

# "Good Stories": The Epistemological Status of Oral Traditions on Tanna, Vanuatu

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A little over a year ago, in 1989, I was on the island of Tanna in southern Vanuatu investigating the possibility of arranging teacher exchanges between Vanuatu and Australia. In the course of my fortnight on the island, I interviewed a number of men in the Whitesands area, including some veterans of World War II who had worked for the American forces on Efate. I planned to use the oral information to augment the written documentary evidence I have gathered over a number of years from various official, church and private sources. The information would both test and flesh out the history of recent Tannese-European relations I am currently writing, in much the same way as oral information (not necessarily recorded by me) had enabled me to add a more Tanna-centered perspective to the early contact history I had written some years before (Adams 1984). My aim then had been to avoid (albeit only partially and imperfectly) what I had been trained to regard as the insidious danger of Eurocentrism which was always threatening to infect what Pacific historians wrote.

Thus in my account of Cook's stay at Tanna in 1774 I detailed what may be gathered from the various written records of the voyage of *HMS Resolution*, concluding with the marine Wedgeborough's fatal shooting of a young Tannese warrior and its effect on Cook, who sailed from the island regretting "that a people he had judged just days before to be 'Civil and good Natured' would look upon the British as 'invaders of their Country,' determined to impose their will through their superior weapons." That perception I then contrasted with the Tannese understanding of the event, as related 68 years later to the missionary George Turner, who recorded the following account (Turner 1942-1943, pp. 13):

"They [the Tannese] were terrified for him [Cook], especially when he fired upon them, and supposed that he was more than human.

Seven, they say, were wounded, two of whom died and five recovered. . . . They say that he went up to a *marum* and saw a chief very ill and surrounded by people wailing over him, and on being told that certain persons were burning his rubbish and causing all the sickness he sought them out and fired upon them! . . . They point to one or two places and say 'there Kuke stood and talked.' They also point to a mountain where he cut an iron wood tree. They also say that he left them two Kangaroos and show us where they lived for some time. Bye and bye they became annoyed by the howling of the animals—and then they killed and eat them."

For me, the account was important as evidence of the way in which the Tannese attached meaning to the event according to a cultural framework fundamentally different from the European, in terms of which the shooting of one of their number signified their control over the visitors, rather than the reverse. As I commented:

"The transformation of Tahitian dogs into kangaroos provides something of an anecdotal aside on the process of culture contact (though it also carries a serious lesson on how oral tradition is not chrono-logic). The more profound element in the myth is the presumption that Cook sought out and killed the *nahak* sorcerers responsible for the chief's illness. It sums up, with an economy of words that comes from the absence of skepticism, the gap between what contact signified to the Tannese and what it signified to the Europeans. We know from Cook's *Journal* that on Monday 15 August he visited a 'little Stragling Village' on the east side of the bay, where the people, 'in whose neighborhood lived our friend Paowang, being better acquainted with us than those we had seen in the morning (to the west), shewed a readiness to oblige us in every thing in their power.' The villagers made signs that a man 'slipt or was dead' in a small, fenced-off hut. Cook, curious

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as always to see all he could, prevailed on an elderly man to go with him up to the hut, though the man would not suffer Cook to remove the mats which covered the entrance. He was also unwilling for Cook to look into a basket containing a piece of roasted yam and some leaves which hung at one end of the hut. Fastened to a string around the old man's neck were a few locks of hair for which Cook offered something in exchange; but he was given to understand 'this would not be done as they belonged to the person who laid in the hut.' From his knowledge of funeral rites in Tahiti and New Zealand, Cook concluded that the person in the hut was dead; going by the oral tradition he was, rather, 'very ill.' It would have been clear to the Tannese that Cook took an interest in the matter; and when, four days later, one of his men fired upon and killed a warrior—quite possibly from the west side of the bay—it would have seemed that Cook, an ancestor, had sought out and punished the offending sorcerer. Perhaps it was the purpose of his visit for, the next day, after conferring with Paowang, Cook departed whence he came" (Adams 1984, pp. 31-32).

The account of Cook's visit recorded by Turner was a useful antidote to the evil of Eurocentrism, in that it not only enabled me to emphasize the double-sided nature of Tannese-European contact but also gave me the opportunity to pour scorn on what I identified as European conceit. Why I should have felt the need to have done this is perhaps of some interest from the perspective of my personal biography, but need not concern us here. Of greater relevance is the concern I now have that while the supplementary oral evidence may have countered Eurocentrism at one level, at another, less obvious, level it unwittingly encouraged it, by treating the oral (Tannese) information as contingent to the written (European) accounts or at least to the narrative structure of those accounts. As I see it now, the problem with this approach is that it assumes that if we ask of both the written and the oral

evidence "Evidence for what?" the answer will be essentially the same in both cases.

But clearly this is not so. As a number of studies have shown, there are basic differences between what Walter Ong refers to as the ways of managing knowledge and verbalization in oral and literate cultures. And the difficulty for people such as ourselves, according to Ong, is that we are so literate, so removed from oral cultures, "that it is very difficult for us to conceive of an oral universe of communication or thought except as a variant of a literate universe" (1987, p. 1). Whereas writing has the effect of reifying *words*, because we see and comprehend them as the visible marks signaling words to decoders, oral tradition gives meaning to words not by investing them with a thing-like quality, but by the *performance* of them (Ong 1987, p. 11). This particular quality can be seen in the Hebrew term *dabar* 'word' or 'event'; and in Malinowski's observation that language for oral peoples is a mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought (cited in Ong 1987, p. 32).

Taken literally, one of the profound implications of the distinction is that we are dealing not merely with different modes of expression, but with different thought processes. As a countersign of thought, words will point us to meaning beyond the words themselves: as a mode of action, they will establish meaning in their utterance. However, I don't think that the distinction should be taken literally. Language and thought do not exist independently of each other and language can never be (certainly can never simply be) a countersign of thought. But if we treat Malinowski's observation as metaphorical, as pointing us to fundamental differences of context, then the distinction would appear to be both valid and of crucial importance in the area of oral history. The utterance of words for oral peoples, their telling of a story, occurs in what Ong (1987, p. 38, 47) describes as "normal full existential contexts" which include the gestures, vocal inflections, facial expressions, the entire human setting. And to

understand oral stories independently of these contexts—to understand the words as counter-signs rather than as actions—is not only to miss their meaning but to impose on them a different meaning.

The imposed meaning will reflect what has been called the "sparsely linear" or analytic thought and speech which is created and structured by writing, and which is characterized by abstractions that separate the knower from the known, rather than the aggregative thought and speech of oral cultures, where knowing means achieving empathetic and communal identification between the knower and the known (Havelock 1963, pp. 145-146, cited in Ong 1987, pp. 45-46).

Contrast the empathy, the close communal identification, the personally interactive world of the storyteller and his audience, with the familiar academic activity of "collecting" stories for the light they throw on this or that event we have come across in the written records. I am not intending to be scornful at this point. I simply want to emphasize how fundamentally different the two contexts are, and suggest that the answer to the question "Evidence for what?" will be essentially different depending on the context.

The difference is acknowledged in a recent collection of articles which deal with the meaning and significance of World War II for different Pacific Islanders. Unlike some earlier histories such as Robinson (1979), White and Lindstrom's book (1989) recounts Islanders' representations. In particular, I would like to consider Lindstrom's case study (1989) of oral histories of World War II labor corpsmen from Tanna, Vanuatu, for the light it throws on the epistemological issues outlined above.

In what he terms a "conversational"—and what Ong would call an oral—society like Tanna, history, Lindstrom (1989, p. 408) points out, exists only as memory. In such a society, historical knowledge is given expression in spoken stories, and depends for its continued existence on their retelling. In such a society, the past exists only to the extent that it speaks

to the present, for if stories fail to make statements about the present they will not be retold, and the history they express will be lost. Not that Lindstrom perceives any immediate danger of this on Tanna, where the wartime working encounters with Americans, "culturally plotted into war stories, have enjoyed continuing exchange value and political utility within island discourse" (1989, p. 414).

It is impossible to know the extent to which the very presence of Lindstrom, whose American nationality had proven on earlier field-trips to be "an important factor in the interview equation" (1989, p. 414 fn. 3), contributed to the exchange value and political utility of the stories he was keen to record. It probably did have some influence, though it is clear from the ability of much younger men than the veterans themselves to accurately relate the stories that they continue to enjoy an "authentic" value and utility.

Lindstrom offers a convincing account of why this should be so, by demonstrating how present-day statements by Tannese about World War II, during which an extraordinarily high proportion of Tannese men worked for the American forces on Efate, enunciate a number of what he calls "elementary themes." The overarching theme is that of exchange, principally of Tannese labor for the apparently limitless American supplies of cigarettes and food. As Lindstrom stresses, the stories of unprecedented American generosity relate (in the sense of both recounting and establishing a connection) ongoing relations of reciprocal exchange: "The continuing narrative rehearsal of the establishment of these wartime relations of exchange presents a case for a special relationship—a relationship that the Tannese and Americans might resume at any moment" (Lindstrom 1989, p. 409).

The emphasis on American kindness and generosity is simultaneously an implicit criticism of the British and French, with their rotten food and poor pay, which in elementary thematic terms expresses the absence of balanced relations between the Tannese and their colonial

masters, both during and after the War. Similarly, the way the war stories represent American wisdom (such as boxing technique) being shared with the Tannese, and secret American knowledge (such as radar) paralleling local magical practice, asserts an identity between Tanna and America at the same time as it highlights the absence of shared identity with the British and French (Lindstrom 1989, pp. 409, 411).

When they were recorded by Lindstrom in the early 1980s, war stories were still "good," or relevant stories, insofar as they served "to enunciate an island challenge to the colonial authorities . . . and outsiders" (1989, p. 413), which since Independence in 1980 might include the new national leaders in Vila. Lindstrom rightly points to the special role accorded to the Americans in this challenge, though Tannese are by no means insular in this respect, having in the recent past established special relationships with the Duke of Edinburgh and with Senator Evans, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. Such relationships would seem to have less to do with enunciating an island challenge to outsiders than with a particular big man, or aspiring big man, asserting his ideological preeminence vis-à-vis his neighbors. This has also been the case with war stories, with various political factions attempting to appropriate war memories and thereby stake the strongest claim to America.

Lindstrom's suggestion that Tannese war stories are good stories to the extent that they express the elementary themes of reciprocal exchange and opposition between Islanders and outsiders, or between competing Islander factions, is an advance on many previous histories in that it pays more attention to an indigenous cultural order. Certainly, it provides a useful framework for the interpretation of other war stories, such as the following story which was related to me last year at the (Presbyterian) village of Iarkei:

"During the war Johnny Manuman [the informant's "brother"] was working for the Americans at Vila. Like many other Tannese

working in Vila at the time, he became ill with dysentery, and was confined to the hospital—the French Hospital—after the war. The French doctor went around giving the Tannese injections, after which he would lay them out in the beds and cover them with a sheet. He had just injected the man next to Manuman when he ran out of medicine. While he went to another room to get more medicine, Manuman lifted the sheets and looked at his friends. They were dead, with vomit around their mouths. On hearing the footsteps of the returning doctor, Manuman jumped up five feet through a window and made his escape. With doctors and nurses in pursuit, he ran to the American headquarters at Tagabe, where he saw Tom Navy, the big boss of the Americans. [Apparently Thomas Beatty, boatswain first class with the Third Naval Construction Detachment, in charge of labor recruiting and supervision. See also Lindstrom 1989, p. 401.] The French doctor arrived, and Tom Navy told him to wait until Manuman had got his breath and then they would take him back. Manuman told Tom Navy that all the people who had been sleeping in the hospital with him were dead. Tom Navy thought that Manuman was joking, but with some other American officers he went to the hospital and found that the people were dead. Tom Navy took the medicine from the doctor and threatened to inject the doctor with it. The doctor said no, and the Americans checked up on the medicine and found poison in it. The Americans sent the French doctor away. One man-Tanna who had the injection, Sakama, had to come back to Tanna and have Dr. Armstrong [the Presbyterian missionary] operate on his arm, in which he found the poison. Sakama was the only survivor. About 200 men died from the injections. As for why the doctor behaved in this way, maybe there were too many Tannese with dysentery in the hospital and this was the doctor's way of dealing with the problem. And as for the reason for the dysentery, possibly the Tannese were eating too much tinned American meat."

Applying Lindstrom's interpretative framework, we can discern the characteristic Tannese special relationship with the Americans though it is via Iarkei's (Presbyterian) Manuman, which might be interpreted as throwing down a challenge to the followers of John Frum, who are usually the most vociferous in claiming an alliance with the Americans. At the same time, while the Americans clearly are more powerful than the French, to have too close a relationship with them, to accept too many of their gifts (such as tinned American meat), is ultimately destructive. Again, this suggests a challenge to the John Frum followers' uncritical regard for the Americans. Similarly, the Americans appear not to have the immediate and intuitive rapport with the Tannese that the John Frum people might claim; after all, Mamuman had to prove to Tom Navy that he wasn't joking about the poison. In terms of expressing the absence of balanced relations between the Tannese and their colonial masters, the sentiment is selectively anti-French rather than both anti-British and anti-French, which perhaps reflects the continuing political bias of the Anglophone Presbyterians; and it is the fact that the one survivor of the injections (Sakama) owed his life to the intervention of the Presbyterian missionary.

Lindstrom's framework is also useful in interpreting the story of Cook's visit to Tanna related earlier. Recall that I had effectively dismissed the two "kangaroos" left by Cook as an anecdotal aside to the real business of culture contact. However, in terms of representing what Lindstrom calls (in the context of war stories) the "continuing narrative rehearsal of the establishment of . . . relations of exchange [which] presents a case for a special relationship," in this instance between the British missionaries who recorded the story in 1842 and the people of Port Resolution who related it, it may well be that the kangaroos constitute the story's key element.

Lindstrom's framework doesn't give us access to Ong's "normal full existential contexts," though, as I've indicated above, he implies that one of these contexts is the desire

on the part of his Tannese informants to foster a special relationship with him as an American — what Havelock would characterize as achieving empathetic and communal identification between the knower and the known. The difficulty for Lindstrom, and for the rest of us who use good stories as evidence in our historical reconstructions, is that we are blurring the distinction between the two contexts which determine what the answer is to the question, "Evidence for what?"

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