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Losing the Forest but not the Stories in the Trees

*Contemporary Understandings of
F.E. Williams's 1922 Photographs of the Purari Delta**

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IN APRIL 1922, F. E. WILLIAMS (1893–1943) BEGAN HIS FIRST ASSIGNMENT AS THE AUSTRALIAN Territory of Papua's assistant government anthropologist in the Purari Delta on the southern coast of what is now Papua New Guinea.¹ During his eight-month trip, Williams obtained information on daily life, social relations, material culture, as well as religious beliefs and practices.² As part of this research, he collected ethnographic specimens, made sketches and took some 96 photographs.³ Twenty-nine of these photographs appeared in his 1924 monograph *The Natives of the Purari Delta*, a publication that subsequently came to define the area for Europeans.⁴ As part of his assessment of the Purari, Williams writes:

The Purari Delta does not appear, speaking comparatively, to be very rich in folklore. It is never easy to flatter or cajole the native into a story-telling mood, and when once he does embark upon a venture, it is usually a repetition of some old tale which has been recorded previously. During my stay in the Delta I heard a few stories

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¹ D.J.F. Griffiths, 'The career of F.E. Williams, government anthropologist of Papua, 1922–1943', MA Thesis, Australian National University (Canberra 1977); M. Young with J. Clark (ed.), *An Anthropologist in Papua: the photography of F.E. Williams 1922–1939* (Adelaide 2001); see also I.C. Campbell, 'Anthropology and the professionalism of colonial administration in Papua and New Guinea', *Journal of Pacific History*, 33 (1998), 69–90.

² F.E. Williams, *The Natives of Purari Delta*. Territory of Papua Anthropological Reports No. 5 (Port Moresby 1924).

³ The full collection of Williams' photographic images is currently held in the NAPNG and the NAA. The NAA mounted an exhibit of Williams' photographs in 1999. In 2002, the exhibit was sent to the PNG's National Museum and Art Gallery. See Young with Clark, *An Anthropologist in Papua*.

⁴ The Rev. J.H. Holmes also published a book on the region in the same year, which received widespread readership; however, it was Williams's 'scientific' monograph that had a wider and long-lasting impact within anthropology. In 1954, Robert F. Maher went to the Delta with the explicit intention of utilising Williams's monograph as a baseline from which to examine the impact of cultural change. See Rev. J.H. Holmes, *In Primitive New Guinea: an account of a quarter of a century spent amongst the primitive Ipi & Namau groups of tribes of the Gulf of Papua* (London 1924); R.F. Maher, *New Men of Papua: a study in culture change* (Madison 1961).

which are not included among those given here. *No doubt others lie hidden in the archives, but they are not popular or, so to speak, important.*⁵

Despite being an astute ethnographer, Williams's comments obscure the culturally specific ways in which Purari histories are locally reproduced and understood.⁶ For the purposes of this paper, I raise this quote not to detract from his ethnography, but rather because these comments persist in a long-term ethnographic trend by which communities of the Purari have been portrayed as without 'history' or as having only a rudimentary historical consciousness.⁷ How does one address this 'particular bundle of silences' that the Purari is without 'important stories'?⁸

During my fieldwork, an answer emerged in the local narratives inspired by Williams' photographs. As part of my investigation on the ways Purari communities have negotiated their identity and history through material culture, visual repatriation of Williams's photographs was one methodology I used to gain insight into local perceptions and constructions of the past.⁹ By freeing photographs from their immersion within European cultural expectations, visual repatriation allows other ways of seeing to emerge.¹⁰ The new narratives that emerge rescue from the photograph the seemingly trivial, 'the trash of history', which Klaus Neumann has urged historians to make the centrepieces of their chronicles of the colonial experiences of indigenous communities.¹¹ The random inclusiveness of photographs, their indiscriminate documentation of the quotidian, allows a photograph's smallest detail to become prompts for, and the centrepiece of, more complex Pacific histories. The oral performances that result from viewing photographs enable new spaces for the preservation and exploration of identity, history and culture to emerge. In the process, more inclusive and critical histories of our cross-cultural engagement can be written, and the various misconceptions that we and others writing before us have created and perpetuated can be interrogated from different vantage points.¹²

⁵ Williams, *The Natives of Purari Delta*, 246 (italics added).

⁶ J. Fabian, *Time and the Other: how anthropology makes its objects* (New York 1983).

⁷ Holmes, *In Primitive New Guinea* (London 1924), 21, 37, 23; Maher, 'Koriki chieftainship: hereditary status and mana in Papua', *Ethnology*, 13:3 (1974), 244–5.

⁸ M.R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: power and the production of history* (Boston 1995), 27.

⁹ J.A. Bell, 'Looking to see: reflections on visual repatriation in the Purari Delta, Gulf Province, Papua New Guinea', in Laura Peers and Alison Brown (eds), *Museums and Source Communities: a Routledge reader* (London 2003), 111–122; idem, 'Intersecting histories: materiality and social transformation in the Purari Delta of Papua New Guinea', PhD thesis, University of Oxford (Oxford 2005).

¹⁰ A. Fiernup-Riordan, 'Yup'ik elders in museums: fieldwork turned on its head', *Arctic Anthropology*, 35:2 (1998), 49–58; Edwards, 'Visualizing history: Diamond Jenness's photographs of D'Entrecasteaux Islands, Massim, 1911–1912 — a case study in re-engagement', *Canberra Anthropology*, 17:2 (1994), 1–26; idem, *Raw Histories: photographs, anthropology and museums* (Oxford 2001); idem, 'Talking visual histories: introduction', in Peers and Brown, *Museums and Source Communities*, 83–99.

¹¹ K. Neumann, 'Finding an appropriate beginning for a history of the Tolai colonial past: or, starting from trash', *Canberra Anthropology*, 15:1 (1992), 1–19.

¹² See J. Binney and G. Chaplin, 'Taking photographs home: the recovery of a Maori history', *Visual Anthropology*, 4 (1991), 431–42; S.A. Niessen, 'More to it than meets the eye: photo-elicitation amongst the Batak of Sumatra', *Visual Anthropology*, 4 (1991), 415–30; R. Poignant with A. Poignant, *Encounter at Nagalarramba* (Canberra 1996); J.E. Staunton, 'Snapshots on the dreaming: photographs of the past and present', in Peers and Brown, *Museums and Source Communities*, 136–51.

Here, I examine one set of narratives that emerged while working with Williams's photographs in the I'ai village of Mapaio. In particular, I focus on reactions to one photograph, entitled 'A Scene in Iari'. The narratives surrounding this image challenge Williams's notion of the Purari as not having 'important' stories, as well as my own expectations of how colonial history is remembered and retold. The discussion that follows encompasses a broad sweep of time in the Purari, and I therefore begin with an account of Williams and his work in 1922, as well as later events, in order to situate my recent fieldwork within this historical context. I subsequently turn to a discussion of 'A Scene in Iari', local reactions to this image and how a new understanding of the ways in which history is constructed and remembered in the Purari Delta has emerged from the revisiting of this photographic encounter.

A Multitude of Contexts: The Intersecting Histories of the Purari Delta

A large tidal estuary, the Purari Delta is a dense array of marine and terrestrial resources.¹³ The region's 10,000 inhabitants dwell in 20 villages and belong to six interrelated but self-described tribes: Baroi, Ia'i, Kaimari, Koriki, Maipua and Vaimuru. Speaking dialects of the same non-Austronesian language, these groups share a bundle of cultural practices, whose current configuration is the result of the interplay between local and foreign agents over the last century. In 1922, Williams was sent to the Purari to investigate a dramatic event in this interplay, 'the curious manifestations of hysteria' called the 'Vailala Madness', which had emerged in 1919.¹⁴ Involving the destruction of local material culture, the innovation of new rituals, and the mimicry of Europeans, the 'Vailala Madness' was believed by the administration to pose a threat to their control of the recently pacified population.¹⁵ As outlined by Murray, Williams's charge in carrying out his research was

to advise the Government on questions of practical administration, and so assist us in our task of fitting or, as it were dovetailing existing customs into the new civilisation which we are introducing...¹⁶

The seemingly chaotic 'Vailala Madness' flew in the face of Murray's desire for slow and rationally European induced change.¹⁷

¹³T. Petr (ed.) *The Purari: tropical environment of a high rainfall river basin* (The Hague 1983).

¹⁴J.H.P. Murray, 'Introduction' in Williams, *The Natives of Purari Delta*, iii; Williams, *The Vailala Madness and the Destruction of Native Ceremonies in the Gulf Division*, Territory of Papua Anthropological Reports No. 4 (Port Moresby 1923); idem, 'The Vailala Madness in retrospect', in E.E. Evans-Pritchard *et al.* (eds), *Essays Presented to C.G. Seligman* (London 1934), 369–79.

¹⁵Only 14 years had transpired since Lt. Governor Murray had led a punitive expedition to the Purari in 1908 in retaliation for the threatening of two European traders. Similarly, the Delta Division's administrative headquarters at Kikori (some 100 kilometres west of the Purari) had only been established in 1912. See Papua, *Papua: annual report for the year ended 30th June, 1908* (Melbourne 1908); J.H.P. Murray, *Papua or British New Guinea* (London 1912), 173–8; B. Craig, 'The ashes of their fires: the Hubert Murray Collection in the National Museum of Australia', *COMA*, 26 (1995), 18–32.

¹⁶Murray, 'Introduction' in Williams, *The Natives of Purari Delta*, iii.

¹⁷Murray, *Anthropology and the Government of Subject Races* (Port Moresby 1921).

Discovering that the 'Vailala Madness' had had little effect on Purari communities, Williams produced what he described as a 'purely descriptive' monograph, along with a separate article on initiation rites.¹⁸ In addition, Williams wrote monographs on collecting and on the 'Madness' itself.¹⁹ While these latter two monographs deal more explicitly with administrative concerns such as the preservation of local culture, in *The Natives of the Purari Delta*, Williams's preface

offers no criticism or suggestion as to government. If it contribute to a better understanding of the people it has a practical value; for the first essential toward fair, sympathetic, and kind treatment of inferiors is to know what they are doing.²⁰

While it is outside the scope of the present paper to address Williams's photographic practice, within this and his other monographs, photographs helped display what it was that these people were 'doing'.²¹ Alongside sketches, photography was one strategy by which Williams visually collected and presented information, thereby following an established disciplinary trend.²²

¹⁸ Williams, *The Natives of Purari Delta*, vii; idem, 'The Pairama ceremony in the Purari Delta, Papua', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 53 (1923), 361–87.

¹⁹ Williams, *The Collection of Curios and the Preservation of Native Culture*. Territory of Papua Anthropological Reports No. 3. (Port Moresby 1923); idem, *The Vailala Madness*.

²⁰ Idem, *The Natives of Purari Delta*, vii.

²¹ In his monographs and field notes, Williams is quiet about his photographic practice. If and when he does mention photography, he does so obliquely and unreflectively, as in the following comment:

Very few would even venture into the little hut at Kimiri, where five decrepit and weather-beaten *kanipu* [a type of mask] were hanging, though one boy of 'plantation' experience put on a costume readily enough to be photographed.

However, several years later in a letter to Beatrice Blackwood, Williams comments, 'I find I have a hatred of photography, and any good results are by chance'. While little evidence remains as to the nature of Williams's photographic practices in the Purari, it is possible to discern the following. In all likelihood Williams used an ICA Tropic 9×12cm. In a letter dated 1936, Williams remarks that this was his 'old official camera'. While 14 years had transpired since his work in the Purari, a sample measuring of Williams's plates and prints taken during this period conforms to the ICA Tropic's plate size. First introduced in 1912, the Tropic was made by the German camera manufacturer ICA A.G. until 1931. It was a well-known camera for the tropics, and Williams could have purchased the camera in England before taking up his post. Extant correspondence (9 Oct. 1922–8 May 1923), between Williams's superior, William M. Strong and the Government Store Keeper reveals that Williams had requested two-dozen photographic plates to be sent to him monthly while he was in the Purari. Owing to the lack of stock, this procurement request ran into difficulties. In his last written comment on the matter, the Store Keeper notes 'the last shipment brought 10 dozen plates, since that date no further supplies have been received'. While it is unclear when this 'last shipment' occurred and how many plates were sent to Williams, this exchange gives one a sense of the photographic limitations he faced. While these problems did not prevent Williams from taking photographs, the availability of plates might have been limited, thus forcing Williams to use great care in composing his images. F.E. Williams, *The Natives of Purari Delta*, 205; F.E. Williams to B. Blackwood, 25 Aug. 1939, Pitt Rivers Museum, General Correspondence, Blackwood Papers; F.E. Williams to Government Secretary, 23 Jun. 1936, F.E. William Papers, National Archive of Papua New Guinea (hereinafter NAPNG), Port Moresby, A447 ML MSS 5/1, 61/2989; W.M. Strong to Government Storekeeper, 7 May 1923, (NPNGA) A447, ML MSS 5/1, 61/2989.

²² Edwards, 'Surveying culture: photography, collecting and material culture in British New Guinea, 1898', in M. O'Hanlon and R. Welsch (eds), *Hunting the Gatherers: ethnographic collectors, agents and agency in Melanesia, 1870s–1930s* (Oxford 2000), 103–26; M. Young, *Malinowski's Kiriwina: fieldwork photography, 1915–1918* (Chicago 1998).

TABLE 1: Williams's Purari Photographs by Cultural Group and Category

<i>Photographic category</i>	<i>Koriki</i>	<i>Pai</i>	<i>Kaimari</i>	<i>Maiḡua</i>	<i>Totals</i>
Portrait — named	12	0	1	0	13
Portrait — anonymous	3	8	0	1	12
Material culture	25	22	1	1	49
Ritual activity	5	4	0	0	9
Landscape	4	5	2	2	13
Total	49	39	4	4	96

Williams's photographs from the Purari can be broken down into four subject categories: first, portraits or posed 'scientific reference' images of individuals or groups;²³ second, photographs whose subject matter is material culture (i.e., masks, carvings, canoes); third, photographs of ritual activity; and fourth, landscape photographs which include villages and natural features (Table 1). While these broad categories are of my own making and the subject matter of some photographs overlaps with two or more of these groupings, they at least give some sense of Williams's interests. While Williams did not completely elide the presence of Europeans or other traces of foreign elements in his photographs, it is telling that none of these images appears in his 1924 monograph. Such comments as 'one may occasionally see an old blanket or a soiled piece of calico worn as a mantle; but happily such sights are still uncommon in the Delta' suggest that he found such intrusions distasteful.²⁴

Contrary to Williams's hopes, by 1922 communities in the Purari were becoming enmeshed within the Australian colonial system. With the cessation of warfare, male inhabitants were being recruited to work in the plantations of the Central Division, as well as on the Vailala oilfield in the neighbouring Gulf Division.²⁵ A sawmill and trade store was established on the Wame River, and villagers both sold logs to the mill and obtained employment.²⁶ Sago was traded with visiting Motuans from the Central Division, as well as being sold to traders, recruiters and the government. To stimulate local industry and provide a base from which villagers could pay taxes, village plantations were being instituted by the administration. A field hospital had been established near the village of Ikinu on the coast to combat the transmission of venereal diseases as well as to monitor influenza outbreaks.²⁷ Since 1906, the London Missionary Society had been an

²³ Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 133–81.

²⁴ Williams, *The Natives of Purari Delta*, 43; cf., idem, *The Vailala Madness* (Port Moresby 1923), 60.

²⁵ Papua, *Papua: annual report 1921–22* (Melbourne 1923), 54.

²⁶ Kikori Patrol Report 7 1922–23 (NAPNG), Gulf Province Patrol Reports.

²⁷ Papua, *Papua: annual report 1921–22*, 116; Kikori Patrol Report 4 1921–22, (NAPNG), Gulf Province Patrol Reports; Kikori Patrol Report 8 1921–22, (NAPNG), Gulf Province Patrol Reports.

active presence on the coast at Urika, although by 1922 it had largely failed to convert the region's inhabitants to Christianity.²⁸

Subsequent to Williams's research, the Australian colonial presence increased. For the purposes of this paper, however, the two events that had the most profound and recent impact on communities will be examined. These events structured the ways in which people received and understood Williams's photographs during my field research. Following World War II, an I'ai man, Tom Kabu, began an indigenous modernisation movement.²⁹ In an attempt to develop 'modern' business practice, the Kabu Movement (1946–69) dispersed traditional villages, resettled communities for cash-cropping purposes and established the enclave of Rabia camp (now Kaugere) in Port Moresby to sell their produce. Abandoning the longhouses (*ravi*) and the accompanying rituals, followers destroyed most of the objects associated with these institutions. The Movement's business focus also opened up new avenues for social advancement that subsequently helped erode the traditional hereditary leadership structures.³⁰ While unsuccessful in achieving economic and political self-sufficiency, the Kabu movement reshaped the Purari physically, thereby changing the sites and nature of the reproduction of indigenous knowledge regarding clan histories, clan relationships and the chiefly hierarchy. The subsequent widespread post-World War II acceptance of Christianity (particularly the Seventh Day Adventists and the Pentecostal Churches), the region's high rates of out-migration (facilitated by the Kabu Movement's establishment of the Rabia camp) and the new leadership positions provided by national and local politics since independence have all contributed to the further entropy of this cultural knowledge.

In the mid-1990s new pressures were brought to bear on these knowledge systems when the national government granted logging concessions in the Gulf Province to Turama Forest Industry (TFI) and Frontier Holding (FH), a subsidiary of the Malaysian logging conglomerate Rimbunan Hijau (RH).³¹ In response to these projects, in 1995 clan groups formed Incorporated Land Groups (ILGs), the registered bodies through which claims to customary land tenure are nationally recognised.³² In 1999, royalty payments began to flow from these concessions. However, the registration process and recognition of customary land rights by the national government has been far from equal, such that the

²⁸ Holmes, *In Primitive New Guinea*.

²⁹ Maher, *New Men of Papua*.

³⁰ Idem, 'From cannibal raid to copra kompani: changing patterns of Koriki politics', *Ethnology*, 6:1 (1967), 309–31; idem, 'The Purari River Delta societies, Papua New Guinea, after the Tom Kabu Movement', *Ethnology*, 23:3 (1984), 217–27; N.E. Hitchcock and N.D. Oram (eds), *Rabia Camp and the Tommy Kabu Movement* (Canberra 1967); Oram, 'Tommy Kabu: what kind of movement?' *Canberra Anthropology*, 15:2 (1992), 89–105; Anthony Yeates, 'The patrol officers and Tom Kabu: power and prestige in the Purari Delta', *Journal of Pacific History*, 40 (2005), 71–90.

³¹ The logging concessions referred to here are the west bank of the Purari, Baimuru Block 3 FMA, which is currently under TFI's jurisdiction, and Vailala Block 3 FMA, which lies on the east bank of the Purari and is operated by RH.

³² C. Filer with N. Sekhran, *Loggers, Donors and Resource Owners* (London 1998), 182; H. Holzknicht, 'Pro bono publico?: conservation and appropriate resource management strategies in Papua New Guinea', in Filer (ed.), *The Political Economy of Forest Management in Papua New Guinea* (Boroko 1997), 368–90.

ILGs of some tribal groups are receiving benefits while others, such as the I'ai, are not. This has led to the fragmentation of social groupings as individuals and kin groups vie for the logging revenue money.

Critical to these intra-community negotiations are clan histories — histories of ancestral origins and migrations. Referred to as 'ancestral talk' (*airu omoro*) and as 'paths' (*kapea*), clan groups possess rights to tell certain stories. Embodied in objects, names and landscapes, these migration histories are recounted by men.³³ Since this ancestral movement through the land helped create it, these stories and their material markers help provide clans with the basis for their claims to a given resource area. Prior to the 1990s, the telling of these histories was closely governed by customary strictures (*vupu*), and they were only privately disclosed within a clan. However, with the onset of the logging and the formation of ILGs, individuals and clans have been pushed to public disclosure of aspects of their ancestral talk in order to prove leadership and land claims within the village. Those who do, open themselves to accusations of being boastful and re-awaken intra- and inter-clan jealousies, thereby becoming targets for sorcerers. Soon after my arrival, the Williams photographs were quickly subsumed within these inter- and intra-clan struggles and locally became analogous to the ancestral heirlooms through which clans assert their various claims.³⁴

Methods and Contexts of Looking

In the Purari, I worked with a set of Williams's photographs held at the National Archives of Australia, which had been scanned from photocopies and then printed from a computer. Williams's geographic attribution allowed the photographs to be arranged in a binder according to village and tribal group. Given the size of the collection, unless asked, I presented only those photographs that related to the interviewee's group. This helped reduce what was otherwise an unwieldy number of images for people to process. The photographs were either shown in a binder or passed around in no particular order. With a few exceptions, each photograph was shown without its caption.

In each of the six communities with which I worked, I first carried out large group meetings in order to share the images as widely as possible with community members. I followed these events with smaller group meetings involving a single clan or household as well as individual interviews. The larger initial multi-clan meetings were often chaotic and soon became arenas wherein debates about the politics of knowledge could be tacitly fought. Within these meetings only personal reminiscences and topics deemed appropriate for public consumption were discussed, such as rituals, songs and the construction/use of objects.

Subsequent smaller meetings were more useful to my research. Alone or surrounded by their immediate kin, elders' conversations involved issues spoken

³³ Unfortunately, within the confines of this paper it is not possible to address the gendered dimension of history telling and authority.

³⁴ Bell, 'Looking to See'.

about in public, but more often incorporated genealogies and thus personal connections to land or chiefly status. On an individual basis, people more readily discussed topics they would ordinarily have been cautious about disclosing in public. Elders appeared more secure in asserting their opinions about the identity of an individual or place in these private meetings. During my first large group interview in the longhouse community of Aikavalavi, many stories began to emerge out of looking at 'A Scene in Iari'. The discussion that follows reveals some aspects of the social dynamics that operate as stories are told and knowledge is reproduced.

The session took place underneath the house of Mailau, a prominent elder in Aikavalavi. The meeting's host, along with the community's six male elders, sat before me, encircled by their younger male kinsmen (many of whose fathers had died, leaving them the leaders of their lineages and in some cases, chiefs of their clans), along with their curious children (Figure 1). Old and young women sat behind me across from the men. Social norms dictated that the core group of male elders first look and comment on Williams' photographs. Making their remarks as much for me as their peers, clan and the assembled villagers, once finished with a photograph the men passed it to the next circle of younger men, who then passed them to female elders, women and children. While these male elders pontificated, the other village contingents made their comments quietly to their neighbours. These groupings and the order in which these images were viewed reflect aspects of the region's dynamics of knowledge production, where age and gender give individuals different degrees of public authority. While my microphone was indiscriminate in its reception and its range, the sound level at which the male elders made their comments limited both what was recorded and what could be later transcribed. As a result, many of the comments made by women and young men were muted.

Although enthusiasm pervaded this and similar group meetings, other emotions — nostalgia, sorrow, confusion and anger — also burst forth or percolated under the surface. Because of the destructive purge of the Kabu Movement, only villagers aged 65 and older had ever seen or experienced what was pictured in Williams's images. As a result, only the elders could make cultural sense of the collection's contents. Stirring the memories of these elders, the photographs also gave the past a new visual presence for younger villagers. Photographs, such as 'A Scene in Iari', quickly became platforms for the performance of oral histories and a means by which people could narrate certain aspects of their lives.³⁵

As elsewhere in PNG, in the Purari people prefer to obtain knowledge of things through direct experience and distrust unsubstantiated oral discourse.³⁶

³⁵ Edwards, *Raw Histories*; J. Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: how things tell the stories of people's lives* (London 1998).

³⁶ R. Eves, *The Magical Body: power, fame, and meaning in a Melanesian society* (Amsterdam 1998); O'Hanlon, *Reading the Skin: adornment, display, and society among the Wahgi* (London 1989); A.B. Weiner, 'From words to objects to magic: "hard words" and the boundaries of social interaction', in D. Brenneis and F.R. Meyer (eds), *Dangerous Words: language and politics in the Pacific* (Prospect Heights 1984), 161-191.



FIGURE 1: Visual repatriation meeting with the Aikavalavi community of Mapaio. (a) Elders sit within a loose semi-circle surrounded by their younger male kinsmen and children. The women who came to the meeting sat behind me. (b) Two Aikavalai elders, Mailau Aneane Ivia and Navara Kairi examine one of Williams's photographs, while others wait for them to finish (Bell 2001).

In the words of one young I'ai man, Ropo, 'We [must] have evidence of what we say, not the word only . . . Without evidence and just talking will not give a clear picture of it.'³⁷ Within the new climate of contestation caused by the logging industry, surviving ancestral heirlooms have re-emerged as important substantiations of an orator's authority. Bridging the gap between the past and present, these inalienable possessions act as metonyms of a clan group's past in their unfolding present. While Williams's photographs gave the past a new and at

³⁷R. Ropo, 31 Jul. 2001, taped interview with Bell.

times arresting visual presence, the collection was partially subsumed within this category of objects and became new tokens in people's struggle for authority. Ultimately, however, the photographs differed in that I, a foreigner, had brought them, which infused my own presence and the photographs with an aura of both strangeness and immediacy.³⁸ Despite this disjuncture, the photographs, like ancestral heirlooms, give the elders' reminiscences a new weight in communities and thus the air of authority. As the elders' built their oral scaffolding around the photographs, the images were re-inscribed with local meanings, which reawakened community pride.³⁹

'A Scene in Iari': Different Registers of Seeing and Encoding Histories

When looking at 'A Scene in Iari' (Figure 2), this is what I see. In the foreground, several women and children have closed off a creek with a fishing weir, the tide is low and several move through the mud with dip nets trying to catch prawns and small fish in the shallow water. On the left bank lie several pieces of a segmented sago palm trunks in various stages of being processed for food, while on the right bank a lone coconut tree and the framework for a small longhouse loom over a small woman's house. Behind the fishing weir, lying across the mouth of the creek is a walkway of logs. Mandated by the government, such paths were intended to improve the village sanitation, but more often facilitated the visits of patrolling government officers. Villagers were temporarily imprisoned and their constables demoted for improper maintenance of the paths.⁴⁰

Across the river on the opposite bank, in the middle of the frame sits the government rest house with its wharf surrounded by trees. Ordered by the colonial administration, these buildings were for visiting officers during their semi-routine trips through the region to enforce colonial law, hear court cases and distribute monies to returned labourers. Williams stayed in these buildings throughout his trip and, while in the village of Iari, most likely occupied this building. To the left of the rest-house stands another house frame, and to its right through the underbrush the main longhouse of the Aikavalavi community can be seen. Looking at this photograph, I initially saw and still see the traces of colonial rule located in the government rest-house and the village walkway, both elements of the region's intersecting histories that I was so intent to talk with people about. I had hoped that when showing this photograph to people during my meeting in Aikavalavi, it would stimulate discussion of these histories. Instead, elders refocused my attention by pointing out what seemed at first inconsequential details. They thus rescued from the photograph the seemingly meaningless, thereby revealing the multiple meanings nested in the image's details.⁴¹

³⁸ Bell, 'Looking to See', 118.

³⁹ M. Langford, *Suspended Conversations: the afterlife of memory in photographic albums* (Montreal 2001), 21.

⁴⁰ Williams, *The Natives of Purari Delta*, 7-8; Papua, *Papua: annual report 1921-22*, 50; Kikori Patrol Report 2 1921-22 (NAPNG), Gulf Province Patrol Reports, 3-4.

⁴¹ Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 99-100.



FIGURE 2: Entitled ‘A Scene in Iari’, in Williams’s 1924 monograph, this photograph is only one of two village scenes appearing in the book. In Williams’s checklist located in the NAA, this image is captioned ‘Fish nets (Iari) (Apr. 1922)’. This shift in captioning suggests the original focus of the photograph and a subsequent rethinking of its use within the monograph (National Archives of Australia: A6003, 24.1).

Older women focused on the photograph’s foreground, revealing aspects of their social orientation to the environment and to food gathering activities. Among other things (such as the creek’s name, the height of the tide), they remarked on the shifting nature of fishing technology. While previously mainly the work of women, innovations in fishing technology has redefined the gendered divisions of fishing. Introduced in the 1970s, nylon nets have largely replaced large fishing weirs. This shift has brought with it subtle changes in the social aspects of fishing, specifically the movement away from communal to more solitary fishing practices, as well as a corresponding shift away from food sharing. Women were not expected or allowed to speak out on these matters within the existing dynamics and structures of the public discourse on ancestral histories. Women’s orientations and activities in the environment are part of the non-discursive making of history. Through their activities in the environment, women foster and sustain the social relations that help create these histories.

In contrast, what fascinated the male elders was the photograph’s background: the trees. The inherited property of men, trees are one of the most important resources that come from possessing customary rights to land.⁴²

⁴² Other rights conferred by being holding customary title to a portion of land are access to hunting game, planting gardens, harvesting sago and gathering other food items found in the area. Rivers and creeks are similarly claimed with customary tenure conferring rights to access the waterway’s fish.

Theoretically, married women use their husband's trees as part of their movement into his clan group.⁴³ However, in contemporary practice, many women retain the right to use the resources of their father's land.⁴⁴ Nuts, leaves, fruit, grubs and the starchy interior of trees are major sources of food, and trees were and still remain a main raw source for a large range of material culture including canoes, houses, carvings, tools and rope. A tree's bark, leaves, roots and sap also provide items for many local medicines and magic. The current logging operations' economic layering of trees has only heightened their position as an index of status. With the advent of the logging, trees now constitute the single greatest source of both real and anticipated income.

The elders identified individual trees, such as tulip (*Gnetum gnemon*) and breadfruit (*Artocarpus altilis*), that are planted, tended and which form a major part of the local diet. Despite the 80 intervening years since the photograph had been taken, the owners of different trees were also named. In particular, three ilimo trees (*Octomeles sumatrana*) became centres of attention, each of which had personal names. Here, I discuss the stories revolving around two of these trees, which belonged to Aukiri Koivi, a medical assistant from the early 1920s until the 1950s. His son, Ke'a, the aging chief of Peruava Orumako clan and a senior elder within the hamlet of Lavi Kaupara, was able to verify and elaborate on these trees' histories. While other elders were able to name and identify the trees, following cultural protocol they refused to tell the trees' stories for fear of telling them wrongly and thus invoking the enmity of the stories' owners. The stories that emerged from these photographed trees challenge Williams's assertion that the Purari lacks 'important stories' and reveal the multiple layers by which histories are nested in the intersections between people, objects and the environment.⁴⁵

Meeting with Ke'a individually, I learned the details that follow.⁴⁶ Ke'a's grandmother, Ikoipie had planted the trees sometime before 1900.⁴⁷ A member of the Aiaronairu clan in Aikavalavi, Ikoipie possessed rights through her paternal kin to the land around and on which the governmental rest house was

⁴³ Williams, *The Natives of Purari Delta*, 120–4.

⁴⁴ If women's male kin do not regulate this process, the potential exists whereby these women's husbands, their children and their husband's kin can gain unchecked access to and use of these resources, thus setting the stage for later land disputes. It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss the lived reality of land ownership in the Purari, which has become only more complicated by the logging ventures.

⁴⁵ See A. Rumsey and J.F. Weiner (eds), *Emplaced Myth: the spatial and narrative dimensions of knowledge in Australia and Papua New Guinea* (Honolulu 2001).

⁴⁶ I have purposely left vague the story I discuss below, in order not to create jealousy among villagers when this article returns and is read by the Mapaio community. However, I have not used pseudonyms and have respected local wishes by narrators to be named.

⁴⁷ Aukiri died in 1976 and by my reconstruction was born sometime around 1900. He became a medical aide and assisted on medical patrols throughout the Gulf until his retirement in the 1950s. In what most likely is a reference to Aukiri, on an undated page of his notebook from 1922, Williams scrawled over one of his pages 'Inft [sic] Aukiri f[sic] Iare (Hosp. boy).' Later Aukiri is mentioned by patrol officer Liston-Blyth on his entry for June 14th, 'Returned to Rest House and was busy on cases till 10 pm Medical Assistant Aukiri, is here, he is a native of this village and I greatly doubt that he spends much of his time at IVIRA [medical station on the coast], while the G M O is away tho [sic] he is nominally in charge.' Williams, 1922, (NAPNG) A447, ML MSS 5/7 68/2993; Kikori Patrol Report 23 1926/27 (NAPNG), Gulf Province Patrol Reports, 5.

built. Ikoipie planted these two trees for her son, Aukiri. Because of her father's chiefly status, Ikoipie had rights to plant the trees on her clan's land and then pass them to him.⁴⁸ Honouring her son's father's clan, Orumako, Ikoipie named the trees after a pair of ancestral brothers from their clan, one of whom her son was also named after. Typical of 'ancestral talk', the story of these two ancestral brothers, a brief aspect of which follows, involves movement over vast distances, conflict between kin, adoption and dispersal:

Vai'i and Aukiri, two brothers, fought over a misunderstanding that arose surrounding a wandering female ancestress of Oreika clan, named Aea Mari. Aea had stumbled upon the garden of the elder brother, Vai'i. Hungry after a long journey from the west, she consumed some bananas and hid. Upon finding the bananas' skins Vai'i accused Aukiri of the theft and they fought. The fight became heated but ended when Aukiri's nose was cut off. Soon afterwards, Aea was found and Vai'i realised his error. Despite his brother's apologies, Aukiri left with his followers and joined a semi-nomadic people, the Pawaiians. Vai'i adopted Aea as his daughter and migrated towards the coast joining groups that would eventually help form the I'ai tribe.⁴⁹

Today, both Vai'i and Aea are regarded as apical ancestors among the I'ai, while Aukiri is invoked to establish an agnatic relationship with the contemporary Pawaiians. Living in the Purari's hinterland, the Pawaiians are now in the unique position of having the lands they occupy become the focus of the previously mentioned logging projects and a new oil drilling operation.⁵⁰ Through these names, the trees index a series of stories that travel up the Purari River. Today, these names are used to invoke and recall relationships between clan groups and now are increasingly used to assert resource ownership.

However, the story of these trees does not stop here. Kairi Koivi, a maternal uncle to Aukiri, cut down one of these trees in the 1950s to make a canoe. Before doing so, Kairi secured Aukiri's permission and honoured their relationship by giving him two shell valuables and one chicken. A decade later, Erare, a man of an unrelated clan cut down the remaining tree to make a canoe. However, Erare failed to secure permission to cut down the tree and did not compensate Aukiri for doing so. Shortly thereafter, Erare sickened. A local shaman with the help of his spirit-beings (*imunu*) removed several pieces of the recently felled tree, which had been magically thrown into Erare's body. Erare blamed Aukiri, but the shaman refuted Erare's assertion, telling him that *imunu* had attacked him.

⁴⁸ Personal communication Ke'a Aukiri, 3 Oct. 2002.

⁴⁹ While the patrilineal succession prevails in the Purari, women could be initiated if they were the chief's first and only child. As I learned during my fieldwork, I'ai women of chiefly lineages could (and did) pass on titles, and in some cases land rights to their eldest son. These trees may have also been a gift bestowed upon Aukiri by Ikoipie's brothers, his maternal uncles. The maternal uncle was responsible for the initiation of a child into the long house cult, as well as for the child's well being and frequently gave them things. Williams, *Natives of the Purari Delta*, 153–64. see also *ibid.* 68, 113.

⁵⁰ Information regarding this drilling project can be found on the Inter-Oil website, <http://www.inter-oil.com/>.

The shaman urged Erare to have a feast to appease the angered spirits. He failed to do this and soon after died.

Capricious ancestral spirit-beings, *imunu* inhabit specific trees, and sites in rivers, and the ground.⁵¹ As a category, *imunu* covers both those ancestors that lineages lay claim to and more generally to ‘those left behind’ during ancestral migrations and which now wander the forests. They are the non-human other that inhabits and enchants the world, and whose capture and possession gives their owner powers. The two trees identified in the photograph were inhabited by *imunu*, as are other large trees invested with ancestral names. Before cutting down such trees, the spirit-beings that dwell within must be formally addressed, asked to leave their home and mollified with a food offering. Only then will the spirits do so willingly and without causing harm to those that offended it.

Unappeased by Erare, the power of the *imunu* began to affect Aukiri, the tree’s owner, prompting him to organise a large feast of chicken, tinned fish, rice, sugar and tea, to which he invited the prominent men of all the I’ai long houses. During the ensuing feast, Ivia Laura, a local politician, ritual chief of the Laivana clan, and a leading elder in the Seventh Day Adventist Church, opened poster-scrolls depicting Jesus and asked him to drive these demons from the land. Placated by the food, and their power diminished by the power of Jesus, the spirits of the old village site harmed no one thereafter.

Photographs as the Paths and Objects of Histories

The stories elicited by ‘A Scene of Iari’ spill out of its photographic frame, moving beyond what the image appears to be about by Western standards of photographic realism and attention.⁵² Furthermore, the stories that emerge help circumvent previous anthropological representations of the Purari, which still influence our constructions today.⁵³ During these visual repatriation sessions, Williams’ photographs became ‘instruments of orality’.⁵⁴ Evoking multiple histories, the stories that emerged from ‘A Scene of Iari’ are ‘spatial practices’ that move as they do in and out of the environment and through time.⁵⁵ They connect ancestral action to a pair of trees planted by a mother for her son to the subsequent events that followed their being cut down to the current horizons of expectations of the photographic elicitation interview where the photographs were viewed and these stories elicited. In a process similar to that described by Elizabeth Edwards during D’Entrecasteaux Islanders’ viewing of

⁵¹ Williams, *Natives of the Purari Delta*; Maher, ‘Koriki Chieftainship’.

⁵² Edwards, ‘Talking Visual Histories’, 91.

⁵³ D. Newton, *Art Styles of the Papuan Gulf* (New York 1961); B. Knauff, *South Coast New Guinea Cultures: history, comparison, dialectic* (Cambridge 1993).

⁵⁴ Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, 153.

⁵⁵ M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley 1986), 115.

Diamond Jenness's photographs, different ways of seeing and cultural orientation were inscribed by I'ai villagers on to this photograph's arrested moment.⁵⁶

The different layers of narratives that emerged when talking with Ke'a transformed 'A Scene in Iari' into a topological object whereby local histories and their inherent spatial and temporal links could be reworked, strengthened and renewed.⁵⁷ Visual repatriation returned this and other photographs back into a flow of sociality, albeit different but nevertheless related to the one which Williams's images were meant to seize, and which the click of his shutter have muted. In the dialogues that ensued while looking at these photographs, they, like 'A Scene in Iari', became templates in which attachments to land through remembered social action (i.e., the planting and cutting of trees, feasting) and social relations (patrilineal and affinal) were re-inscribed and re-affirmed. While today communities tacitly know these connections, their meanings and the nature of these attachments are actualised through the oral discourse of elders. Through the process of visual repatriation, Williams's photographs assisted to create and substantiate the collective memory worlds of the I'ai communities, clan groups and lineages.

If, as Edwards has argued, 'photographs focus seeing and attention in a certain way', then visual repatriation re-focuses this 'seeing and attention' by drawing the historians attention to the visual triggers of different cultural visions.⁵⁸ As a process, visual repatriation enables narratives that challenge both our own and our predecessors' representations. Thus visual repatriation enables the critical reappraisal of how we have represented and understood our mutually entangled histories that these photographs are products of. This is an important step in the process of reinvesting communities with a degree of agency and a voice in what we write about them. Photographs in a very real sense create a new space through which researchers — the communities with whom we work — rework their respective 'paths', revisiting our intertwined 'ancestral talks', thereby enabling multiple histories for the future. Therefore, while the present-day logging activities may be radically changing the Purari's forests, the stories that are embedded in the trees can retold, renewed and preserved for future generations through visual repatriation.

ABSTRACT

In 1922, F.E. Williams began his first assignment as the Australian Territory of Papua's assistant government anthropologist in the Purari Delta. During this eight-month trip, Williams obtained information on daily life, social relations, material culture, as well as religious beliefs and practices. He collected ethnographic specimens, made sketches and took some 96 photographs and used 29 of these photographs in his 1924 monograph *The Natives of the Purari Delta*, a publication that

⁵⁶ Edwards, 'Visualizing History', 11–12.

⁵⁷ J.F. Weiner, 'Afterword', in Rumsey and Weiner, *Emplaced Myth*, 236, 243.

⁵⁸ Edwards, *Raw Histories*, 17.

subsequently came to define the area for Europeans. However, Williams obscured the culturally specific ways in which Purari histories were locally reproduced and understood. This essay highlights a long-term ethnographic trend by which communities of the Purari have been portrayed as without 'history' or as having only a rudimentary historical consciousness and suggests that, despite this 'particular bundle of silences', the Purari is not without 'important stories'.