CASE STUDY THREE
Moving Images: John Layard, Fieldwork and Photography on Malakula since 1914

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Haidy Geismar, working with elders of Atchin island on copies of Layard’s photographs in July 2003. © Haidy Geismar

Project background

The project started in 2003 when Haidy Geismar was employed as a post-doctoral Research Associate at MAA to document the museum’s photographic collections from Vanuatu, as part of a Getty-funded photographic research project led by Anita Herle. Geismar had already conducted fieldwork in Vanuatu where she worked with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC), specifically focusing on the contemporary resonance of historic collections. This work highlighted the ongoing significance of John Layard’s pioneering field research (1914-1915) for ni-Vanuatu (people of Vanuatu). In collaboration with the Vanuatu and Malakula Cultural Centres and communities on Malakula we developed a project to facilitate access to Layard’s 450 original glass plate negatives housed at MAA. The research included five trips to Vanuatu, and extensive archival research in the UK and the US. We located Layard’s photographs and archives in the present-day context of the places where he had worked and worked collaboratively with local curators and communities to construct and edit our manuscripts and other outputs and incorporate different perspectives.
Aims and outcomes

Aims: To unite Layard’s dispersed archives and photographs, to return digital and print copies of all the images to the central archive and library in the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, to return material directly to the communities of origin on the small islands of Malakula, and to document their return and the resonance of photographs and other collections based knowledge in present day Vanuatu.

Outcomes: a community exhibition, an electronic resource, an academic monograph and a community book which brought the images and their captions to a local audience in their own language, numerous articles and an academic monograph. The various formats took into consideration different interest groups and access to technical resources. For example, the Vanuatu Cultural Centre has facilities to store and reproduce digital images, whereas the small islands of Malakula have extremely limited access to electricity and computing equipment. We raised funds to print 1000 copies of a community volume *John Layard long Malakula, 1914-1915*, written in Bislama. Several hundred copies of the publication were directly distributed for free to the communities from where the photographs originated, as well as to various libraries, schools and educational groups throughout Vanuatu. The remaining copies are available for sale at the Vanuatu and Malakula Cultural Centres with the proceeds going to support their activities.

Are/were you merely providing access/information, or is this a project with mutual aims and outcomes?

The terms and outcomes of the Project were developed collaboratively over several years. Vanuatu has a well-established cultural research policy whereby goals are negotiated between community members and researchers and research results are made locally accessible.

We wanted to raise awareness that creating access to museum collections is not a neutral process and that collections are received into cultural contexts that also need to be documented. We were all committed to a process of education, evaluation and collaboration at every stage of the project, from the writing of our manuscript through to policies regarding the access to this material at local, national, and international levels. Following local cultural protocols we worked not only with local museum professionals but also with women, chiefs and elders in an attempt to gauge the different ways in which cultural material can resonate within a single community. Alongside an exhibition and series of publications, information about the photographs generated by the project was incorporated into MAA’s CMS and shared with the VCC. A few of the images and associated documentation were deemed to be culturally sensitive and put on restricted access. Geismar worked with the archives team at the VCC to develop cataloging procedures and update their CMS documentation.

How were aims/outcomes agreed?
See above.
Who are/were the lead personnel on the project?

Haidy Geismar (lead researcher), Anita Herle (MAA curator and lead researcher), Numa Fred Longga (Curator, Malakula Cultural Centre), Kirk Huffman (Curator Emeritus, VCC).

Who are/were you working with (a whole community, a selected group or an individual?) Please describe:

Institutional, individual and community partners: Ralph Regenvanu (Head, Vanuatu Cultural Council); Marcellin Abong (Director, VCC); Richard Layard (son of anthropologist John Layard); local communities of Vao, Atchin, Wala, and Uripiv, mediated through fieldworkers who have been trained through the VCC’s innovative fieldwork programme; Cesar Sami (VCC Fieldworker for Vao), Vianney Atpatoun (Former VCC fieldworker and curator of the Malakula Cultural Centre) Bernard Georgy (VCC Fieldworker for Atchin); Various community leaders; VCC Archivists including Malcolm Sarilieo (photo curator); Kathy Creely (archivists Manderville Papers University of California, San Diego).

Are you clear about why you are working with this selected group and with their role as representative of others? Please comment:

We were clear at all times regarding the structure of community and curatorial engagement and the responsibilities of each of the research partners and partner institutions.

Assessment of authority: why are/were you dealing with this individual or group: how are/were they empowered to speak on behalf of a community? Are/were you satisfied with their credentials?

The VCC has an innovative fieldworker program that has been running since the late 1970s and employs men and women from villages throughout the archipelago who research and document cultural traditions from their areas and act as intermediaries between communities and external researchers. Each year they are given a theme to research and they meet annually at the VCC to discuss their work and share knowledge about customary practice and social change in Vanuatu. The VCC trains the fieldworkers in documentary methods, such as oral history, local language documentation, and audio-visual recording. Fieldworkers work alongside researchers in a reciprocal relationship where researchers gain the expertise and community involvement of the fieldworkers and also work to transfer skill sets and assist with projects that are initiated by the community as well as their own approved research. We also worked with recognized community leaders and elders from the communities of Atchin and Vao.
The cover of our community volume, coauthored by Haidy Geismar, Anita Herle and Numa Fred Longga. The caption for the cover photograph is: “The aged Pelur, of Togh-vanu, holds forth on tribal history which John Layard records with the help of Ma-taru of Tolamp, whose son Na-sum sits listening too. The scene is the courtyard of Pelur’s lodge.” The photograph was taken on Vao, in 1915. UCMAA P.3768.ACH1. © Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

**Partners – who are/were they? (Please provide website addresses if possible):**

Vanuatu Cultural Centre [www.vanuatuкультure.org](http://www.vanuatuкультure.org) and the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology [www.museum.archanth.cam.ac.uk](http://www.museum.archanth.cam.ac.uk).

**Is/was it a museum-to-museum/ cultural centre project?**

See above

**What are/were the budgets and other resources? (e.g. grant awards, dedicated staff, sponsorship):**

The Getty Grant Program; British Academy Small Grant; ASAO Grant to return Indigenous Knowledge to Pacific Islander Communities; Cambridge University Smuts Fund; Bergen Research Group in Pacific Studies; Crowther Beynon Fund, MAA; New York University; Richard Layard
Dedicated staff: Haidy Geismar, Anita Herle, Numa Fred Longga.

Total budget: £25,000 (approx.), including research costs, travel, subsistence, accommodation, publication, digitization and other photographic reproduction, ni-Vanuatu assistants and local gifts (not including in-kind support from Cambridge, NYU and Vanuatu Cultural Centre).

What are/were the timescales?

The actual project was from 2003 – 2010, but it also drew on Geismar’s research from 2000.

Ethical considerations – describe what these involved in relation to the project and how they were agreed/adhered to?

Ethical considerations were managed through the Vanuatu Cultural Research Policy (currently under review). [http://www.nab.vu/vanuatu-cultural-research-policy](http://www.nab.vu/vanuatu-cultural-research-policy)

Please also describe any compromises, surprises and how the project may have been transformed through the engagement:

No research takes place in a vacuum and part of this project was to explore the contemporary resonance of historic ethnographic collections for present day communities. We were well aware of the potency of historical documentation, especially about present day disputes around land ownership. Documentation that demonstrates genealogical connections to places is increasingly used as evidence in court and has become the subject of competition and dissent within many communities. The “repatriation” of archives into communities is thus something that requires a great deal of thought, preparation, collaboration and consultation. In turn, questions of ownership challenge the very conception of “visual repatriation” and focus attention on what rights of access and interpretation encircle museum collections in their many permutations. In our introduction to the Bislama language book of the project we emphasized that communities had the greatest knowledge base and expertise regarding their own present and past and that they should not necessarily overwrite this with documentary material compiled by outsiders even though it was in the seemingly authoritative form of textual evidence.

What things would you consider if embarking on a similar project again?

This project could not have been possible without community and institutional support at many different levels within Vanuatu.

- The mutual respect and the recognition of multiple agendas is a prerequisite for collaboration.
- The need to acknowledge the amount of time, personal commitment and resources involved in sustained multi-level collaborations.
- Developing strategies to overcome the difficulties posed by lack of communication infrastructures in villages.
• The importance of clear communications and flexibility to develop relations that are mutually beneficial and to decentralize (without negating) academically focused research.
• Projects also need to take into account sustainability beyond the end of the set project date, especially with regards to the maintenance of digital resources.

Reception at Atchin for the book John Layard long Malakula with (l-r) Chief Williamson Nimbwen, Anita Herle, Fred Numa Longga, and Bernard Rossi. August 2007 © Haidy Geismar

What things would you avoid?

Making assumptions about people’s relations to the past and cultural/intellectual property. It is important not to get entangled in areas of community disagreement, occasionally we had to adjust our research goals and limit our work in particular areas or with certain communities.
References to publications relating to project (online/in print):


