Stone Men of Malekula on Malakula: An Ethnography of an Ethnography

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Abstract This article examines the resonances of the voluminous ethnography, ‘Stone Men of Malekula’ (SMM) in contemporary Vanuatu. Anthropological research is politically charged in Vanuatu, in part because of how the weighty materiality of archival forms exercise significant local authority. However, alongside respect for this ‘evidential’ material is a healthy scepticism of anthropological authority. SMM, written by the maverick anthropologist John Layard in 1942 (based on fieldwork in 1914–15), has returned to Vanuatu in many guises over the years. It is used as formal evidence in land disputes and as a bone of contention within competing claims. Tracing the ways in which culture is written, read and materialized, exposes the paradoxes of knowledge and politics not only within anthropological critique but in Vanuatu villages.

Keywords Ethnographic representation, text, materiality, evidence, Vanuatu

This article describes some engagements between contemporary Malakulans (islanders from Malakula, part of the South Pacific archipelago of Vanuatu) and the production of anthropological knowledge, as mediated by the form and content of a single, particularly voluminous, ethnography. Stone Men of Malekula (SMM), published by British anthropologist and analytic psychologist John Layard in 1942, is based on fieldwork in the Small Islands and Mainland of North-East Malakula in 1914–15 and focuses primarily on the social and ritual configurations of the Small Island of Vao (Fig. 1). Today, SMM is both a primary cultural resource and a highly contentious source of knowledge for many Small Islanders, its reach extending onto the mainland and beyond, into networks of Malakulans living in Vanuatu’s capital, Port Vila. It circulates locally as whole or partial photocopies, often in secret (Fig. 2). It has been translated in parts into the lingua franca Bislama.
Islanders from Atchin, the Small Island where Layard conducted most of his fieldwork, bemoan the lack of such a published resource, the likes of which they would like to draw upon in their own land disputes and are keen to recuperate Layard’s extensive archive, which contains an unfinished manuscript about Atchin. The resonance of *smm* as a published text certainly contributes to the controversial place it has in Small Islander reckonings of the past. The book has created a tangible platform for contestation, and facilitated both a consolidation and critique of anthropological and textual authority. Its absorption into the contemporary fabric of Small Island life accompanies an indigenous critique of the practice of anthropology as a knowledge-making discipline. It materializes the past in the present, and makes evident the contested nature of history in present-day discussions about land, status and *kastom*. In this article, I follow some of the trajectories of this heavy volume, arguing for the import of its presence within debates about evidence, knowledge and both customary and anthropological authority. I engage here with the ongoing impact of the *Writing Culture* critique (see Clifford & Marcus 1986), which assumes that the resonance of ethnographic texts lies primarily in the ways in which they constitute a complex representational field, discursively incorporating multiple orders of anthropological and indigenous knowledges and conceiving of this field as a metonym for culture. Here, I argue for a focus on materiality in addition to representation. Following the pathways of ethnographic texts in the field exposes the ways in which knowledge gains credibility from,
and in fact may also be created by, the material forms that presence it. The
dynamic shifts in knowledge politics in Vanuatu, exemplified by the chang-
ing ways that John Layard’s work has been received and used, are often
as concerned with the availability and presence of knowledgeable materials
(from anthropological archives to ritual objects such as stones and drums) as
they are with the facts these objects are understood to contain. I argue these
‘facts’ are constituted by the formal presence of such objects (standing stones
do not represent an individual’s authority, they presence it; Layard’s book
does not represent the stories and ideas told to Layard by his Small Island
friends, it brings them into being in strategic ways). Only by focusing, during
fieldwork, on the movement and agency of these representational forms can
this complex process of knowledge constitution be elicited.

**An Ethnography of Paper**

Paper has a curious lifespan in Vanuatu. It rots and decays quickly in the
tropical climate, but is also tenaciously present (Fig. 3). The National Archives
of Vanuatu are in the process of being incorporated into the climate-controlled
environment of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, but prior to this they existed in
a small bunker-like building, packed messily into various boxes as arranged
by previous French and British Colonial administrators. As is the case in

![Figure 3](image-url)

*Fig. 3. Firmin Teileimb, from Vao, holds a rotting copy of Osa Johnson’s ‘Bride of the Solomons’.*
*This book has important photographs of his family in it, but has not lasted well in the humid climate.*
*Photo: Haidy Geismar, July 2006.*
many nations of island Melanesia, and indeed many other former colonies, much of Vanuatu’s richest archival material is elsewhere – in the UK, France, New Zealand, the USA, and Australia. This distributed archive includes not just colonial records, but books, letters, objects, photographs, film and sound recordings (see Huffman 1996). However, a significant amount of indigenous agency has been wielded to address these diasporic archives. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre, since its emergence from its colonial chrysalis as an indigenous institution (see Geismar & Tilley 2003; Bolton 2003), has systematically compiled copies of this material, generating memoranda of understanding with museums, libraries and archives around the world. This has resulted in a series of paper trails that connect museums and libraries, researchers and archivists to their local counterparts, mediated by both the content and form of ink on paper, pixels and print. The intensity of these connections has opened up a new ‘subject’ for anthropological research: the recuperation of the archive (see e.g. Geismar 2006; Bell 2003; Buckley 2005; Brown & Peers 2006).
Since the ending of a ten-year national research moratorium in 1995, the Vanuatu Cultural Research Policy has stipulated that copies of social scientific research (including notes, images, videos and other digital material) be deposited both with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (vcc) and with source communities. Whilst the archive in the vcc has been formulated as a ‘bank for kastom’ holding diverse material in trust for its original indigenous creators, and a network of vcc fieldworkers facilitates the traffic of archival material and knowledge both into and out of the National Museum in Vanuatu’s capital Port Vila, many ni-Vanuatu based on islands other than Efate do not have regular access to this material itself, but rely more on its secondary dissemination through oral and visual technologies such as radio (see Bolton 1999b), cd and dvds, and through the work of researchers, both indigenous and foreign (Fig. 4).

In the islands, paper, photographs and other documentary material have been collected in collaboration with particular individuals, whether they are official fieldworkers of the vcc who have for over thirty years been creating their own archives (stored in the vcc as well as in their villages) or individuals who have developed relationships with visiting researchers, tourists, missionaries, museum curators, collectors, dealers, volunteers, and other visitors to their villages. These pieces of paper, when sent back to villages, are carefully stored in people’s homes, held in old suitcases, in plastic folders, and brought out and displayed on special occasions.

Fig. 5 shows the idiosyncratic ‘review library’ of Vianney Atpatoun, the former curator of the Malakula Kaljoral Senta (mks), and former vcc field-
worker for the island and mainland region of Vao. The island of Malakula (and accompanying islets) is one of the best documented parts of the archipelago. This proliferation of material fits into complex local archiving practices, which are in turn subject to complex restrictions that mesh with local hierarchies of status and authority. Archival practices here are not simply about the preservation of materials, they are about activating material in often highly sensitive or political local environments – they are less about preservation for an institutional future and more about configuring local hierarchies of access and control. Above all, two voluminous ethnographies, *Stone Men of Malekula* by John Layard (1942) and *Malekula: a Vanishing People of the New Hebrides* by Arthur Bernard Deacon (1934), have returned in multiple guises to Malakula with visible effects in the present day.

Deacon’s monograph has been used by numerous researchers as a foundation for research, and by cultural activists as a resource to reinvigorate interest in past traditional practices. Kirk Huffman, former curator of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, began doctoral research in South Malakula in 1973 under the auspices of the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and drew heavily on the work of Deacon and Layard, both former Cambridge students (see Huffman 2009). Under his instigation, Deacon’s Cambridge girlfriend Margaret Gardiner travelled to Malakula in 1983 to visit Deacon’s grave at South West Bay and to revivify Deacon’s presence on the island (see Gardiner 1987; Clifford 1997). In addition, numerous anthropologists have worked with Deacon’s book *in situ*.

American anthropologist Joan Larcom worked intensively with Deacon’s material during and after her fieldwork with the Mewun in South West Bay, Malakula. In her appraisal of ethnographic precursors (1983), she notes how Deacon’s written work helped her to understand the ‘ideological’ continuities in Mewun life as well as the rapid transformation as a result of intensive contact with Christian missions:

Rather than an archaeological record of what had disappeared in Mewun, Deacon’s written work thus proved more valuable to me as a view of what remained. As I put aside my hopes for original authority and explored Deacon’s research records in conjunction with my own, new aspects of each of our observations and new relationships between them were highlighted. Thus his notes, his letters, and his book helped me to achieve both a new sense of the meaning of place and an understanding of the ideology persisting behind that concept of locality. But Deacon’s most significant contribution to my research was a general lesson – that of the importance of our precursor’s texts in our continuing work (1983:190–191).
Whilst Larcom focuses on the textual authority of anthropological precursors, she also emphasizes the flexible nature of Deacon’s monograph. The monograph is a curious artefact: written in the third person, but using Deacon’s posthumous yet authoritative voice, it also contains occasional editorial interventions by its compiler, another of Haddon’s Cambridge students, Camilla Wedgwood. Wedgwood also unwittingly incorporated fieldnotes that John Layard had lent to Deacon with the result that the first edition of *Malekula: a Vanishing People of the New Hebrides* is peppered with slips of paper inserted by the publishers at the last minute, containing addenda, footnotes and minutiae by an irate Layard.\(^1\) In turn, as Larcom notes, Wedgwood not only compiled Deacon’s scattered, often undated, fieldnotes without the contextual knowledge Deacon would have brought to the volume, but also drew on personal correspondences with teachers (such as A.C. Had- don and W.E. Armstrong), lovers (Margaret Gardiner) and family. Larcom comments ‘Deacon’s book remains an unusually “open” ethnography, with fruitful possibilities for reinterpretation’ (Ibid: 192). In her final sentence, she provocatively suggests, but does not explore, the possibilities for local, as well as academic, re-engagement with the book.

Whilst literacy rates are variable in Vanuatu, it is clear that the hefty materiality of texts such as *smm* and *mvp*, coupled with their repeated return in the hands of visitors to the islands, has permitted an ongoing local engagement with both the content and form of anthropological research. Guided by the National Cultural Research Policy, anthropological work is structured around the promotion of this engagement with research, within an emphasis on practical affect, or on the strategic uses of text and images, within broader social work. This policy influences the national perspective on archival materials within Vanuatu’s cultural institutions, from Huffman’s early policy of using anthropological materials in the *vcc* with the explicit agenda of ‘cultural reawakening or revival’ (Huffman 1997:2) to the present-day policy of the National Photo, Film and Sound Archive to ‘ensure that cultural research projects are consistent with Vanuatu’s own research priorities’.\(^2\) Such sustained engagement between national cultural institutions and diverse archives continues to activate the past products of anthropological research within local communities. For instance, a recent initiative between UNESCO and the *vcc* to inscribe the practice of Sand Drawing as Intangible Cultural Heritage, drew on both Deacon’s and Layard’s extensive documentation in order to reaffirm this practice in the present. Using Layard’s method of schematising sand drawings and Deacon’s own drawings and photography,
Australian doctoral candidate Stephen Zagala created a database of designs for the vcc and encouraged their reproduction in the islands as part of the research for his PhD (Zagala 2004). There are now annual sand-drawing festivals in Pentecost, Ambae and Malakula.

Fieldwork as Paperwork

Over the past few years, one trajectory of my own fieldwork in Vanuatu (Geismar 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2009) has taken as a starting point the complex production of archival material by past anthropologists, using the widening body of academic engagement with photographic images as an analytic frame (e.g., Sontag 1979; Barthes 1993[1981]; Sekula 1984; Tagg 1988; Pinney 1992, 1997; Edwards 1992, 2001). The growing scrutiny of the colonial visual archive, both within archives and through fieldwork, has foregrounded the shared interests of early anthropologists, photographers, and their audiences, in ‘inscribing’ reality, and in using this as ‘evidence’ in diverse representational projects, for example, assisting in the constitution of ideas and ideologies about race, nationalism, and colonialism (see Edwards 2001; Pinney 2003; Buckley 2005). Such critical engagements with photographic images also highlight that in addition to being viewed as authentic evidence, or representations of objective reality, photographs can be understood as subjective, malleable, and reflexive embodiments of personal experiences (see Wright 1997), and as both the products of, and important players within, cultural and political exchanges (see Poole 1997). Photography may be seen as an ideal medium through which to explore the material complexities of lived experience and embedded ideas about authenticity and evidence.

As such, working with photographs may provide a blueprint for both anthropological analysis and practice. In another article (2009) I compare the production of photographs to the production of *malanggan*, funerary carvings made in New Ireland – both are ‘technologies of enchantment’ that materialize and activate memory in fluid and processual ways, playing with form and highlighting tensions between the objective and the subjective, political epistemologies and local cosmologies. Here, I extend this argument to ethnographic texts, arguing that we should understand both text and photographs as materializations of this complex social world. This speaks to the crucial role that form plays in the consolidation of knowledge, identity, social relations and so forth (see e.g. Strathern 1999; Miller 1987; Miller & Tilley 1996; Gosden & Larson 2008) and to the meta-narratives, or broader explanations people use to explain these phenomenon (see Miller 2005). In
the context of this literature on materiality, ethnographic texts may also be ‘read’ as creative actors within the development of anthropological ideas, which in turn may be negotiated via the strategic use of special form in local contexts. In the discussion that follows I emphasize the complicity of archival material in maintaining ideas about past anthropological practice in the present and in debates about evidence and partiality in Vanuatu.

My own research trajectory connected with smm when I was staying on Vao to undertake research on customary copyright for my doctoral dissertation in 2000. At that time I was struck by the ways in which the families I was staying with used smm as a reference for almost any aspect of kastom we were discussing. The ways in which we talked about the past were heavily mediated by Layard’s text. At one point I found myself translating whole sections of the book into Bislama, in order to make it more accessible to Francophone Vao islanders, who clamoured to be connected to more of Layard’s material, published and unpublished. In 2002–2003 I was employed by the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology to catalogue and research their collection of photographs from Vanuatu in the Haddon Collection. In the process I discovered over 400 glass negatives taken by Layard. In collaboration with Anita Herle, Senior Curator at the Museum, I decided to focus on these fascinating documents, and following the wishes of the people I had worked with, to reconnect contemporary ni-Vanuatu to this material. After several months of archival research in Cambridge I returned to Vanuatu with photocopies of the photographs in 2004, and returned again, this time with their captions (which I had discovered in Layard’s archives in San Diego) and a draft manuscript of our book in 2006 (Geismar & Herle 2009). Anita Herle returned with printed copies of a second edition of our monograph, captions translated into Bislama, in 2007. Our repeated returns, coupled with the repeated return of Layard’s archive in various forms (from microfilms donated to the Vanuatu Cultural Center by ucsd in the 1970s, to paper copies of the photographs circulated by vcc fieldworkers, to the return of digital images of the photographs from Cambridge and full copies – both published and photocopies – of smm to Port Vila and Malakula in 2006) has created an ongoing dialogue around Layard’s archive. The archive is therefore indigenously contextualized by the social practices that activate it – the end point of these kind of repatriation projects is not only to proliferate archival material but the forms of practice and dialogue they relate to, and influence. Paradoxically, this dispersal of authority in turn enforces the power and agency of these material forms.3
In the following sections I break down Layard’s oeuvre into its material components, focusing on the impact of the book both on the discipline of British Social Anthropology and on Small Islanders in Vanuatu.

**Stone Men of Malekula and British Social Anthropology**

In April 1914, young Cambridge graduate, John Willoughby Layard, set sail for Australia. He was part of a larger group attending the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. The outbreak of World War One inevitably affected the scholars, famously interning Bronislaw Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands. Haddon abandoned his plans to take Layard on survey work down the New Guinea coast, and his colleague W.H.R. Rivers suggested that the aspirant ethnologist accompany him to the New Hebrides.

Layard and Rivers decided to go to the Small Island of Atchin, a mile from the coast of Malakula. The Small Islands were famous for a lengthy cycle of ceremonial status alteration known as *Maki*, a variant of a ritual complex that exists throughout the region of north and north-central Vanuatu. Taking place over the course of a generation, a lengthy series of preparatory rites culminates at a lavish ceremony, where a man sheds his old name and title and acquires a new rank and attendant status. Such ceremonies comprise the sacrifice of pigs on stone tables, and the erection in the sacred dancing grounds of stone dolmens and figurative carvings covered by small houses used to contain sacrificial pigs, mounted with hawk-carved finials. Lavish dancing, singing and feasting accompany these ceremonies. The importance of standing stones in this region led Rivers and Layard to consider these rituals as ‘megalithic’, comparing them to the megalithic practices of Stone Age Britain.

Unbeknownst to Layard and Rivers, the Atchin community had recently had a violent altercation with a despotic Irish trader (see Layard 2008; Monnier 1991; Geismar 2009). Previous violence between locals and foreign traders had resulted in punitive visits by the navy, to devastating effect. In his autobiography, Layard describes how the two anthropologists based themselves upon their arrival in an abandoned Roman Catholic Mission and how they were, at first, scrupulously avoided by local people (Layard 2008).

After a few days, Rivers seized the opportunity of a passing skiff to leave Atchin. His departure to undertake survey work from the relative comfort of various mission stations, left Layard feeling bereft, but also forced him to undertake one of the first periods of intensive, solitary anthropological fieldwork, coterminous with Malinowski’s first stay in the Trobriand islands. Between 1914 and 1915, Layard collected what has come to be considered
one of the most detailed and evocative sets of early ethnological data about customary life in Vanuatu.

He later was to recall this period as one of the happiest times of his life. There were nightly gatherings on his verandah, when the youths of Atchin would gather to teach Layard Atchin songs and stories. During my research I recorded several humorous stories about Layard dancing in rituals and speaking Atchin language. Layard also travelled with the youths on their journeys to the neighbouring Small Islands, on their initiation pilgrimage to Ambae, and to South-West Bay, Malakula, all the while taking copious notes, photographs, and collecting artefacts. He developed strong relationships with his key informants: Mal Taru and Pelur on Vao and Mari, Melteg-to, Buremin/Nale, Malteris and Lawak on Atchin.

In 1915 Layard returned to England. He was exhausted from the intensity of fieldwork, and eventually suffered a series of breakdowns that Rivers, by that time his doctor as well as his supervisor, described as a ‘severe attack of neurasthenia’ (Rivers 1918). From 1915 until well into the 1920s, Layard was bedridden and incapable of work. After a rupture with Rivers he sought psychological care with the American analyst Homer Lane. He gradually abandoned anthropology in favour of psychoanalysis, first training under Homer Lane in London and eventually working with Jung in Zurich.

In the 1930s Layard began to systematically work on his Malakula field notes, a period of fermentation that gave rise to Stone Men of Malekula (1942), a work that combined Layard’s growing interest in Jungian psychoanalysis with Rivers’ interests in cultural diffusionism and social psychology. Ostensibly based on only three weeks fieldwork on Vao, the island adjacent to Atchin, the monograph also drew upon Layard’s material gathered in the other Small Islands. Stone Men was to be the first in a series of monographs detailing life in each of the Small Islands, but in fact Layard went on to publish little more about Malakula, growing preoccupied with his therapeutic practice.

Until his death, Layard remained at the margins of anthropology. His early alignments, through Rivers, with the hyper-diffusionism of Grafton Elliot Smith and William Perry alienated him from Haddon and the Cambridge school (and it was for this reason that Haddon chose Camilla Wedgwood rather than Layard to edit the field-notes of the young Bernard Deacon, who died on Malakula in 1927). His later analytic unorthodoxy and Jungian-inflected thinking set him apart from the Structural-Functionalism of Evans-Pritchard and the Oxford School. Yet reading his work in the present, we may be struck by the resonance of many of his ideas with contemporary anthropological
ideas. His discussions of the synthetic, ‘psychic’ transformations that Atchin drums facilitate, resonates strongly with the more recent discussions of the social efficacy of material culture, and the powerful potential of material culture to extend and manifest social agency (see Gell 1998; Layard 2005). Layard’s analytic insights into the transformational power of the substances of initiation, which ultimately provide a formal resolution to tension between genders, may also be seen as a precursor to much work undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s around sexuality and initiation (e.g. Herdt 1981) and on the performative nature of gender relations (e.g. Strathern 1988) in Melanesia.

The Material Qualities of the Book

While Layard’s potential impact on the discipline of social anthropology was largely unrealized due to his relative lack of publication and his unorthodox theoretical perspectives, _smm_ continued to be an important reference both for students of the history of anthropology and for researchers working in Vanuatu. It should therefore come as no surprise that in Vanuatu today, the book evokes both an engagement with local histories and with the politics of anthropological research. This, I argue, is achieved not just through the content of the words on its pages, but by the tangible presence of both its original form – with faded red cardboard cover – and the bulk of the many photocopies strategically circulating throughout the country.

Jeremy MacClancy has compared the volume and density of the 816 page book to that of a brick (with a footnote commenting ‘Professor Needham thinks that ‘two bricks’ might be a more apt description’ (MacClancy 1978:2). Compiled between 1914 and 1915, but worked on from then until 1942, _smm_ is a vast compendium of different levels of information. During this period, Layard shifted from novice anthropologist to a practising Jungian psycho-analyst. The book reflects this personal journey, his interest in theories of diffusion and his acceptance of Jungian archetypes. The book is also a material extravaganza of anthropological production: thirty-nine photographs taken on Vao are reproduced, eighty-seven figures, some of which are adapted from his photographs, eleven tables, ten maps, eleven song scores and pull-out genealogies and drawings of rituals and dancing grounds.

This material reflects Layard’s engagement with local methods of organizing, and indeed materializing cultural knowledge, underpinned by an emphasis on genealogy (gleaned from both Rivers and Small Islanders). For instance, the book starts with a pull-out panoramic drawing of the stone monuments and slit gongs which comprise the upper side of the dancing ground of Pete-
hul on Vao. The detailed sketch is based on and cross-referenced to seven different photographic plates contained within the book. Many of the stone platforms, dolmens and monoliths in the drawing of the dancing ground are cross-referenced to the two genealogical lines responsible for erecting them, that of Mal Taru and of his father. In keeping with successive status acquisition associated with different stages of Maki, Layard connects particular stone monuments to six different Maki performed by alternating ‘lines’, cross-referenced to his extensive discussion of Maki within the text. Indeed, as Herle notes ‘Stone Men might indeed be seen as prefiguring hypertexted accounts of contemporary information culture’ (2009:119, and I draw heavily from Herle’s close reading of smm here). At the same time, it is evident how these different forms materialize local genealogies, combining Rivers’ interest in developing his genealogical method with local preoccupations with tracing ancestral and contemporary connections through specific places.

**The Efficacy of Stone Men Today**

One of the first things I noticed upon arrival at Norsup’s burnt-out airport in July 2006 was that somebody had photocopied one of the maps in smm, and added it to a legal notification of a pending court case regarding a disputed border on the island of Vao. As we drove from Norsup to Lakatoro, and later to Vao and Atchin I noticed that this small poster had been put up at almost every store and public telephone as well as being plastered around the provincial capital. Numa Fred Longga, my research partner and curator of the Malakula Kaljoral Senta (mks), told me that the book had become the centre of so much controversy he had hidden the photocopy I had made in 2003 for the mks library from public view. The visitor book of the mks was filled with complaints and notifications of disputes, primarily regarding land. smm, written by an outsider and filled with maps, genealogical charts and other tables, is one of the few tangible forms of ‘evidence’ in these disputes, many of which attempt to establish entitlement through fixing individuals as ‘paramount chiefs’, sometimes overriding more fluid systems of status and authority, based around the hierarchies of the Maki (see Blackwood 1981; Allen 1981; Jolly 1991; Bolton 1999a).

The first time I visited Vao, in 2000, I spent long hours translating the section from smm discussing different kinds of pigs into Bislama by request of Vianney Atpatoun. I also spent many hours with Olfaala Matthias Teilemb talking about the production and playing of slit-drums, something that Layard wrote extensively about for both Vao and Atchin (Layard 1942, 2005).
Both pigs and drums are intimately connected to the acquisition of status, materializing and performing specific ranks in social practice (see Geismar 2005a), and these were the material forms that came to mind when answering my questions about customary copyright. In 2003, I returned to work specifically on Layard’s photographs (see Geismar 2005b). At the time, there was no vcc fieldworker on Vao, and Jean Mal Varu, who was established as
chief, was our host. Mal Varu is a descendant of Pelur, one of Layard’s two primary sources of information about Vao.

Using the photographs as a starting point, we mapped the island following Layard’s own images, drawings and paths. Jean Mal Varu was able to connect up many of Layard’s images to their contemporary sites and to discuss their importance to the ways in which he traced contemporary land boundaries. He had re-inscribed Layard’s kinship diagrams in order to bring them up to date with newer generations of his family and had updated and enhanced the detail of Layard’s maps, overwriting the worn photocopies made by his son in the district capital, Lakatoro.¹⁰

When asked to comment on Layard and his work, Jean Mal Varu recorded the following statement, which he gave us permission to use in our own publication:

Thank you. When John Layard was here, so were my ancestors. John Layard came and took down everyone’s histories, and put them inside his book. I think this is a very good thing. Because when you people come to follow up on his work, we
can tell you that what he talks about, in ‘Stone Men of Malekula’, is true. It is still alive. My own [family] line is in ‘Stone Men of Malekula’, it is alive today. I am glad because when you two come back here to see if what John Layard wrote was true, I can tell you everything here is still alive… When you show us the photographs we can see that everything in the photos, the dancing grounds in the photographs, everything is alive, is still here… John Layard didn’t make any mistakes or write anything that was wrong… I hope that all my future generations are glad that all of these pictures are still here. (Chief Jean Mal Varu, talking on Vao, 19 July 2003, translated from Bislama, (see also discussion in Geismar 2005b:200).

When I returned to Malakula in 2006 to make some final research notes and show people the completed manuscript of our book on Layard’s photographs before publication, Jean Mal Varu was no longer the head of the Vao council of chiefs, although he was still supportive of our project. However, ongoing disputes about land on Vao increasingly referred to smm as a potential form of evidence of past tenure, and many people were suspicious of any project that proposed to bring more of his material to light. This was a significant change from the earlier way in which the return of archival material had been celebrated on the island. I was told by some of the men who were carefully reading our manuscript that I should not refer to Mal Varu in print as ‘chief’, and that I should edit the above statement to read ‘Almost everything that John Layard wrote was true’. At the time of my arrival the Vao Council of Chiefs was in the midst of a week-long meeting, during which all regular activities were suspended and the leading men of the island met daily in order to draft and devise a kastom polisi [custom policy] – a written document which would clarify customary entitlements and expectations for everyone on the island.11 This had emerged specifically in response to ongoing land disputes that were holding up plans to have the large cruise ship that visits Vanuatu every two weeks include a stop at Vao on its itinerary. There were debates over who had claim to particular anchorages, landing beaches, and how the six dancing grounds were to profit from the arrival in one day of 1000 Australian tourists (the current population of the Small Island is also roughly 1000, divided between the island and the mainland). By the time we arrived with our photographs and manuscript, these disputes had already led directly back to Stone Men of Malekula. The emergence of this body of material had inculcated both its use as evidence and set in motion an ongoing process of contestation about its evidential status.

Our meeting with the leaders of Vao started eagerly and earnestly – Numa Fred and I distributed a small exhibition of the photographs with their simple
captions (which provided names, dates, and places, that I had discovered in the archives in San Diego) attached as a way of showing people what we had done with the research gathered in previous visits (Fig. 8).

This initial interest soon metamorphosed into a heated discussion in Vao language. You can see the tension on some of the faces of the younger men in Fig. 9. Finally, a young man from the ocean side of the island raised his hand and asked the chairman of the meeting if he might ask a question. Given permission he turned to me and enquired, ‘Please, can you tell us if everything John Layard wrote was true?’ I hesitated to answer, taken aback at this local scepticism in the face of what, in Vanuatu, and certainly within the work of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, is usually perceived to be ethnographic veracity. He continued (I’m paraphrasing from his Bislama):

When Layard was on Vao, he talked only to two men, from one side of the island. These were troubled times, you couldn’t walk safely from one part of the island to the other. Yet these two men told Layard many things about the whole island. All they could really know about was what directly concerned them, their families and their nasara. How could they speak for the rest of us? (ol kustom blong wan saed wetem tu man nomo. From wanem oli kaveramap ful aelan?).
As he talked he became angry. He shouted that John Layard was a ‘liar’ and we should be run off the island if we carried on his work.

Trying to speak calmly I emphasized that I was not qualified to make judgments regarding the truth of the book and that my research was intended to be solely in the domain of the photographs and the people that they conveyed and that I could not comment on disputes over land and hierarchies of knowledge. I tried to distance myself from Layard’s work and emphasize the project to reconnect people to archival material held abroad. Numa diplomatically came to my assistance quoting former Vanuatu President, Jean-Marie Leye: ‘It’s easy to criticize someone else but hard to do good work yourself’ (hemi isi blong criticisem wan man be no mekem i gud i tru i had lelebit). The vcc fieldworker, who had only been appointed the previous year, remained silent.

In retrospect this was somewhat naïve. If, as I argue within my academic work (e.g. Geismar 2006, 2005), photographs and other archival material are intricately enmeshed within local practices and understandings of the past then they should always be seen as potentially controversial documents. I exposed my own desire to see this material as neutral information, filled with fascinating archival details, rather than as potentially loaded with political significance. In turn, I was also used to the ways in which the vcc had inculcated a celebratory narrative around the repatriation of archival material (see Huffman 1996, 2009).
However, ethnography emerging not from the main museum in Port Vila but in the islands demonstrates how complex and powerful this repatriation can be and how ambivalently people negotiate with archival material once the researchers have left (and sometimes in their presence) (e.g. Lindstrom 1985; Kelly 2000:162; Kolshus 2007:95–98, and also 52–57).

In the heated atmosphere of the meeting the Council declared that we should abandon our project to make and distribute a small book of Layard’s photographs. After the meeting, however, Jean Mal Varu (and some of the descendants of the people Layard had worked with and photographed) told me it was fine to continue my work as they held the ‘copyright’ to the images of their specific ancestors that they were keen to have more access to. Faced with a difficult decision, and the uncomfortable realization that I couldn’t win, I decided to do both — to go ahead with the project but to include very few of Layard’s images taken on Vao. We eventually printed 1000 copies of our book of nearly 200 photographs which made this resource widely accessible on Malakula for the first time in 80 years (Geismar, Herle & Longga 2007) and distributed them via the mks to schools, libraries, chiefs and elders.

Unlike the Atchin photos, virtually all of Layard’s Vao images have already been published in smm, so in our new book we only included photographs connected to the people who had authorized me to print them plus a few photographs of people at the Roman Catholic Mission, previously unpublished, which I assumed would be less contentious than photographs of people in particular dancing grounds, as these linkages between people and places were what tended to become ‘evidence’ for family claims to land, rather than the more neutral space of the mission (although let’s see what happens). In our introduction, Numa and I discussed the issues of interpreting photographs, their potential for being evidence and for being interpreted in multiple ways and gave an overview of both Layard’s and our research. This kind of context is so often missing: people receive copies of archival materials without being given information as to who, when, and why it was originally produced, where it has been stored, how it has been organized, and why it has returned.

When Anita Herle returned to the Small Islands the following year to distribute the volume to the people of Vao and Atchin she was not welcomed onto the island of Vao (see Herle n.d.), and only gave copies to the people who we had worked with and who had supported the research. Subsequently, I heard that many people on Vao were angered that there were more photographs of Atchin than of Vao in the book and were buying up as many copies of our small volume as possible (Huffman, pers. communication, 2008).
The project had transformed from research requested by local people who were extremely keen to gain access to archival material previously unavailable to them into extreme ambivalence. As tensions over land erupted on Vao, the possible uses of Layard’s archive as evidence were activated, creating contestation and dissent about the meanings and use of the archive. I believe that the project is validated by this contestation — that local people need to be able to choose how to appropriately manage the material traces of their own pasts and that controversy is just as legitimate as consensus. The key point here is that engagements with Layard’s material are dynamic and changing, responding to local knowledge politics, which in turn are embedded, and heavily mediated, in the material forms of anthropological production.

In the days that followed my discussions about the possibilities of publishing Layard’s photographs, I stayed with friends on the mainland, descendants of Layard’s other informant, Mal Taru. The fractures between the different factions on Vao became increasingly apparent. One man had paid nearly 40,000 vatu (US$350) to have sections of smm translated into Bislama. He was primarily interested in a brief mention that Layard made of a now extinct lineage from a former village on the mainland, supposedly one of the first to settle on the Small Island. In order to resolve the leadership disputes on the island, he argued that it was necessary to find the ‘first man’ of the island and trace their line of entitlement through the generations. Highly educated, having worked on cruise ships around the world, and a reader in both English and Bislama, this man held smm poised to use it as a secret weapon in recuperating this lost lineage by tracing his genealogy to it, thereby trumping all other land claims. I was surprised at the attention to textual detail necessary to notice this one-line mention in smm and also by the potential power one sentence could wield if successful as evidence in forging entitlements to land. These sentences, however, are continually negotiated within the framework of formal meetings on the island, court appearances in the district capital, and by participation within research projects sponsored by the vcc.

Writing and Reading Culture

In many ways, this essay is a (belated) response to the Writing Culture critique of anthropology that, prompted by the publication of the eponymous book in 1986, provoked a series of anthropological reflections upon the resonance and power of ethnographic texts qua representations and the subsequent ‘poetics and politics’ of anthropological research qua ethnography. As Clifford Geertz persuasively argued (1988) ethnographies are curious texts — the subjective
aesthetic of ‘being there’ is married to the objectivity of empirical observation. *Writing Culture* focused on ethnography as the main form of anthropological practice and focused more on the internal worlds of text/ethnography, ignoring the external authority texts might have, regardless of whether they are actually read or situated within social worlds (and potentially therefore the subject themselves of anthropological research). In a critique of the functional positivism of earlier anthropology, which assumed that ethnography mimicked reality, the turn, dominated by US anthropology, towards a more literary, or discourse-oriented analysis pointed out that this relationship could in fact be turned inside out: ethnography might itself be a model for culture, itself best theorized as a complex representation (or set of symbols, see e.g. Geertz 1973). Rather than to push books themselves into the social world, this perspective constitutes sociality as a form of writing – a complex, perhaps polyphonic, representation. Representation becomes a worm-hole which swallows up the matter of existence.

Recent discussions have assessed the relationship between the practice of anthropology and its mediation through text and writing, highlighting one of the primary conundrums of the writing culture approach: the contextual nature of interpretation and textual representation. In an exchange of articles and a commentary, Richard Wilson and Knut Christian Myhre debate whether or not anthropologists are

overly concerned with genres of writing and rhetorical authority, rather than with what our texts refer to and the validity of the knowledge claims they constitute. The ‘linguistic turn’ in anthropology thus disables an evaluation of knowledge claims in terms of their evidence, and only leaves room for ‘the aesthetics of the representation of evidence’ (Myhre 2006:16).

Contemporary work on material culture and materiality (see e.g. Miller & Tilley 1996; Gell 1998; Myers 2001; Buchli 2002; Geismar & Horst 2004; Miller 2005; Tilley et al. 2006) may act as a palliative to these representational quandaries. An ‘emphasis on the negotiated character of representations, a quality that often emerges through participation in social and political events that have a quite evident material outcome, reminds us about the extent to which representation might be understood from a more materialist approach’ (James, Hockey & Dawson 1997:7). If the *Writing Culture* model focuses on culture *qua* text, a material culture perspective moves away from this representational model, foregrounding, for instance, the complex materiality of language (e.g. Keane 1994), or the way that texts and narratives are embodied
and emplaced in vibrant and ongoing cultural landscapes (see Bell 2009), pulling representation into reality rather than reality into representation.

As Clifford (1980:525) points out, ethnographic texts that rely heavily on (relatively) unmediated transcriptions and translation of genealogies and myths are ‘open to scholarly reinterpretation (and to re-appropriation by native speakers).’ The early wave of ethnographies emergent from Melanesia in the first decades of the twentieth century did indeed contain much more in them than even, perhaps, the ethnographer could comprehend, much as photographs contain far more than can be seen initially by the photographer (see Pinney 1992). Certainly Deacon’s bricolage-like text, and also that of Layard – with its appendices of Melanesian birds compiled by fellow unorthodox anthropologist Tom Harrisson, its extensive glossary and idiosyncratic index, pages of schematized sand drawings, pull-out panoramic views of Vao dancing grounds, its photographic reproductions, and drawings in Indian Ink copied from the original prints – contains the potential to be refigured, reused and replaced in many different ways. That said, the paradox of this ‘hypertextual’ flexibility is that its use is presaged on the assumption that this form of knowledge is fixed, and gains authority from this solid and stable veracity.

In another work, Clifford describes how the engagements between French missionary and anthropologist Maurice Leenhardt and Kanaks in New Caledonia were mediated through the production of texts – both locally written documents and the writing of Leenhardt’s own ethnography, Do Kamo: Person and Myth in the Melanesian World (1947):

Leenhardt hoped that the very process of recording information about tradition would stimulate reflection on the part of his informants. While preserving the old in written form, they would distance themselves from it (1980:522).

This form of distancing has often been commented upon as an adverse affect of the objectifying tendencies of ‘Western’ research, museological practice and so on. Many commentators are suspicious of the ways in which international research and museum culture ‘objectify’ that which is more fluid, dynamic and processual. I have developed here a perspective on objectification (which I prefer to call materialization) that does not deny this dynamism. In Vanuatu, exemplified by the work of the vcc, the objectification of tradition, or the presencing of the archive, does the opposite of what Clifford suggests – rather than distance people from their past, it re-engages them and provokes cultural creativity and innovation in social practice, often in the name of tradition.
Conclusion

This essay is not simply a textual analysis of an ethnography, nor is it an account of how the practice of anthropology itself may be understood to be textually mediated. Rather, it is an account of the vital materiality of ethnography ‘out there’, of the truth claims consolidated by wielding weighty monographs and the ways in which the return of archival materials engenders a local response to the practice of anthropology and its textual, and other, manifestations. Literacy rates on Vao and Atchin are relatively high for Vanuatu, in large part due to the presence of successful long-term Catholic, Presbyterian and Seventh Day Adventist missions, and as we have seen many people have read Layard’s text and engaged in minute specificity with its details. There is however a politics of reading, a context for this detailed involvement, that frames the interaction of ethnography and current concerns in the islands, which integrates published text (and archival material) into local hierarchies of authority and evidence.

*Stone Men of Malekula* is materially embedded within the complex politics of language, text, evidence and authority. On Atchin, where people are literate in English, it is understood and used differently from Vao, where because most people are Francophone, those with working knowledge of written English are at an advantage in plundering the ethnographic details. I spent a good deal of time on Atchin explaining why Layard never published his Atchin monograph (my explanations: his illnesses, mental troubles, distractions with psychoanalysis and so on; local conclusions: that he knew too much and was too aware of the power of his knowledge to dare publish into this problematic public domain). However, on Vao, despite the limitations of translation, the fact that the book has been published and publicly circulated for so long adds another dimension of authority to its contents. SMM is therefore an active player within this political context. Translations into Bislama not only increased the bulk of the text; they often also created meanings for sentences that the author could not possibly have had in mind. The book was also embedded within the complex regional history of anthropological research, tied to the fortunes and reception of VCC fieldworkers and visiting anthropologists and archaeologists. During this project, I came to realize that my own status as an anthropologist was bound up with understandings of what Layard was doing on the island in 1914, and people repeatedly talked about the first white men who had arrived on the island, linking me and Layard into this chain of foreign interest in their culture (see Geismar 2009). Critiques of Layard are therefore not only critiques of his authority, they are broader critiques of
anthropological representation, indigenous renditions of *writing culture*.

It would, however, be wrong to present this as indigenous participation within a Euro-centric academic critique. SMM is continually drawn into age-old local debates about entitlement and access to knowledge that are part of an underlying social dynamic throughout much of Vanuatu. These knowledge politics are embedded within local social and political structures, from the traditional ceremonies of status alteration in the North and North-Central region (see e.g. Blackwood 1981) to the ways in which rights to public speaking and rhetoric are managed on Tanna (see Lindstrom 1990). Whilst anthropologists have spent many pages describing the form and structure of social regulation (by gender, age, moiety, club membership and so on) the ways in which these understandings of the hierarchies embedded in knowledge and the ways in which restriction itself is materialized has been underscrutinized. For instance, much of the material culture of the so-called ‘graded societies’ of Malakula or Ambrym, the slit-drums, masks, canoe prows, stone carvings and raised dolmens, have little exegesis specifically connected to their form (but see Rio n.d.). Despite this lack of exegetical justification, it is obvious that these are artefacts of regulation, and provoke awareness of the boundaries of entitlement as they are physically emplaced within local landscapes. The importance of these objects lies in the ways in which they are used to materialize the right to use them successfully, rather than in any meaning that might be found in verbal explanation elsewhere. Their resistance to be translated into language only highlights how the power of these objects lies in their presence and in the ways in which they *materially* express the transcendent permanence of structures of authority as well as the innovative attempts of their makers to position themselves within these structures.

Rather than participate in the inevitable process of decay that much archival material in postcolonial tropics is subject to (Buckley 2005) the archiving practices of the VCC have resisted the deterioration of material by making and remaking the archive within local communities. Within the VCC itself a digitization initiative has transformed much fragile material into more durable bits and bytes. But more importantly, the connection of archival material to social practice ensures the perpetuation of archival material in a variety of different forms – the locus for the original form lies in the ways in which archival artefacts mediate between knowledge and ongoing social practice, rather than simply within pieces of paper. In turn this gives pieces of paper a great potency. Much as slit-drums, masks, canoe prows, names, songs and dances materialize entitlements and may only be produced and used by those
with the appropriate rank and stature, so too are ethnographic texts placed within local competitions for political authority.

What these forms all have in common is their incorporation into a local theorization of material culture that understands form and content to be inseparable and therefore resistant to the academic analytic of translation into other registers. These images and objects presence the ongoing production of authority, yet make it seem timeless. This is exemplified by the ways in which SMM has been used in court cases and local disputes as a materialization of authority yet is also significantly contested as a source of evidence.14 As a material form, its power lies in its successful application in context. Its success hinges on the success of those who use it legitimate themselves, rather than on any particular assemblage of words that can be translated into French or Bislama.

Ni-Vanuatu have long been sensitized to the ‘poetics and politics’ of representation and the hierarchies that they entail and they have long been resistant to the representational dilemmas of translation. The best example of this may be found within the ways in which the term kastom resists translation into both English and local languages; it retains power by application rather than definition, maintaining a powerful and extremely flexible ambiguity. Following the long history of anthropological thinking about representation in the Pacific region (see Geismar & Bell 2009 and the references contained within), my understanding of the efficacy of the archive is not based on more general ideas about discourse, language and text, making distinctions between the interiority of a representation and the exteriority of reality, but rather follows a strand of thinking about the efficacy and agency of material forms themselves, and their ability to influence the outcomes of the processes and structures they bring into being. It is the efficacy of SMM simply as a book, which can be opened, read, closed, hidden and quoted, as well as a more abstract container of anthropological knowledge, that makes it such a potent document in contemporary Malakula.

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Notes
1. Layard, at the time somewhat ostracized from academic anthropology, had been sent a review copy only after the book had gone to press.
3. In a parallel example, Annelise Riles (2001) discusses the ways in which paper documents give form to Fijian women’s participation in the global discourses of international development and NGOs. Documents themselves give form to meetings, visualize national and international relations, and in turn effect the relations they purport to merely represent.
4. This section has been condensed from the account given in Geismar 2006 and Geismar & Herle 2009.
5. Rivers was intrigued by a recent publication that described the material culture of the rites throughout the archipelago (Speiser 1913), and was keen to develop his interests in mapping patterns of cultural diffusion in Melanesia (Rivers 1914; see also Herle 2005; Langham 1981; MacClancy 1986).
6. On his return from Malakula, Layard deposited the 261 artefacts he collected in the field in the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. He was later to donate copy prints of his 400 photographs to the Haddon Photographic Collection, and his son Richard Layard generously gifted the glass plate negative to the museum in 2003. Layard’s paper estate was posthumously deposited in the Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego (mss 84).
7. There is an almost complete manuscript of Layard’s Atchin monograph, and several other unpublished papers, in his archives, held in the Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego (mss 84).
8. Although Kirk Huffman mischievously argues that Jung’s ideas of archetypes were as much influenced by Layard’s Malakulan ethnography as Stone Men of Malekula was influenced by Jung’s idea of archetypes! (personal communication, Dec. 2004).
9. The airport had been set fire to at a heated moment in an ongoing dispute over land.
10. Layard himself was aware that his knowledge of custom on Vao was intricately connected to the two men he worked most closely with, commenting: ‘Whilst fully conscious of the pitfalls attending a comparatively short stay under such conditions, these were, however, considerably minimised by the fact that, as known to the Vao natives, I had lived half a year on Atchin, where I had become familiar with many of the problems involved, and was thus primed with a knowledge of the general outlines of Vao culture before I ever set foot on the island. In the second place, I was already known personally to many of the Vao natives who inter-marry with Atchin. In the third place, I had the good fortune to meet immediately with a first-class informant, Ma-Taru, a man in the prime of life, who had once been a member of a Presbyterian Mission school but had renounced Christianity and had returned to Vao in order to rebuild the fortunes of his family through intensive prosecution of megalithic ritual. This man was descended from the former inhabitants of the now submerged island of Tolamp which once flourished between Atchin and Vao, who, owing to historical circumstances to be recounted below, hold a privileged position.
in the cycle of megalithic rites. His information was therefore of the highest value. Not having time to learn the language of Vao, which is different from that of Atchin though the islands are only three miles apart, my work with him was carried out in pidgin-English supplemented by comparisons with Atchin, which I spoke sufficiently well at that time to serve as a useful check... Added to this was the fact that I had evolved highly efficient technique of recording and cross-referencing which was the admiration of the natives, who believed therefore that anything I had once learnt I never forgot.' (Layard 1942:xviii–xix).

11. This document has not yet been finalized.

12. I was pregnant and sadly unable to accompany Anita Herle on this trip.

13. Whilst the Cultural Research Policy guarantees a greater degree of local impetus in defining research projects, research is still also directed by the interests of foreign academics who bring their own careers, institutional backgrounds and theoretical interests into Vanuatu. At a recent conference held in Port Vila, which discussed research as collaboration since 1995, much was made of the ways in which indigenous research criteria and interest have influenced social science in Vanuatu. Less was discussed regarding the ways in which social science has influenced local understandings of culture (but see Bolton 2003, chapter one for a discussion of her influence on the formulation of ideas about women’s kastom in the context of the vcc’s Women’s Culture Project).

14. Because of the on-going nature of these legal disputes, I have deliberately chosen not to describe any of these cases here (and the reader may also have noticed a certain vagueness in my discussions of the ways in which Layard’s book is used in contemporary disputes). As my discussion should have already made clear, there is every possibility that this text could in turn be used as either evidence or controversy within these debates.

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