of faith, but so completely coterminous with the material that it is perfectly possible for those so minded to deny its existence' (Willaim Fagg 1953:7).

Documenting knowledge traditions is at the heart of the anthropological enterprise, and knowledge traditions are bound to social forms. Consideration of how we go about recording knowledge prompts refection on what our basis for comparison is (Candea 2019: xi, passim), and, in fact, the assumptions about the grounds of comparison we use in undertaking documentation itself. This essay is framed by the question, 'under what political and practical conditions do we make knowledge?' Isabelle Stengers has recently discussed the possibility for comparison as a political and ethical enterprise; that is to say, 'no comparison is legitimate if the parties compared cannot each present his own version of what the comparison is about; and each must be able to resist the imposition of irrelevant criteria. In other words, comparison must not be unilateral and, especially, must not be conducted in the language of just one of the parties' (2011: 56). In this paper, the mode of comparison adopted is an attempt to try to

hold onto two ways of looking at a thing (knowledge) at once during the process of documentation, and not, as is perhaps more familiar, to compare things using a common measure. When it comes to knowledge, the pervasive assumption of a common measure lies behind the concerns that this essay highlights. It is a complex terrain, something William Buller Fagg, to whose memory this essay is dedicated, would surely not have been shy to tread.

I will draw on ethnographic work in Papua New Guinea, along side the work of several other scholars, to focus on documentation as a mode of making knowledge. Using historical and contemporary material about Reite villagers on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea, I will draw upon their 'knowledge tradition' (Verran and Christie 2014: 61)[2], which I characterize as a practice of 'knowledge as relationship'. Reflecting on documentation in the light of their interest, and aiming not to be 'unilateral', the idea is to explore how it might be possible to develop the practice of documentation, a practice at the heart of anthropology, in a manner that is 'responsive' to different conceptions of knowledge, and of its value.

The essay then considers the documentation of material and cultural practices, and it does so in the context of the Endangered Material Knowledge Program at the British Museum, a new initiative that, 'has been established to enable the ethnographic documentation of knowledge associated with objects and the built

environment, with a regional focus on the global south. The documentation is to be made available through an open access digital repository. The Endangered Material Knowledge Program will not focus only on the objects in museum collections, it will support research on objects as they are being made and used' (Bolton, forthcoming: 2). As the Funder's, Arcardia Fund, express it, they support EMKP and other documentation programs to 'serve humanity'.

> Arcadia serves humanity by preserving endangered cultural heritage and ecosystems. We protect complexity and work against the entropy of ravaged and thereby starkly simplified natural environments and globalized cultures. Innovation and change occur best in already complex systems. Once memories, knowledge, skills, variety, and intricacy disappear – once the old complexities are lost – they are hard to replicate or replace.[3]

Endangerment implies threat, an existential matter, one even of life and death. So, perhaps, it will not come as a surprise that the discussion leads us to consider different temporalities, even mortality and immortality, and to consider aspects of 'loss' and 'return' that take us quite a distance, in the journey, from the idea that knowledge is something out there to be documented, or otherwise it will be lost.

One of William Fagg's many acknowledged contributions was to change perceptions of the *temporality* of African art. As John Picton wrote in his appreciation, 'He took African art out of the myth of primitivism and placed it within the context of African social history,…' (Picton 1994: 26). Fagg was keen to highlight individual artists as people to engage with, and drew on his relationships with them. He worked to see that their contributions could be acknowledged for what they were – historically, situated, art (see also Benthal 2015: 1). I will, also, be drawing attention to a particular temporality, not to an approach to art, but to knowledge making itself. I will point out how knowledge is something we make with other people, yet we also have an image of knowledge as timeless universal, one that transcends any era or producer. It is this kind of knowledge that Arcadia wishes to preserve for humanity, and apparently has most value. The negative of this image of knowledge is that sometimes it can work against keeping the relationships involved in that making, in view.

The essay has a specific purpose, supportive of the Endangered Material Knowledge Program. That is, to contextualise and to situate documentation so the Program may lead the way, responsive to both its own conditions of existence, and to the practical and conceptual worlds that it seeks to document.

The Enlightenment Knowledge approach

I open with the observation that many anthropologists are deeply involved in the everyday negotiation of their presence in different fieldwork contexts (see Kulick 2019: 76-88 for a recent vivid discussion). And for Museum's, the ever-present requirement to negotiate the value of their holdings (and indeed, their knowledge) are increasingly prominent. As the Director of the EMKP wrote recently, 'These issues are to do with the kinds of moral work that museums are often now required to do on behalf of wider society.' By moral work, she means 'the work of reparation and restitution for past wrongs, especially wrongs committed in the colonial era.' Reflecting on the program, she continues that, 'EMKP also draws attention to issues to do with epistemology, to how people understand and control knowledge in and around museums' (Bolton Forthcoming: 1).

I am going to outline what I consider to be part of the problematic behind the issues that EMKP provides an opportunity to consider. Put starkly, it may be a reliance on conventional Enlightenment conceptions of knowledge. Assumptions about knowledge that have prevailed and developed since the European Enlightenment impel a perfectly rational process in which removal, appropriation, and recontextualisation seem natural: realising the value of data collection by adding expertise, and preserving the outcome in a reified space. However, such spaces, and even the knowledge archive, repeatedly prove

inadequate for or inaccessible to the people about which they claim to know (Verran and Christie, 2014: 58-9). As such, texts, and archives may also be read as an artefact of the particular assumptions and inequalities that underlie the Enlightenment knowledge tradition.

While many historical collections and most contemporary scholars actively struggle with(in) a frame that requires we balance institutional, disciplinary, and interpersonal expectations and demands, those very separations remain a formative, everyday, problematic. One practical solution, and one that many of us have followed, has been to distance ones' interpersonal obligations to informants (ie., the relations we have in the field) from one's professional obligations to 'knowledge production'. The former feed the latter, but disappear in the final knowledge product. But this solution is repeatedly called out as inadequate as the assumption of discrete spheres of expert practice, and of practitioner knowledge, become increasingly blurred.

Enlightenment knowledge practices tend to render things 'knowledge' and therefore valuable and accessible, exactly when separated from their producers, that is, when made public, comprehensible, and verifiable (Leach 2012: 80, Leach and Davis, 2012: 214). It is a profoundly alienated and alienating view of knowledge in which knowledge must be abstracted and reified, made distinct from the relations in which it has specific local value, and represented as of

more value when it takes a common, 'universal' form. In Arcadia's terms, something of value to a wide and generalised 'humanity'. Stripped of what makes it local or personal, knowledge becomes comparable with other instances of the same phenomenon, and thus of value as a contribution to a corpus, an image of an abstracted and existent 'knowledge' that transcends, that is beyond any specific realisation, waiting 'to be' documented.

This knowledge making process reshapes knowing and experience by re-making the relations in which knowledge exists, and in which it has value. As Stengers writes: 'Commensurability is created and it is never neutral, always relative to an aim. The ethical and political challenge begins with the aim' (2011: 55). Enlightenment universalism (if I may call it that) assumes that this is a positive and natural development. This naturalisation masks how the process creates value for the experts and the holders of knowledge. Yet in many contemporary claims, it apparently removes something vital from the original creators or users themselves.

In light of the diagnosis, I wonder if we can make the form of knowledge, of documentation, responsive to a different problematic?

By looking at Melanesian ways of understanding the value of knowledge, I will here suggest, as an alternative, another image for knowledge; as something that

is not possessed by one about others, but as formative of relationships. It suggests a process whereby documentation does not extract knowledge but *is where* the conversation about the value of preservation or circulation is played out. This thought does not arise out of the blue.

Relational knowledge

Between 2005 and 2010, the British Museum hosted the Melanesia Project, an initiative that in the words of Nick Thomas, sought to, 'bridge the gulf' between Melanesian peoples, 'and the institutions, collections and critical traditions associated with Western museums and Western anthropology' (Thomas 2013: xi). The Melanesia Project was one example of many initiatives, and I only refer to it in particular (ie. in preference to others) as it was through that project that the possibility of experimenting with documentation forms began to engage my long term interlocutors in Papua New Guinea.

Underlying the approach of the Melanesia Project was the same serious issue: whether and how relationships can be sustained through objects (and knowledge) that, in some sense, are, at the least, under the guardianship of a western institution. While many rail against possession, as Lissant Bolton points out, a vision of ownership as the relationship between a single person or institution and an object is challenged by the way objects in Melanesia are used

to, 'hold open' relationships between parties. Objects, she implies, importantly sustain a nexus of many relations: including those of obligation, of interest, and of value.

We could usefully transfer Bolton's thinking about objects to documentation. She wrote, 'when objects are treated as the means to a relationship, then the key issue is *the relationship itself*, and the importance of the object is whether or not it is still of use in constituting that *connection*' (2013: 332 emphasis added). If we do transfer this thinking to documentation, we will surely have to examine *how and what kind of connections* documentation constitutes. In what follows, I will suggest an attitude, as much as a method, which propels an interest to make *documentation itself* a process, a relationship, responsive to an understanding that there are different ways of doing knowledge, and different modes for value to accrue in those processes. In doing so, I will look at the particular way one Melanesian approach to documentation draws upon their cosmo-temporality to address the issue of knowledge loss.

When William Fagg wrote that 'In art the spirit is to the matter… completely coterminous with the material' (1953: 7), he could have been describing the way the Papua New Guinea villagers I work with consider knowledge itself. For them, knowledge is not something outside its material form, is not useful or powerful when abstracted from the relations of its circulation and use. The

following draws on this understanding of knowledge to suggest how the documentation process might be shaped by a different form of knowledge making relation, and how the result of this process could move apart from a model of knowledge that leaves interpersonal debts (or relations), or politics and claims, as a kind of 'remainder' of the knowledge making process.

Fagg was successful in transforming the interest in ethnographic collections into a new source of engagement. In this place and time, how can we build on his legacy, and document material knowledge practices? I turn now to some detail about a specific example in Papua New Guinea.

Documentation in Reite

Reite village is a collection of hamlets of Nekgini speaking people located about 10km inland on the Rai Coast of Madang Province on the North Coast of Papua New Guinea. Nekgini is a small language group of around 1200 speakers who live by horticulture and hunting in a rainforest environment. They cultivate taro and yam, supplemented by other vegetables and more recently introduced crops. Nekgini speakers plant taro and yam following strict and often complex processes specified in their taro myth. They had (and continue to have) a strong sense of their distinctiveness as people who consciously choose to live by ancestral practice (*kastom*).

My association with Reite began in the early 1990's when I was enthusiastically welcomed there to undertake anthropological fieldwork. The enthusiasm was helpful, but they had their own reasons for engaging me (see Leach 2003: 10-11). During negotiations around my arrival and presence, Reite people stated clearly that I was welcome as a student who was trained to write about *kastom* and history. Reite people told me that they wanted their *kastom* written down for future generations, and as a means to achieve recognition from the wider world. They clearly understood they were in a relationship with me involving documentation of their knowledge.

This brought my version of knowledge into contact with theirs in ways that regularly surprised me. In many instances, I was expected to recognise key myths for example, and respond to their revelation. My lack of response to what they considered was knowledge that I must already share was a disappointment to my interlocutors, and the process was also problematic in that they did not feel the need to elaborate or contextualise. In fact, disappointment sometimes resulted in withdrawl from the process. Information they offered was often partial. Investigations of genealogy always seemed to turn to demonstrations of connections to particular myths or stories, rather than a comprehensive map of who was related to whom. The latter was what I needed for rigorous data collection, the former was the point of the exercise for them – to establish a

three way relationship between powerful deity, myself, and themselves. What they thought was important to tell me related to what they thought the purpose of the exercise was.

What was clear was that the relationship with me, and texts, were a potential vehicle in their understanding for making Reite *kastom* into a form that might have more directly beneficial outcomes (practical, material outcomes) than those they had achieved to date with 'white people'.[4] They hoped their knowledge was the basis for a productive relationship. And in fact, Reite people had already had a history of seeking productive interactions with white people through the material forms of written records, and the circulation of documents. It is revealing to consider what expectations and assumptions they had in those experiences.

Colonial documents

Rai Coast people were colonised by the Germans around the turn of the 20thC and subsequently administered by Australia. A long way outside the practical, everyday orbit of any administrator, a Lutheran mission station was opened on the coast in the early 1900's, and labour migration for plantation work and mining was sporadically imposed or encouraged during the first half of the last century (Lawrence 1964: 42-3). First missionised by native mission workers in

1936, Nekgini speakers at first adopted the new religion of the colonising power before subsequently rejecting it and self-consciously re-adopting what became called '*kastom*', that is, ritual and religious activities that they identified as linked to taro and yam cultivation, and practicing a musical male cult that requires initiation and long periods of abstinence and restriction.

Reite were not unique in rejecting missionisation. It certainly did not mean that they were uninterested in, and unaffected by, the colonial power. The Rai Coast, and parts of Madang province have been the site of some of the most famous re-interpretations and creative engagements with colonial rule that go under the name of 'Cargo Cult', in the Pacific. The foremost mid-century anthropological account of these is that of Peter Lawrence. He writes that, 'New Guinea Cargo cult', 'is based on the native's belief that European goods (cargo) – ships, aircraft, trade articles, and military equipment – are not man made but have to be obtained from a non human or divine source. It expresses its follower's dissatisfaction with their status in colonial society…'.[5] In the case of Reite, some rejected missionaries in the hope of rebalancing the power differentials they perceived between themselves and white people. Writing and documents have played a significant role in this history of responding to colonialism.

Colonial control was visible in and made apparent by the introduction of religious texts (the Bible) and administrative forms and orders. These two were

inevitably bound together in local perception, as, 'Historically, literacy [….],

like virtually everywhere … in the Pacific region, was introduced in Christian

contexts' (Kulick and Stroud 1990: 290). As Lawrence recounts, 'After 1904,

each village or hamlet cluster was placed under a native headman or *luluai* …

who had to maintain order, guard the village census book, report epidemics and

settle minor disputes' (1964:42-3). The census book, the written order, the bible

knowledge and admonition of the catechist, were the material forms in which

colonial power appeared. Lawrence tells us that on the Rai Coast, 'the natives

decided to become Christian partly from political motives' (ibid. 74) and this

was bound to the use of documents. Villagers could not accept that the new way

of life represented by the material trappings of colonial power did not go

alongside the new religion that 'would explain and validate it in the same way'

(ibid). It is unsurprising that reading and writing, and documents themselves,

were considered the technology through which power was exercised. Note that

Christianity was linked *through literacy and documents* to colonial power, not

as a transcendent spirit (God) but as a practical method of achieving power.

On the Rai Coast an overstretched administration attempted to make alliances

with local leaders after World War Two in order to bring control. This was the

period of the famous 'cult' leader Yali, who for long periods had administrative

backing. Lawrence reports that Yali was deeply concerned about his standing in

the eyes of the administration, and was highly competitive with the missions for

authority. Believing himself to have been given permission, even encouragement, to revive and practice ancestral forms of religion (*kastom*) set him on a collision course with the Missions who were the de-facto educators and bringers of colonial change into Rai Coast people's lives. Lawrence describes a growing 'bureaucracy' around Yali on the Rai Coast. He was illiterate, but many of his followers, 'styled themselves as his secretaries, dealing with his correspondence, compiling lists of workers, and writing down his instructions' (ibid. 145). Lawrence goes on to note rather disparagingly in a footnote that, 'the documents show no appreciation of the meaning of letter-writing and the material they contained could have been better handled verbally. They served more than anything else to enhance the writers' importance' (ibid. 145 f2).

Nevertheless, 'Yali was encouraged to draw up a set of "laws", combining the best features of the two cultures, for native society. [He] .. spent a great deal of time drafting several documents in Pidgin English. One document listed influential supporters…. Another the procedures for ordering goods from the stores… setting out old and new 'laws' … organisation of work in the village, house-building, marriage rules,… water rights, reef rights, land rights, funeral ceremonies…; the use of sorcery and love magic [etc.]' (Lawrence 1964: 172). Lawrence tells us that 'according to Yali, the Administrator told him personally … that he fully approved of the 'Laws'… After these remarks, *Yali believed that his victory over the missions was complete*: he need brook no further

interference from them' (Lawrence 1964: 75 emphasis added). Victory (power) was gained by the activity of making and circulating documents.

Documents and writing were the way of acting and doing 'law' and 'knowledge' appropriate to the new interaction. The actual *content* (as Don Kulick and Christopher Stroud long ago showed) was not the issue (1992: 289). Words could be misleading, it was clear the Bible was not complete (as it had no mention of how to achieve equality with and the material wealth of the whites), etc. So it was in the doing of documents, not what they contained, that power might be gained. Part of my argument is that Rai Coast people saw writing, and documentation as *actions*.

We cannot possibly read Reite people's enthusiasm for an anthropologist writing about their *kastom* and history in any other context than this perception of the power of paper and documents in engaging with new manifestations of the power of life and death that they always claim was theirs. What then, we might ask, does documenting *kastom*, as traditional or ancestral 'knowledge' look like if it is an action in itself, if it is the doing of it, rather than the content, that is important?

'Knowledge' as Rai Coast people understand it, requires a relation, both for it to be acquired, and for it to manifest. Relationships themselves are coveted, and

what is 'owned' about knowledge might be said to be the relationships it constitutes. Rai Coast objectifications of knowledge (of which documents, records, and writings are a novel instance) can be seen as (more or less successful) moments and experiments in forming or transforming relations. This casts a series of inflections on 'knowledge' that have come to shape the practice of documentation. For example, my willingness to engage with their project of seeking more equitable relations and recognition was interpreted as evidence of a prior connection to them. It was assumed I was already related. Hence the misunderstandings during 'data collection' alluded to earlier. And this speaks to a particular cast to and temporality for knowledge in their valuation. Its appearance is always in the context of shaping or effecting other's responses, growth, or capacities.

Pre-figured relations

I his 2013 monograph 'Names are Thicker than Blood', The Director of the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery, Andrew Moutu, is candid about a 'major stress' he experienced during fieldwork among the Iatmul of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea. The source of this stress was he perceived that he would be unable to fulfil all the financial expectations of his adopted family in the Iatmul village where he resided and worked. In this context, Moutu also discusses openly the demands, and the complaints, of his Iatmul hosts. Hosts, I

hasten to add, whom he lavishly praises for their wisdom and generosity. The demands, and complaints, were specifically motivated by their perceptions of the value of what he was learning among them, and how that value would be realisable by him in other contexts (2013: 3-5).

Now it is familiar for anthropologists to use such moments, such aspects of a relationship, as more data. They can be aggregated and analysed as part of building the picture of a whole – the thinking or assumptions that lie behind Iatmul people's actions. Moutu's refreshing openness helps us understand the situation of his fieldwork and the thinking of Iatmul people. But he has another concern as well, one which takes his brilliant ethnography in a similar direction to those projects I mentioned in the introduction: projects in which Museums have been experimenting with ways of using collections that build sustained relationships with source communities and object producers.

Moutu draws attention to ontological and epistemological differentiation. He contends that anthropology has been mainly determined by an Enlightenment or 'Western' analytic project to understand other societies. He writes, 'This book offers a comment on that endeavour, and focuses on the way in which social relations are assumed and prefigured in its methodological approach in data-gathering and in the subsequent theorisation (2013: 1). The reference to 'data-gathering' is the part of his sophisticated argument that I wish to draw attention

to. Data gathering is always about social relations. But does it, Moutu asks, always have to 'pre-figure' them? In order to see what an answer might look like, consider for a moment what Moutu means by 'pre-figure relations'. How does an approach to ethnographic work as 'data collection' pre-figure the outcome? According to Moutu, it is an approach that assumes that people (Iatmul, anyone) are living their daily lives and in that process 'doing' their society or their culture (or craft making, knowledge creation etc.) and the researcher is there to collect data about what they do. What is collected is then recontextualised outside the relations in which the researcher gathers the data and thus the researcher has knowledge about these things that is external to the relations in which the data was gathered. 'Data collection' prefigures the relations studied (as culture) and the relation between data gathering and outcome. Moutu explicitly challenges this process of prefiguration. And he does so, 'from the viewpoint of a Melanesian scholar', from a Melanesian viewpoint.

A new engagement with documents

In 2014 I began a collaborative project, which is called Traditional Knowledge Reite Notebooks or TKRN with people in Reite village, and with the artist/designer Giles Lane, to develop a documentation system that we, and other rural people, could use to record and transmit Traditional Knowledge.[6] The impetus was very much from the side of Reite villagers. This is important. From

my first arrival as an anthropology student 25 years ago, Reite people have

supported and encouraged the writing down of their '*kastom*'. They are still

experimenting with what this might mean. The 2014 project grew from the

desire of particular people to make records 'to link them with future

generations' (Nombo and Leach 2010: vii-x), and to find a way that this could

be achieved using simple, locally available materials, and also in a manner that

took account (to the extent possible), of a relational, personal and processual

form that knowledge and knowledge exchanges take in the area (Leach 2012:

259-60).

We began by drawing on Giles's work developing a system for 'public

authoring'. Reite villagers Porer Nombo and Pinbin Sisau had met Giles and

began exploring his publishing system during a visit to the British Museum

under the auspices of the Melanesia Project in 2009 (Nombo and Sisau, 2013:

92). 'Public Authoring' is based on a paper folding technique that allows

commonly used paper formats to be hand modified into self-binding booklets.[7]

These booklets require simple tools, and yet are designed to become hybrid

entities existing both physically and digitally. PDF templates are created that are

the basis for the booklets. When printed out, the sheets are cut and folded. The

templates can be designed with different rubrics, questions, information etc.

They are then available to people to fill in any way they see fit. More or less

guidance or direction is possible when designing specific templates. Once

complete, the booklets can be unfolded and scanned, offering a potentially more durable digital copy of the original. Digital files can be printed and re-folded to provide a facsimile. The scans can be stored, combined with others to generate a series, or set etc., and shared through digital media formats if so desired.

A relationship with Giles and his booklets offered a way to experiment and we began what we thought of as an extended 'co-design' process of templates and a process/protocol for their use. This involved intense discussions of what templates for specific booklets that would be useful to villagers would look like, and with many public meetings in Reite hamlets gauging interest, concerns, opposition, and receiving advice.

From the outset we recognized the importance of embedding clear and unambiguous information about the project, its aims and limits, and thus conscious and informed agreement by participants. Authors are asked to indicate on the front cover that they have understood that TKRN provides materials with which they can, if they so choose, make a personal document about something. They are asked to indicate the scope of sharing for the particular booklet that is produced. The possibilities range from completely private (they can just keep the booklet) to scanned and returned to them as a digital copy, to various other restrictions on circulation (such as perhaps limited to 'family', 'village', 'women', etc.). These discussions have led to evolving iterations and have been

an important mode of engagement with the idea of documenting *kastom* in the first place. While far from perfect the requirement to consider circulation makes awareness of the possibility of appropriation, and in response, the potential for absolute control (and indeed, the totally voluntary nature of using the templates) impossible to miss. We came to call this method 'engaged consent'. It is a moment where the writer of the booklet considers their intentions and interest in the outcome. The emphasis is firmly on the wishes of those filling in the booklets rather than on asking them to agree to an already established framework that absolves the documenter of responsibility.

Alongside this 'engaged consent' section on the front cover of each booklet is a space for a photograph of the writer and their name, place, date, and title. The photograph helps to make evident a personal connection. By attaching the photographs and maintaining the digitized records as facsimiles of the original booklets (the hand-made originals) the process keeps writers in view. Whatever they choose to record appears in their handwriting, and in a booklet that was hand made by them. While obviously never capable of addressing a complex interleaving of knowledge and person, the format does make a move in that direction.

The spontaneous introduction of drawing into many of the booklets is significant. Of course, artistry is a key aspect of any process involving

knowledge, as aesthetic effect is crucial to the demonstration of power in Reite initiation, ceremony, and exchange. 'Knowledge' looks like a relation to or manifestation of a particular kind of power here, and much of that power is the effect one can have on the reactions or actions of others.

The fact that people independently decided on the topic and scope of their documents made for interesting outcomes. For example, many people recorded the 'same' things. Taro and yam figure prominently, with levels of detail from complex and intricate to very minimal, and differently phrased accounts of taro and its origins, gardening techniques, and so forth. Reite people did not show any concern over repetition, or duplication.

Most, if not all, however careful, are *incomplete* in some way. Booklets are more often than not *indicative* of a story or process than a complete rendering of it. Even those who are most vocal advocates of the booklet project have not used it to make a comprehensive record of knowledge that is in 'danger' of being 'lost'. Most records are of things that are quite well 'known'. There has been no systematic effort to use them with frail old people, nor seemingly to prioritise rare or esoteric knowledge.

Is this just indicative of the fact they did not understand the purpose or potential of documentation to preserve their kastom? I think not. In fact, it reflects the fact

that there is no sense of an existential need to document *knowledge as such*.

Documentation is something else and the desire for documentation does not

come from the same aesthetic of knowledge as that of the Enlightenment

tradition.

As Tony Crook has argued, the 'modern' impulse to document knowledge arises

in a form of temporality in which there are objects or units of information that

disappear if not transmitted or recorded (2007: 10-11). We fear the loss of

knowledge because the past recedes, and we and cannot go back and retrieve

something that is gone.

Reite people deliberately leave things out. One interpretation is that showing

that there is knowledge is an invitation to a further relationship. In fact, many

things that are in referred to in the booklets *require* a specific relationship to the

documenter to be effective. Taboos have to be followed, and obligations to

particular persons who revealed the 'knowledge' are necessary to 'knowing' it –

that is, for it to 'work'. Documenting is an invitation to a relationship, where

people are not working with a conception of knowledge that requires a

comprehensive record. And this is a core point – the booklets are doing other

things. In fact, the booklets are a 'doing'. They are a performance of knowing, a

process in which knowledge is shown to be a resource for connection and

future/past relations to coalesce.

Although (or perhaps because) the booklet form was intended as a way of facilitating Reite documentation processes for their own ends, it has been revealing how closely I am implicated in their production. We found consistently that people did not engage in making booklets unless I was physically there in the village. In some ways, this confirmed that documentation is tied into expectations and interest in a relationship with me, and to future exchange. More widely, that knowledge and its performance requires a relationship to motivate action. And perhaps even more interestingly, incompleteness was completely deliberate in many cases, and explicitly motivated. Documentation is of a capacity for having an effect, not of a series of knowledge-objects that lined up together could be called 'encyclopedic' or 'comprehensive'. In this we see, perhaps most clearly, how different the image of knowledge is to that of Arcadia.

Reite people have already adapted the form of attribution that we carefully thought out. They have innovated on the mode for keeping things attached to persons. Many of the booklets now name the children or grandchildren of the actual writer as the author. They substitute pictures of these children for the picture of the writer, and use that child's name on the cover in the consent and circulation rubric. Just as it does not seem necessary to these documenters to agree a canonical form for *kastom,* a concern with 'authorship' as such is not the

point. Having multiple versions of the same story demonstrates a desire not to divide labour and document everything, but to claim a connection with certain important things. Likewise the subversion of generations is revealing about what they think documentation as an action, can achieve. Placing the child on the cover is like putting that knowledge into the future. 'Loss' is directly obviated as the transfer is already made. 'Loss' effectively disappears.

As an anthropologist from a tradition of modernist knowledge, I was concerned about making content comprehensible, about if the booklet survives or not, how village people can access it, and so forth. These were not their concerns. Questions about the form and content of TKRN documents that concerned Reite people have been more about an aesthetic of effectiveness than about completeness or preservation despite their initial request to make things for future generations. How can we understand this?

I suggest we think about revelation as a material practice. Not the material manifestation (inscription) of an abstract 'knowledge' that somehow lies elsewhere, but the very thing itself. Talk is a material practice, with breath and flesh shaping sound and travelling though the medium of the air, effected by the acoustic properties of the spaces and structures in which it happens. Making a document is a material practice in which the *process* of transmission is the *material*, it is not something that happens to knowledge that lies somehow

elsewhere or outside the transmission. And much of the transmission of 'knowledge' in Reite is in hiding, staging, diverting attention, and in distributing responsibility and separating people (Leach 2003: 79-87). Knowledge is not 'there to be revealed', but *is the revelation* or the dissemination, is the meeting of initiate and initiator.

The base of taro

I would like to dwell for a moment on a particular booklet, representative in its way. Musir Hungeme produced a short booklet called the 'Foundation/Base of Taro'. In this booklet, Musir talks of seemingly unrelated things. There is a stream (Holiting) in his lands. He was cautioned strongly by his father that he must not eat the fresh water snails that live in this stream as it is the foundation or base of taro. Eating the snails will result in blocked ears, in inability to hear what other people are saying, in ear infections with milky pus, and eventually in deafness.

That is the extent of the content of the booklet. It amounts to a rendition of a series of linkages between people and place, people and water, particular streams, and the animals that reside there, how they are treated, and the further (hugely significant) 'taro', both the subsistence staple, and the deity that is the basis of the male cult. In this one short booklet (only 100 words in all), links and connections, consequences and responsibilities, knowledge and practice are all

materials that are connected in Musir and his father, and his children. To an outsider they seem extraordinary – ranging wildly across scales and modes of understanding and effect.

Clearly the booklet has effect and consequence, the paper and the process now enrolled in a cosmic play of positioning persons and power over fundamental materials and processes. The 'documentation' is a drawing together of connection and its particular revelation as something he was doing with Giles and I. It is the snails and the water, where the water flows to, and how that connects landscapes of myth, knowing and practice, and how people's practice and action is a part of these series of connections such that effects are within particular bodies.

To appreciate the force of this, in relation to documentation, I make one final (apparent) diversion into a Reite temporality.

Immortal plants and an immanentist cosmo-temporality

In her Foerster Lecture of 2018, Marilyn Strathern considered the capacity of some (staple food) crops in Melanesia to self-replicate asexually. That is, both taro and yam are replanted each year from parts of the self same corm/ tuber that

is also eaten. Reproduction is a form of 'cloning' (2018: 11) she argues, where the same plant is grown or regrown year after year.

In Reite, a short portion of the top of the yam tuber is retained while the rest is cooked and eaten. This 'head' is replanted in the subsequent year's garden, and regrows. The plant is the same, and life is thus continuous over many generations. As Strathern writes (about yam growing in other places than Reite), 'it is the bit of the corm or tuber that is cut off or otherwise separated from what is to be eaten that provides the nourishment for the new corm or tuber that grows in its stead. What is eventually harvested is in effect a 'replacement' for the piece that was planted, frequently imagined as a parent, whether father or mother, who dries up, shrivels and dies away' (Strathern 2018: 12). Reite people insist, for example, that yam was and is a deity, and the yam deity gave Reite people the knowledge and processes of yam cultivation alongside the original strain of yam. The deity 'disappeared' after instructing Reite ancestors in how to grow (himself) but said he would always be with them when they followed his process and planted yams. Yams are replanted in the name and breath/voice/tune of the yam deity each year. *The deity* regrows. He does not enter into the plant. He is the plant.

It is not just plants that are regrown. People take the names of their grandfather's generation in Reite. They follow their ancestors' words and their actions in

relating to yam. As Strathern writes, 'the identification of the present planter with his or her predecessor, the one whom he or she has 'replaced', is repeated over and again (Strathern 2018: 12). By linking cloning and immortality, Starthern redirects our attention as to where life may be continued without recourse to a transcendental soul or spirit, and how life (and death) are 'immanent' in the very processes of material transformations. Looking at Reite material, it is all too easy to follow familiar patterns of understanding matter and spirit in an Enlightenment mode. That is, to see the garden magician calling on the spirits to come and animate or grow his crops. But Reite people insist that the yam and the deity are the same. That planting and calling are not different processes, they are the way you bring yams into life and how the garden is grown. Knowledge is not separate from the practice, not an addition, just as the life of the yam is not added or additional to its substance and matter. Planting yam is a doing, a doing of knowing that wraps the doer into a history and a future replete with other people who are related through the action of planting.

Life (and death for Strathern) are immanent in cosmologies such as Reite. This gives us a counterpart in thought and understanding; a conception of knowledge here as action, effect, and relationship. Knowledge is not a transcendent realm of ideas and stories, magical formula and material practices, knowledge is immanent in the very processes of relating to particular people and places. The format is not where knowledge is contained, but is itself a practice of knowledge

as the making of relations. I believe Musir was considering documenting 'base of taro' in similar terms.

Musir's booklet is not making material an idea, it is not the documentation of an idea or a knowledge that is elsewhere, it is the idea and the knowledge as a material practice that is not the same as the material practice of collecting snails for making calcinated lime, or planting taro. Those practices are here caught up by the booklets in other processes that Reite people desire or adapt to – processes that include anthropologists, missionaries, colonial and post-colonial administrations and new contexts for relations with their past and future.

There is also reason in this for Reite people's lack of concern with the material manifestation of their knowledge *as property* (they choose to manage its revelation and concealment, not to restrict the circulation of the booklets) that is instructive and interesting. Property, exclusive possession of an object or knowledge are part of a cosmology in which objects and material are separate from their ideation, and knowledge exists *outside* its manifestation or inscription. Musir's document by contrast is in fact is a 'putting into play', having knowledge appear as a material circulation which anticipates a trajectory of life, and a return. This is not the same as a sequence in which loss is the inevitable outcome. Reite documenters anticipate not loss, but transformation, movement, and return.

I have begun then to consider an alternative temporality for 'endangered knowledge', and of 'loss' from other angles. Taking impetus from Moutu, and from the recent museum based initiatives that explore *what* shape relations based on collections (and different expertise) can take, I suggest we look at documentation's 'cosmo–temporality' and what image of loss sustains it. I do this in order to open a conversation about how documentation itself – the process of recording information and knowledge – the basic activity of 'data recording', might work in a 'responsive' (Riles 2006: 22-28) rather than 'pre-figured' (Moutu 2013: 1) mode. How do we respond to Musir's gambit of putting the base of taro into circulation? What would an adequate response be?

The impetus behind the EMKP is that it is a timely intervention, at an urgent moment to collect and preserve what otherwise will be lost into the past. What other meaning could endangered have other than it will cease to be? Here then is an explicit temporality to the impetus to collect and document knowledge. It must be captured, collected, acquired, while available. Endangered knowledge must be preserved against the passage of time and dissolution. The image is, in a sense, to prevent its cessation, its 'death'.

In this, one can discern a powerful notion of transcendence. That immortality is to transcend death, to rise above the material and mortal condition of bodily

existence and preserve as spirit, the essence of our humanity – knowledge. The logic follows its course: Knowledge then can transcend, it can and should be rescued from time, put outside time. It remakes the space of the museum as the epitome of the enlightenment project of knowledge making. For this to happen though knowledge must be acquired in a certain form in which it can persist. Persistence is a matter of extracting knowledge from the everyday messy mortality of life and purifying it into a universal, reified, and transcendent form. Holding such universal knowledge makes the holder central, and makes the task of acquiring and transforming it a political and a moral matter. Stengers puts it thus: 'From an ecological viewpoint, the questions raised by a creation of rapport are not epistemological, but rather political, pragmatic, and (again) never innocent ones. Who is, or will be, affected, and how? The answer to such questions ought to be a matter of collective concern and accountability' (2011: 62).

The contrast I have tried to establish here is with systems of cosmo-temporality such as those in Reite. The issue for Reite documenters is how to keep knowledge in life. Life does not transcend the material. Thus 'knowledge' here is not in an image of something transcendent but is immanent in the very processes of growth and regeneration, in circulation and exchange. Knowledge for them resides in relationships.

Neither Cypher nor Critic

In 2006 Annelise Riles made a powerful argument for rethinking anthropological scholarship in what she termed a 'responsive mode'. Riles is convinced (and convincing) about the shift in anthropological thinking and practice that feminism and the reflexive turn brought to the discipline in the 1970s and 1980's. Unconcerned with berating others or despairing about the future, instead she builds positively on the insights of those who point out that the culture concept is a legacy of historically situated, Enlightenment thought. Culture is a creation, as Roy Wagner argued, of the observer, a reification and construction that explains unfamiliar practices or beliefs by situating them within a wider context of meaning (Wagner 1975: 3-9). It is in bringing together the elements of that context of meaning that the 'construction' occurs.

Concepts such as society and culture – the 'things' anthropologists produce accounts of - are constructs, artifices, and often very helpful ones, as long as they are not mistaken for the lives and practices that they frame and make comprehensible in one way or another. Put simply, and to quote from Riles, 'if anthropologists ever truly believed that facts were "collected" in the "field" rather than produced collaboratively with the intersubjective experience of the ethnographic encounter, they have abandoned any such pretence'. Ethnographies always were produced in collaboration with informants. She continues, 'One way to rephrase many of these concerns is to say that a once

productive distance ethnographer's maintained, implicitly or implicitly, purposeful or not, between ourselves and our objects of study, between things studied (the data) and the frames we used to study them (the analysis) between theory and describing, has now definitively collapsed' (Riles 2006: 3). Or consider Toon van Meijl's recent assertion that, 'Māori ways of knowing cannot simply be collected' (2019: 165).

As I say, Riles takes this 'collapse' wholly positively. It calls for '*ethnographic response*' (2006: 4). Outlining ethnographic response, she writes: 'Ethnographic response is part art and part technique, part invention and part convention, part ethnographer's own work and part the effect of allowing others to work on the ethnographer. It is theoretically informed but not theoretically determined' (ibid. 4-5).

Responsiveness then is born of the understanding that our ethnographic knowledge is an outcome of interactions and relations with people, people who are differently situated and have different priorities and understandings, but who we learn from at both theoretical and practical levels.

My argument is simple. As long as we consider data gathering as *prior to* creating knowledge, we prefigure the outcome of ethnography. Ethnography is cast as a project of data collection, perpetuating, as Moutu puts it, 'a basic

confusion of the mode of study for the object studied' (2013: 1). It will always produce 'knowledge about' others.

Tellingly, Riles's synthetic and programmatic summary comes in the context of an experiment in ethnography: that of considering 'documents'. Documents, Riles argues, are 'artefacts of modern knowledge'. They are a way of making knowledge appear and have effect, an artefact of 'what Ginsberg describes as an epistemological model' and as Riles points out, is thus 'a paradigm of interpretation' (2006: 6). What gets into and gets left out of documents is in no way to be naturalised. It is how and where knowledge comes into effect for moderns (Riles 2006: 6). And as such, of course, 'the subject of documents demands that ethnographers treat their own knowledge as one instantiation of a wider epistemological condition:…', of the 'knowledge practices that define ethnography itself' (2006:7).

My argument then has been that we should explore the basic method of 'documenting' knowledge as a project of exploring relations in which knowledge itself can be negotiated and opened to scrutiny. And doing so requires that we consider how the method of data collection and subsequent analysis that documents embody are prefigured by something else – that is a specific, and not a universal, cosmo-temporailty. The assumption that knowledge is out there, to be collected, for (all?) humanity, is in fact to

precipitate the very process of abstraction and alienation that masks the actual, relational effects of Enlightenment knowledge making.

Conclusion. The 'remainder' in enlightenment knowledge making

Reflecting on the implications of 'the reformulation of ethnography as a modality of response', Riles suggests doing so 'gives rise to a larger descriptive and interpretive problem: the problem that the artefacts of ethnographic knowledge *cease to be comparable, …*' (2006: 26 original emphasis). Similarly, Stengers cautions against, 'the imperative of comparison and the imposition of a standard ensuring equivalency, because what makes each one exist is also what makes it diverge' (2011: 58-9). Concentrating on what this means for the collegial interactions of a scholarly discipline, Riles suggests we need to become more open to multiple ways of doing fieldwork and writing ethnography. She points out the criteria for *evaluation* of each other's work or contribution will need to be reset. This re-setting could be formulated, she suggests, following the model of, 'the subtle appreciation ethnographers have for their relations with the people they encounter in the field,…' (2006: 27).

While I have drawn heavily on Riles' formulation of 'responsiveness' and its necessity, perhaps I have also pointed to the fact that this appreciation may not always be as subtle as we might like to think. The usual solution of managing

ones interpersonal debts and obligations *outside* the frame of data collection and analysis is not adequate for Reite, and nor was it for Moutu and his Iatmul hosts. for example. In this, we begin to see the possibility rethinking the basic activity of documentation as a process of negotiation in itself. And that means shaping it and its outcomes in full knowledge of the bias within Enlightenment knowledge making to appropriate, translate and reify one form of knowing into another. This process is anything but neutral (Stengers 2011: 57).

While all of us are aware of personal moral obligations and interpersonal debts, can we put aside this convenient separation of what we do, with what we owe others for doing it? This suggests developing documentation as a process that is itself a return and a value creation to the people we work among, without that implying they must become versed in the knowledge form of the enlightenment to realise its value. I think these are implications of Moutu's work, and of Musir's 'Base of Taro'.

In bringing the transcendentalism of the Enlightenment model of knowledge-making, one that pre-figures the anthropologists' work, to the table, I have tried to show how the museum (and parts of the academy) lie at an interstice between a transcendent cosmo-temporality of knowledge and a relational impetus. As an institution, as a place in which 'endangered knowledge' should be preserved, it offers the promise of an outside time (outside the daily rise and fall of people

and things) in which the universal can be preserved against loss, even while this dream is contradicted by all the back of house work (of collecting, storing, conserving, negotiating, the messy politics, the imminent concerns of preservation). As Marilyn Strathern wrote, 'Transcendent cosmologies encompass what they perceive as their opposite, a world of immanence … ; whether ostensibly 'within' or 'without' their hegemonic scope, a transcendent regime deals with immanent dimensions as part of its purview' (2018: 17).

To show something of the mechanism of this transcendence and encompassment, I have discussed how assuming the primary value in one kind of knowledge system is inherent in a data collection approach to documentation. That the enlightenment or modernist knowledge system is one which imagines itself able to encompass all others, to incorporate and record them, *without distortion,* as it transcends them.

Yet so much seems always to remain recalcitrant, a matter of 'politics' or misunderstanding, or unrealistic thinking, or other people's unreasonable expectations. This 'remainder', of what is, in fact, the relational methods and effects of the Enlightenment mode of collecting and making knowledge, could, perhaps, with work, be more than just 'more data' about the societies and cultures we work in, and help to shape the very process of documentation.

One size will obviously not fit all. That is the point. Reite's experiments with documents will not be suitable elsewhere. But an awareness of how the relational becomes a 'remainder' under Enlightenment assumptions about, and approaches to, knowledge making might just help in understanding that documentation cannot be the collection and preservation of already formed 'things' out there in the field. The process is always one that forms the knowledge it assumes, and thus the relations of power inherent.

Arcadia support the preservation of diversity and difference. Perhaps this should not just be about content, but also be able to sustain very different ways of doing and valuing knowledge itself. The conditions under which we make our knowledge are the conditions of enlightenment knowledge, and they have consequences. EMKP offers a valuable opportunity to think about methodology in a sustained, and even an experimental way. We might even start to see documentation not as a prefigured collection of data that exists 'to be found', but incorporate the interests and understandings of practitioners in what gets documented, and how it gets documented. That might mean, as with the Reite booklets, that the results look unfamiliar to those who assume an Enlightenment form of knowledge. It might require that we undertake a form of comparison that is not that of various facts and attitudes about a subject, but as a process of trying to hold more than one position in view. It might also mean the

documentation process itself becomes a dynamic exchange about the relations

that making knowledge entails.

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Notes

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[1] This text is a revised version of The William Fagg Lecture (2019), presented at the British Museum to honour the memory of William Buller Fagg, Keeper of Ethnographic Collections 1969-1974.

[2] '"Tradition" comes from the Latin word *tradere*, "to give." "Traditions" emphasizes human communities "doing" their knowledge, giving both across the generations and to other knowledge communities' (Verran and Christie 2014: 61).

[3] Quoted at https://www.arcadiafund.org.uk/about-peter-baldwin-lisbet-rausing/ Accessed 23 February 2018.

[4] 'White people' is the general term for those from overseas, see Bashkow (2006).

[5] (Lawrence 1964: 1).

[6] The term "traditional knowledge" is a problematic phrase, especially when used as a synonym for the neo-Melanesian term *kastom*. In this case, however, it was a conscious choice. That choice arises directly from the impetus to associate the TKRN documentation project with a wider interest in the field of traditional knowledge, indigenous knowledge, etc. Using "traditional knowledge" in the title of the documentation project, whether analytically appropriate or not, links what Nekgini speakers were doing to a wider world with whom they can generate recognition and connection. Through the designation, they have received some support. The analysis of this paper illuminates also that old category (TK) because it demonstrates the impossibility of the TK categorization pointing to something that can be simply "added' to other kinds of 'knowledge".

[7] See http://proboscis.org.uk/397/ut-final-report/ accessed 22/12/2019.