

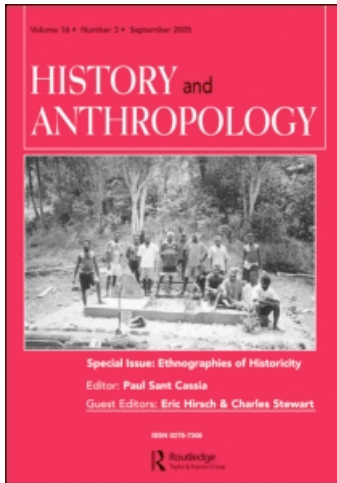
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### Out of the Mouths of Crocodiles: Eliciting Histories in Photographs and String-Figures

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# Out of the Mouths of Crocodiles: Eliciting Histories in Photographs and String-Figures

Joshua A. Bell

*Whom and what do we touch, hear and see when we hold, listen and look at photographs? What histories are enfolded within photographs' materiality? What elided pasts do they contain, and what possible futures can be negotiated with source communities by engaging with these artefacts in the present? In this paper I consider these related questions through an exploration of the nexus of relations, perspectives and histories enfolded within a particular glass plate (A6510,499) held in the National Australian Archives. Taken by the government anthropologist F. E. Williams in 1922 in the village of Ukiaravi, this portrait of the two young boys Kauei Ove and Kauri demonstrating a string-figure is one of some ninety-six glass plates produced by Williams during his eight-month trip to the Purari Delta of Papua New Guinea. Viewed with communities, this photograph generated a series of conversations about a set of relations involving the mimetic faculties of Crocodile Monitor Lizards, the growth of knowledge through bodily transformation during male initiation, and various modes of history telling and making. In examining these relationships and the ways in which they unfolded around engagements with this glass plate, I contribute to discussions about the nature of fieldwork and the productive possibilities that connecting source communities to their photographic and archival legacies has for them, museums and the discipline.*

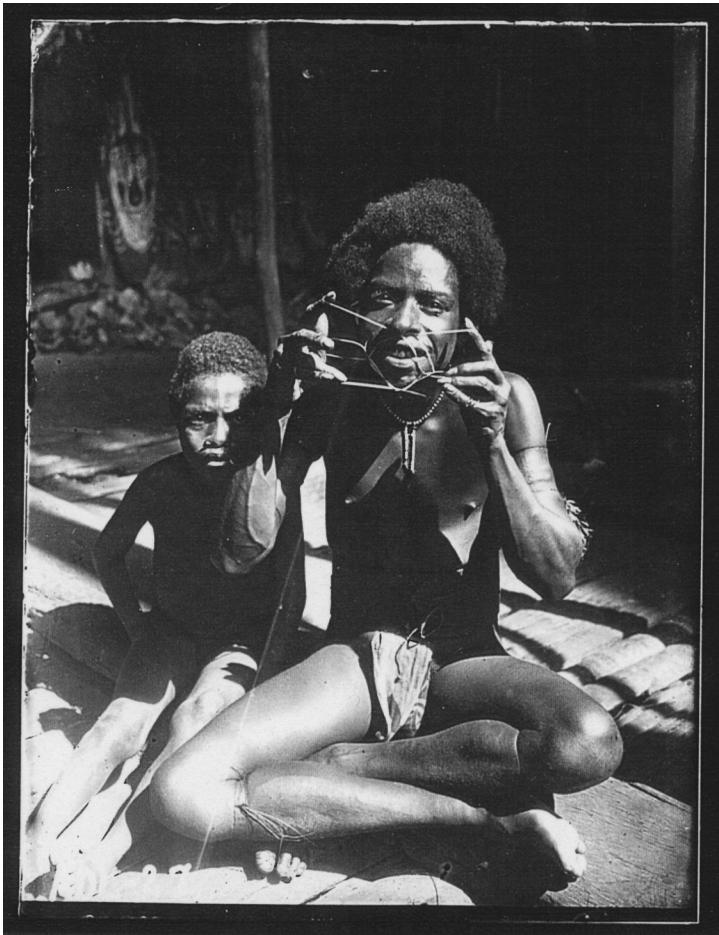
*Keywords:* History; Mimesis; String-figures; Crocodile Monitor Lizard

Whom and what do we touch, hear and see when we hold, listen and look at photographs?<sup>1</sup> What histories are enfolded within photographs' materiality? What elided pasts do they contain, and what possible futures can be negotiated with communities

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by engaging with these artefacts in the present? I consider these questions here by exploring the nexus of relations, perspectives and histories materialized by a particular glass plate (A6510,499) held in the National Archives of Papua New Guinea and the National Australian Archives (Figure 1). Taken in 1922 by the Assistant Government Anthropologist F. E. Williams (1893–1943) during his eight-month residence in the Purari Delta of what is now Papua New Guinea (PNG), this portrait of two boys in Ukiaravi village is one of some 96 glass-plates produced by Williams. Its caption reads “‘Ani Amani’ Cat’s cradle (Ka[u]ei Ove and Kauri the Pairama boy). ‘Ani Amani’ is the huge saurian, said to be found in the bush” (NAA A6005, 30.1). Kauei and Kauri sit inside a *ravi*, a longhouse, where initiated men through ritual and art forms brought forth the forest of relations that connected them to their ancestors, and through which they made sense of the world. Each is at different stages of his transformation into an



**Figure 1.** Photograph taken by F. E. Williams captioned ‘Ani Amani’ Cat’s cradle (Ka[u]ei Ove and Kauri the Pairama boy). ‘Ani Amani’ is the huge saurian, said to be found in the bush” (National Archives of Australia A6005, 30.1).

initiated man, and both look at the camera while Kauei holds a string-figure to his mouth. The figure invokes the *ane komara* (lit. “the crocodile that comes”) as I’ai communities call the Crocodile Monitor Lizard (*Varanus salvadorii*).<sup>2</sup> Held to the mouth, this string-figure involves the wielder imitating the *ane komara*’s reputed powers of vocal mimicry. This is perhaps why Kauei appears bemused as he looks at the camera, mimicking in his way the anthropological technology *par excellence* of mimesis (Taussig 1993).

Viewed with communities in the Delta over the last ten years, this photograph generated a series of conversations about the mimetic faculties of *ane komara*, the growth of knowledge through bodily transformation of male initiation, and thus local modes of history telling, making and being. In examining these relationships as they unfolded during community engagements in response to this photograph, I explore the transformations that these processes entail, thereby contributing to discussions about fieldwork and the productive possibilities that connecting communities to their photographic and archival legacies has for them, museums and the discipline (Edwards 2001; Peers & Brown 2003; Pinney & Peterson 2003; Brown *et. al.* 2006; Geismar 2006; Morton & Edwards 2009).<sup>3</sup> Such collaborations have the possibility for not only writing more nuanced accounts of our shared colonial pasts, out of which objects such as this photograph emerged, but also for contributing to the understanding of the vernacular renderings of photography (Pinney & Peterson 2003; Vokes & Smith 2008; Geismar 2009).

A central issue involved in this process is understanding how talking about and around photographs entails learning to see, hear and, indeed, be—what Pinney (2001: 158) has termed “corporetics” or “the sensory embrace of images, the bodily engagement ... that people ... have with artworks”. Productively expanding on Taussig’s (1993) call to rethink the visual in relation to other sensorial modes, Pinney’s call for nuanced accounts of what photographs *do* in the world, and how people engage them, contributes to the wider sensorial and material turn of anthropological theory and method (Feld 1982; Stoller 1989; Gell 1998; Howes 2005; Miller 2005). This phenomenological perspective reminds us of how “the senses operate in relation to one another in a continuous interplay of impressions and values” (Howes 2003: 47), and helps to move us towards the “sensuous scholarship” advocated by Paul Stoller (1997: xiv). As such, the western preoccupation with the visual indexicality of photographs begins to fade, and the ways in which other senses, particularly sound and touch, that are integral aspects of the experience of these image-objects comes to the fore (Edwards 2005). Doing so the ways in which photographs are “bundles of sensory properties which respond to specific sets of relationships and environments” emerges (Edwards, Gosden & Phillips 2006: 8). This bundling of relations involves attention to the materiality of photographs, whether they be the feel of paper, the delicacy of glass plates or the pixelization of digital images on computer screens.

Within this sensorial turn, photographs emerge as social objects that are embedded in gesture, and oral expositions, and, indeed, are generative of them (Pinney 1997; Edwards & Hart 2004; Wright 2004; Edwards 2005; Geismar 2006; Morton & Edwards 2009). They are performative objects whose indexicality and oral architecture—that

is, the talk that surrounds them—connects photographs to the world (Edwards 2001; Langford 2001). Photographs are therefore not passive containers of history, but a means by which history is negotiated and remade (Pinney 2004; Morton & Edwards 2009). Contextually bound, their meanings are in Gell's formulation materializations of the "unfolding patterns of social life" (Gell 1998: 6). This perspective encourages thinking about the social relations that infuse these entities, are engendered by them, and how photographs in turn push back as agents in the larger sensorial dance between humans and non-humans (see also Latour 1999, 2005; Mitchell 2005). Doing so helps both to further situate photographs in the world, and allows us to consider the different ways that these objects act upon the world, opening up anthropologists to glimpsing other ontological premises, and all that they entail (Kohn 2007).

Such issues come to the fore when dealing with photographs in cross-cultural situations precisely because of the ways photographs indiscriminately capture what transpires before the camera's lens. The dialogues that emerge from examining what is in and outside the frame usefully challenges our own scholarly and cultural biases about the nature of the photography and the networks we perceive them as inhabiting (Edwards 2001; Wright 2004; Bell 2006b, 2008; Geismar 2009). Such engagements are increasingly an essential reality of the lives of collections in museums and archives, and are important facets of these institutions' wider public engagement (Peers & Brown 2003; Morton & Edwards 2009). Through such encounters, photographs are placed back within "a world of meaningful interconnections" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 16), whereby relationships in the present and past are revealed, and in doing so one can write more nuanced accounts of others and ourselves (Strathern 2005: vii).

In the spirit of collaborative play that the string-figure held by Kauei invites (Haraway 1994), replete as it is with mimicry, within this paper I use these perspectives on the sensorial and material aspects of photograph to think through the strings, relations, or, in the Purari idiom, *kapea* (paths) radiating from this image-object. Following a discussion of contemporary communities in the Purari Delta, I turn to the circumstances of Williams' fieldwork and situate this photograph in his wider ethnographic project. Turning back to the present, I examine engagements around this image to understand the transformations in which the boys, Kauei and Kauri, were involved, and how men today conceptualize the abandoned initiation process through their own bodies. Doing so, I address the wider set of non-human agents that are part of Purari cosmology through a brief discussion of communities relations to, and with, the *ane komara*. This weaving between the past and present, and different forms helps reveal the intersections of local modes of history telling and being, as they are found in string, bodies and images. All are replete with mimicry, the folding of things within things, alternating perspectives and their subsequent transformations. Such understandings are essential if we are to comprehend the networks in which this photograph was taken, and within which communities forge new understandings through them. In the process, photographs emerge, to modify a remark by Haraway (2003: 5), as "not just to think with", but "are here to live with".

### Contexts of Talking, Looking and Hearing Histories

The 12,000 people who collectively comprise the Purari inhabit a large tidal estuary fed by the Purari River on PNG's South coast.<sup>4</sup> Speaking the same non-Austronesian language, six self-described tribes, the Baroi, I'ai, Kaimari, Koriki, Maipuan and Vaimuru compose the Purari. These groups occupy some twenty-four villages that range in size from six hundred to thirty people.<sup>5</sup> Villages divide themselves further into *ravi*, which until their abandonment in the late 1940s, were centres of ritual displays carried out by the *ava'i* (patrilineal descent groups) they hosted. Despite their physical absence today, *ravi* remain important distinctions within communities, as do *ava'i*. The latter are, however, increasingly fragmenting under the pressures to register kin groups as Incorporated Land Groups (ILGs), entities through which relations to the companies are maintained, and to whom resource royalties flow. In the wake of the regional logging (1995–present) and oil/gas (2002–present) projects, this bureaucratic process has complicated relations between and within kin groups defined by strong relations between fathers and sons, exogamous marriage practices, and the last fifty years of out-migration to urban centres.<sup>6</sup> Movement to and from urban centres to visit kin further shapes these relations. With relatively limited access to cash, communities rely on selling fish, sago and timber in Baimuru, the district headquarters, marketing produce at Kapuna, the regional hospital or at the three base camps for the logging and oil/gas projects.<sup>7</sup> These activities, and the resulting food sharing and feeding enabled either from products of the environment or cash earned from them, are an essential part of the non-discursive fostering and sustaining of social relations and thus, histories (Bell 2006a, 2009).<sup>8</sup>

These temporal and spatial relationships, known as *kapea*, are the means by which humans conceptualize their interconnections and relations with the various non-human ancestral and non-ancestral entities known as *imunu* that enchant the Delta. Before the widespread iconoclastic purges of the Kabu Movement, *imunu*, and the relations they materialized, coalesced in large-scale rituals and displays of objects, which acted as their *ruru* (“skins”) or *vi'i* (“canoes”) (Williams 1924, Maher 1961, Bell 2006a).<sup>9</sup> Housing this material, the *ravi* were forests of relations transposing through carved images and masks ancestral presence with various sensorial and social effects. In the absence of *ravi* and with few heirloom objects remaining (Bell 2009), today *imunu* reside in specific trees, waterholes and sites in the ground and become visible through taking on the forms of different animals (birds, crocodiles, fish and pigs), and found objects (machine vice, flashlight). The attenuation of communities' engagement with *imunu* combined with the negative connotations that Christianity (Seventh-Day Adventist, Pentecostal and United Church denominations) has placed on traditional cosmology has resulted in a mixture of pride and fear regarding the agency of this capricious population.<sup>10</sup> Given the abilities of these beings to take different forms, communities understand that nothing encountered may be what it appears to be, and as such often engage in speculation over what lies concealed behind visible forms and actions.<sup>11</sup> Too often this entails conjecture that leads to suspicions of sorcery, which is seen to increasingly plague the region as strife develops around resource owner claims (Bell 2009).

It was with an eye towards understanding these transformations that I brought to the Delta several sets of historical photographs, of which Williams' was the largest (Bell 2003, 2006a, 2008). In 2000 these photographs cast me as a familiar stranger, and upon my return in 2001 it was widely speculated that I was related to an ancestor, who had left the region but had promised to send his children to lift up the I'ai (compare with Kirsch 2006). My interest in local history for my dissertation was also interpreted as part of a wider salvaging of ancestral histories by which the I'ai could claim their rightful share of the royalties flowing from the ongoing resource extraction projects (Bell 2009). In March 2010, these perceptions remained but with the new urgency of communities' hope that I could help them address the growing environmental problems they are experiencing from the logging and oil/gas activities on the Purari River.<sup>12</sup> Intra- and inter-village politics around leadership and resource ownership have further complicated these understandings such that over the last ten years, when I worked with assembled male elders, disputes often simmered underneath the surface, occasionally bursting forth, as they attempted to manoeuvre themselves and their kin group as part of the wider-community-level struggle for recognition of resource rights. Engaging photographs, though immensely productive, entailed various negotiations, the ramifications of which I have only slowly become aware (see Harrison 2001). This experience underscores both the politics of knowledge in which these images were immersed and understood, and how long-term engagement around collections with communities yields different results as these demands change. Different, but equally important dynamics engendered Williams' fieldwork and the portrait discussed here.

### **Histories of the Moment—F. E. Williams in the Purari Delta<sup>13</sup>**

In 1922, the Papuan Administration sent Williams to understand the effects of the so-called 'Vailala Madness' that swept the Papuan Gulf coast in 1919 (Williams 1923c), and assess its impact on the Delta's densely populated villages (Murray 1924: iii).<sup>14</sup> Finding the effects of the "Vailala Madness" fleeting, Williams obtained information on daily life, social relations, material culture, as well as religious beliefs and practices in the Delta (Williams 1923a, 1923b, 1923c, 1924). Though preoccupied with translating his experiences into text, Williams collected ethnographic specimens (Schaffarczyk 2006), made sketches (Butcher 1964: 163) and took photographs with his ICA Tropicca 9 × 12 cm (Bell 2006b; Young with Clark 2001).<sup>15</sup> Williams' glass plate camera dictated that he often had to pose his subjects as he attempted to document otherwise fleeting aspects of social life (Williams 1924: 205). Limited supplies of plates, and delays in shipping to the Delta, also meant that Williams had to choose his shots judiciously (see Bell 2006b: 194, fn 21). As a result, Williams' photographs are as much about documenting Purari life, as they are part of his following categories dictated by *Notes and Queries* (British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS) 1912).<sup>16</sup>

Though recognizing how "an anthropologist's business may be obstructed by his official character and the presence of a uniformed policeman" (Williams 1924: 119),<sup>17</sup> Williams was never fully able to escape his association with the colonial administration, which was viewed with varying degrees of suspicion in the Delta (Bell 2006a). His

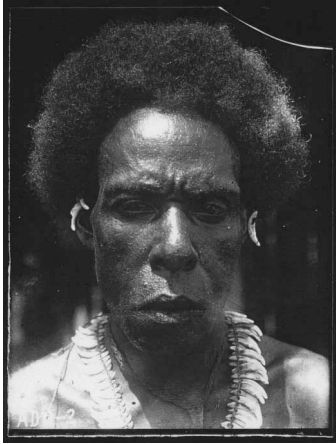


**Figure 2.** Photograph taken by Williams of three adorned *pairama ukua* with a man in colonial Papuan dress, presumably Tangalemo, standing behind them. This photograph was original captioned “Young entrants after feasting”, and was taken on 13 April 1922 in Lavi Kivau community (National Archives of Australia A6005, 79.2).

reliance on government transportation, and on his escort of Papuan policemen—Tangalemo and Aragita—reinforced these perceptions (Figure 2).<sup>18</sup> Glimpses of this dynamic appear in Williams’ fieldnotes. In Kairavi village, Williams notes that two objects previously seen were hidden on his return visit and that there was a “general stubborn reluctance to talk. As far as I could make out village hadn’t a single story to give me. Possibly fear or non-cooperation.”<sup>19</sup> In Ukiaravi, Williams noted that “Men are afraid to speak of these [tracings linked to cannibalism] to me. When I broach the subject, there are startled looks from one to another and warning gestures to keep silent.”<sup>20</sup> This fear was a by-product of the administrations officer’s routine punishment through imprisonment for failing to follow hygiene sanctions and building codes (Bell 2006a), which continues to resonate with I’ai recollections of how their grandparents refrained from telling Williams’ stories because of their fears of being sent to jail (Bell 2006b). I raise these issues to help make more visible the power relations that infused the creation of Williams’ images, which are an important aspect of their biographies (Stocking 1991).

Within this context, Kauei and Kauri’s portrait emerges as part of a set that Williams took whereby he visually documented Kauei’s family and through it a range of practices. A *pai’iri amua* (village chief) in *Karara ravi*, which was adjacent to the village’s





**Figures 3 (left) and 4 (right).** Visual mapping of Kawei's family. Left is an image of Kawei's father Ove Kawei captioned "Ove Kawei, Chief of Karara-Ravi (Ukiravi)" (National Archives of Australia A6005, 1.2), while right is an image of Kawei's mother, which was originally captioned 'Ove's wife-making AKEKE, Ukiravi (National Archives of Australia A6005, 27.1),

government rest house where Williams stayed in Ukiaravi village, Kawei's father Ove was photographed in profile and in a close frontal portrait (Figure 3; see also photograph opposite; Williams 1924: 49). Though not captioned as such, the two images of Ove appear to have been taken within the register of scientific reference, and may have been part of Williams' brief foray into physical measurements. During the four months he worked in Ukiaravi, Williams comments how Kawei was "an exceptionally reliable informant" (1924: 49), and his notes show that he was a source on leadership, ritual, as well as property and kin relationships. Information obtained from Ove became an important basis of Williams' understanding of Purari kinship, and portions of his genealogy appear in his monograph as exemplary of kin terms (Williams 1924: 49–52). Within his fieldnotes, Williams further maps Ove's relations to the carvings displayed within the *ravi* illustrating the analogies by which men through these carvings connected to ancestors.<sup>21</sup> Kawei's mother, Evaia, imaged in a photograph not published by Williams, appears plaiting a sago fibre basket (*akeke*), which, though no trace of their interactions appears in Williams' fieldnotes, appears to be part of his documentation of basketry (1924: 36–38) (Figure 4). Similarly, Kawei's sister Varia Kau'u serves as example of how the daughters of chiefs could be initiated (1924: 113), while the funeral of Kawei's paternal aunt, Varia's namesake, becomes the example of mourning members of chiefly lineages (1924: 223–228).

For his part, Kawei figures in the Williams' discussion of genealogy and practice of alternating patronyms (1924: 58), while Kauri is mentioned in relation to the *pairama ukua* initiation (1923b: 371). Due to the temporary absence of his initiators, and thus of his perceived neglect, Kauri's older brother removed him from Aika Ravi, where he was to be initiated, to Karara Ravi where he was photographed by Williams with Kawei.

Several months later in November, Williams documented Kauri's initiation (1923b, 1924: 153–164). These social relations enmeshed Williams, and the ethnographic information he obtained, and feed the familiarity that appears in Kauei and Kauri's portrait, an intimacy absent in other images. These relations aside, the focus of their portrait appears to be the documentation of the string-figure in Kauei's hands. Filed in a folder marked "Games", are notes taken in Ukiaravi about the string-figure. Williams writes how the string is placed over the mouth, thus allowing one to repeat all said to them. He also notes that the figure is "said to be [a] large lizard—can tie its tail to [a] tree".<sup>22</sup> The photograph appears to be Williams attempt to collect data on games, which, though not entering the monograph, as *Notes & Queries* (BAAS 1912: 227) dictated "should be recorded fully, if possible with photographs and drawings".

### Histories in Photographs, Bodies, String, and Crocodiles

Discussing other interactions around Williams' photographs, I have examined how these artefacts invoked *kapea* into the forests, means by which trees and otherwise seemingly indistinct aspects of the environment are cultural (Bell 2006b), and how photographs acted as pivots for men to enact new or dormant relations within their community (2008). Kauei and Kauri's portrait contributed to these discussions, but, more than this, the image revealed how mimetic empathy helped to drive relations between humans and non-humans, and their transformations through ritual and history telling. As articulated by Willerslev in his ethnography of the Siberian Yukaghirs mimetic empathy involves putting "oneself imaginatively in the place of the other, reproducing in one's own imagination the other's perspective" but in doing so draws upon the "decisively corporeal, physical and tangible quality" that this process entails (Willerslev 2007: 106). Willerslev offers this formulation as a way to combine the perspectivism articulated by Viveiros de Castro (1998), which is articulated in myth, and the dwelling perspective of Ingold (2000) to understand the Yukaghirs lived experience. Similarity and difference pervade this process, which, though a faculty in Tausig's formulation (1993) may be more aptly thought of as a relationship through which the world is mutually constructed by humans and non-humans (Harrison 2006; Kohn 2007). In Willerslev's formulation "feelings of empathy arise precisely because the other's experiences are *not* mine, because we are different beings that, in the face of our dissimilarity, possess similar access to basic bodily and sensory experiences" (Willerslev 2007: 107–108). It is through this indigenous mode of analysis that relationships normally rendered as animism and totemism can be understood (Kirsch 2006), and by which sense is made of communities' engagement with the environment and their multiple non-human others. Such engagements necessarily involve transformation or "ontological blurring" (Kohn 2007). Within the Delta this is found in the process by which initiates become men whereby they are corporeally linked through ritual to ancestral spirit beings. Discussions also revealed aspects of how women and men collaborate in constructing the network of relations that is the stuff of history in the Delta.

In public and private settings Williams' photographs became a means by which male elders lauded their audience about their experiences in the lapsed ritual system.

Alongside their wives and sisters, these men were the last generation to have experienced the *ravi*, initiations and rituals. As social norms dictated, men spoke while women, though knowledgeable, listened and muttered to themselves (Bell 2003). Alongside positive responses, a few men openly worried about bringing to the fore practices that Churches now condemned, and indeed some chastised their peers for talking about such matters. For fear of sanction by the Seventh Day Adventist Church, some male elders later performed songs that these images provoked in private. People's responses reflected the differing impacts of the Kabu Movement, and people's adherence to Christianity. While anxiety and indifference struck some, many young people were dazzled, and though not knowing how to engage the images themselves, felt the process as articulated by a young man named Joshua, "is beautiful. It makes us appreciate our past".

Predominately working with I'ai communities, I did not locate the boys' descendants. This factor, along with the specificity of Williams' captioning as to their identities, meant that discussions of this photograph did not become enmeshed in the politics of hierarchy that other unnamed portraits did (Bell 2003: 113–116). Rather, discussions of this image-object stayed at the level of the "forensic" (Edwards 2001) and, along with others of I'ai and Koriki initiates (such as Figure 2), became prompts for discussions about various items of male adornment, which, if present now, lay hidden in people's homes. These identifications situated the boys in the flow of practices that transformed them into men, and allowed elders to present their own experiences. Kauei's bark belt (*ore*), patterned calico loincloth and necklace of glass trade beads emerged as objects of interest. The belt was understood as a sign of Kauei's having passed through *pairama ukua* initiation, while the other items generated talk about the elders' experiences of the labour trade and the annual *hiri* trade carried out by Motuans from the Port Moresby area (Dutton 1982).<sup>23</sup> As I subsequently delved into these oral histories it became increasingly apparent how the labour trade, though eclipsing the importance of these ritual initiations, became an analogous process through which maternal uncles worked to transform their nephews. For Ke'a, a *pa'iri amua* in Mapai and my principal host, these images prompted reveries about his father and uncles, which he related to me in stories and songs inspired by their experiences. Each of these narratives revealed nuances of the colonial encounter that may not have been forthcoming otherwise (Bell 2006a, 2008). Listening to Ke'a sing in his room long into the night after our discussions, these photographs awakened various dormant memories that he reworked both with me and privately.

While younger men invariably laughed at their communities' former lack of clothes, suggesting that—judging by their lack of clothing—the men must be Africans, or laughing at the poor condition of the men's skin, they also marvelled at the work involved in male initiations. This was brought home in March 2010 when I brought Williams' images on a laptop. While previous work with photocopies in plastic sleeves in binders had the methodological advantages of being able to pass out images that people could touch (Bell 2003), the computer allowed for the enhancing of photographs. With details newly visible, elders engaged with these images anew. On one occasion, I examined Williams' images with eight young I'ai men, and Navara, an elder

with whom I have worked since 2001, and who in the early 1940s was a *pairama ukua*. Three of the men were en route to the coast after several months working for InterOil. Prior to looking at these images, we had been discussing their perceptions of the increasingly disenfranchised I'ai communities by the regimes of legibility provoked by Rimbunan Hijau and InterOil's activities. On this occasion Williams' images, explained by Navara, gave the men a chance to be proud of their heritage. Collectively, they laughed and marvelled at the artistic ingenuity of their forefathers and mothers. In a political atmosphere where I'ai cultural heritage, and thus connection to the InterOil project site, is ignored, their enthusiasm was both palpable and poignant as the photographs in various guises made present claims to the wider world that are otherwise not materially present, and/or recognized by the State (Bell 2009).

On this and other occasions, Kauri's shell nose bar (*poikiri*) was pointed to. Looking at this, and similar images, in which men's ear and nasal piercing were visible, elders often tugged their own ears and noses showing where they had been pierced. Such actions placed their bodies within the same continuum as the men photographed, and helped to contextualize their embodied histories. Carried out by one's maternal uncle (*apo*), whose actions were acknowledged through the gift of a pig, this piercing was the first stage of becoming a man and helped to materialize the assemblage of relations through which the person was understood to be formed (Williams 1924: 58).<sup>24</sup> Discussing this process, comments invariably ranged from the amusing, as in the elder Keke'e recollection of fleeing his uncles following the piercing of his nose, to the sad, as elders cried over what was no longer. To this end in 2001, Aikava spoke to those assembled in Mapaio about the profound transformations that this piercing began. As he put it, through ear and nasal piercing, "we stopped acting like animals and learned to listen". This and other such comments were part of elders' periodic laments about the lapsing of traditional laws (*vupu*), and the relationships that these laws entailed. With such practices no longer carried out, the kin relations that sustained them are increasingly not marked and thus the obligations and expectations increasingly not resonant with youth. Elders linked this ignorance to current health issues caused by HIV/Aids, marijuana consumption, social unrest and the decline of traditional hierarchy (Bell 2006c). Other elders, such as Ikoï, used the images as a platform by which to assert the primacy of their embodied experience, and thus the authority and knowledge it conferred. Wearing his *pokiri* every time I saw him until his death in 2007, Williams' images helped re-present the grounds by which Ikoï could perform his identity as a *pairama ukua* and thus his position as a knowledgeable elder (Bell 2008).

Men also enumerated their experiences of being secluded within the *ravi* for up to six months during which time they were instructed on their clan's *airu omoro* (ancestral histories) and, depending on the initiation grade, involved them in making different ritual objects.<sup>25</sup> Visible over Kauei's left shoulder in the photograph is a pile of pig and crocodile skulls, themselves markers of the efficacy of a clan's ancestors. Atop these displays is visible a carved and painted wooded board known as *koi*. Other *koi* can just be made out in the *ravi*'s low light. Collectively, these carvings formed the *larava paku* ('face of the clan's alcove'), which were owned by different individuals in the clan. Mnemonic devices, these carvings, which were only seen by initiated men, were forms



**Figure 5.** Photograph of a *larava* showing the forest of human and non-human relations materialized in *koi* (carvings). Originally captioned “Iari. Au Maria’s Larava in Onopo Ravi” (National Archives of Australia A6005, 53).

that the ancestors inhabited and through which they communed with kin by dreams. They also were important means by which initiates were taught their respective place in the network of histories spanning the Delta (Figure 5). Absent in communities today save for a few carvings made in the 1970s (Bell 2009), these photographed *koi*, though frustrating elders’ attempts at identification, helped to re-materialize how ancestral histories were formerly made present.

While each initiation possessed its own nuances, the process of the *pairama ukua* initiation (which Kauei had undergone and Kauri was undergoing at the time this photograph was taken), was the most important of these initiations (Williams 1923a). Occurring at intervals of several years, the *pairama ukua* initiation involved the refurbishment of a *ravi*’s *kaiaimunu*—large wicker figures said to materialize key tutelary *imunu*. Initiates through foraging for materials, weaving the wicker form, spraying of barks and herbs onto the finished form and themselves under their uncles guidance worked to form analogies between their own learning and the figures’ completion. Both were animated through the process. The making of the *kaiaimunu* in turn helped to make them through the revelations of esoteric knowledge it entailed. In this way boys took an important step in their multi-year transformation into men and came to learn the network of relations by which kin are related and humans to non-human others in the Delta (Figure 6). Elders recalled their terror upon seeing these otherwise



**Figure 6.** Young *pairama* initiate helping to weave a *kaiaimunu* figure out of rattan and sago fiber from within the crocodile/pig figure's mouth. Originally captioned by F. E. Williams "Child named OVE Eh in his Kiemunu at Mira Ravi (Ukiravi)" (National Archives of Australia A6005, 69).

hidden forms, as well as their delight in learning that the voices of these beings were manifest through bullroarers played in the *ravi*.

The parade that followed their release from seclusion was similar to other Melanesian systems of display, most notably those of PNG's highlands (O'Hanlon 1989; M. Strathern 1979, 1999: 38–42). The various items of adornment—red face paint, feather headdresses, shell ornaments, dog's teeth necklaces and painted bark-cloth—used to decorate the initiates, materialized the initiates' constitution as emerging points in the network of *kapea* that defined the region, and thus the efficacy of their ancestors. Their fattened and matured bodies also signalled the embodied nature of their new status and knowledge (see Figure 2). Williams' photographs of *pairama ukua* invariably entailed groups laughing at the photographed boys' large bellies, and their expounding on what the boys and the elders themselves ate while in the *ravi*.

Alongside these contexts of giving presence to male controlled ancestral narratives, and their embodied dimensions, the image of Kauei and Kauri importantly engaged children. At the prompting of their parents, children were quick to show the deftness of their hands in the replication of the string-figure held by Kauei (Figure 7). Though not as widespread as they once were, string-figures remain a focus of play for children. Their demonstration of *ane komara* invariably entailed the children mimicking me, and the questions with which I playfully peppered them. Alongside of this display, adults



**Figure 7.** Vaipa, a young girl in Maipenairu, demonstrates the *ane komara* string-figure (photograph by author 2002).

and children offered tales of the *ane komara*.<sup>26</sup> The arboreal Crocodile Monitor lizard has long coexisted with Papuan communities, and their uncanny presence is found in a variety of archival traces. While stories vary, certain impressions come to the fore in this literature, and in oral accounts. Interestingly, they coalesce around their perceived ferocity, size, incredible tracking skills and their capacity for mimicry (Grimshaw 1930: 188; Murray 1938: 22–3; Wohling 2003: 42–3; Horn, Sweet & Philipp 2007). Men were quick to tell tales of their own, or their father's experiences while hunting, warning of how the lizards are known to mimic one's calling to comrades or dogs in the bush in the effort to lead men astray so that they can be ambushed and eaten. These discussions, and my own subsequent walks through the rainforest, brought the importance of sound to the fore. Sound plays both an important role in the sociality engendered by the rainforest itself, and thus the sensory dimensions of experience, but is also an integral part of the ontological blurring that this photograph makes present through the string-figure's invocation of the *ane komara*'s vocal mimicry.<sup>27</sup>

The *ane komara* are part of a wider range of non-human agents, who have the capacity to be totemic ancestors (*opa*). While I was not able to record any ancestral narratives about *ane komara*, it is possible that they were represented on *koi* as part of the larger ensemble of forest beings that these art forms made present in the *ravi*, which were subsequently revealed to initiates. Carvings of reptiles exist, but their identification remains spotty due to the fragmentation of knowledge following the Kabu Movement. What I would like to suggest is that this string-figure functioned as perspectival play, thus engendering mimetic empathy, albeit tinged with fear of the *ane komara*. Such string-figures and their play prepared young boys for the transformations that they

would learn about in ancestral histories and magic and would subsequently experience through rituals, such as the annual *aia'imunu* festival. It was specifically within this forum that initiated men donned large barkcloth masks, which, like the *koi*, materialized different ancestral beings. Wearing these masks, elders recalled how though they wore the masks; the ancestral beings in effect wore them. This possession enabled them to perform incredible feats of dancing (Bell 2006a). In this way string-figures, *koi*, and other ritual forms whereby ancestral beings were materialized, can be said to possess an analogous relationship that boys have to knowledgeable men. Each is a refraction of the other, and possesses a generative relationship to one another (Wagner 1991). Let me explain further.

*Vinako*, as string-figures are called, is also the term for public narratives told by women to children. Whether spoken or played out in string, *vinako* are objects of play, but this mirth belies their serious intent. Complementary to the narratives told secretly by and to men during initiation, *vinako* are foundational for the more esoteric male knowledge, which reveals kin groups' origins and thus charters to land and resources. These two narrative forms can be thought of as forming a lattice, a pattern or even a string-figure that together make a whole. These seemingly innocent stories were, as I understand it, the framework through which the secret male narratives were later woven. As articulated to me in March 2010 while looking at decorated sago baskets (*akeke*) made by women, *vinako* or female stories are akin to a basket's outside or surface, while male narratives form the basket's hidden interior. Men's stories and the relations to the property relations they reveal to the wider environment are submerged in public in metaphoric speech, which the I'ai refer to as *vau ikave omoro* (hidden talk). This complementary between male and female narratives has wider salience within New Guinea and has been most clearly explored by Gillison (1993) in her discussion of the interlacing of female and male Gimi narratives (see discussion by Weiner 1995), and is echoed in rhetorical forms known as "veiled speech" documented, for example, among the Melpa (A. Strathern 1975) and Foi (Weiner 2003), who conceal meanings through allusion and imagery. Telling these stories today is like turning the basket inside out and reveals the *kapea* and, thus, property relations by which people are connected. Because of the politics of recognition around resource ownership, these revelations have become fraught with fears about sorcery and are thus closely guarded (Bell 2009). The narrative assemblage that results from this building up of female and male narratives mirrors the complementary exchanges that form the body of male initiations, and indeed all persons, as kin work out the grounds of their sociality (Strathern 1988; Wagner 1991). In short, these female and male narratives, the string-figures and those of the carvings are configurations of one another in the complementary weaving of relations that constitute persons, and thus histories.

## Conclusion

String Figures [are] so widespread an amusement that it deserves special attention ... The *manipulation* consists of a series of movements, after each of which the figure should be extended by drawing the hands apart and separating the fingers. (BAAS 1929: 323–324)



By way of concluding, I would like to return to Haraway (2008), whose examination of the engagement of humans and dogs has inspired my thinking about the photograph discussed here, the networks it entails and what transpires during community engagements around artefacts. I am specifically inspired by the hope she speaks of when writing about the entanglement of humans and non-humans in the contact zone. Extending the metaphor of the contact zone developed by Pratt (1992), and subsequently Clifford (1997) and Tsing (2005), she eloquently argues for the need to bring into view the wider assemblage of non-human actors with which humans are involved to help unseat tired dichotomies of nature and culture, human and non-human to understand the ways in which sociality and being emerges relationally. As she argues for human interactions with dogs, this process does not occur through disengaged looking but through mimetic play, embodied action and emotional experiences through which all actors are transformed (Haraway 2008: 214–230).

While photographs are not dogs, they inhabit the similar networks of humans and non-humans. Moreover, they themselves are contact zones (Peers & Brown 2003: 5). In touching photographs, their histories and networks touch us (Edwards 2001), and the stories and perspectives that emerge in these contact zones help to challenge otherwise obfuscatory historiography and ethnography. Such interactions allow for other ways of engaging to emerge, ways of engaging that challenge our notions of what photographs are, and what form histories take. As such, in addition to “navigating the archives ... to map ... multiple imaginaries ...” (Stoler 2009: 9), of colonial discursive practices, we need to include in our explorations and resulting narratives acknowledgement of the other ways of being such as those found in nested in the *ane komara*, and ways of materializing history through images made in string, carvings and the body. This analytical move, driven by communities’ responses, usefully complicates the visual economies (Poole 1997) in which these images circulated, and points to the ways in which outside of institutions the meanings of images are far from given but come forth anew with each engagement. This is what Haraway (2008: 25, italics in original) terms the “*dance of relating*”, which transpires during each encounter with photographs.

The mimicry that Williams’ photograph provoked in people who viewed the image of Kauei and Kauri, whether through touching one’s body, singing or picking up string to make string-figures, helped to reveal how viewing photographs involves much more than transforming the “there-then” into the “here-now” (Barthes 1977: 44). Indeed, as I have tried to demonstrate, bringing photographs back to source communities is to place them back, albeit temporally delayed, into the network of relations from which they were cut. Within these contact zones new perspectives on the ways in which we all attempt to transcend difference through mimetic empathy occurs. It also reveals that besides time, history in the Delta involves space and is found in various forms. The photograph of Kauei and Kauri became the touchstone for some of this understanding, and was crucial in getting me to think about the mimetic play found in the image and embodied responses it provoked. If, in the process, the photograph has dissolved into a network of relations, then so be it, as I believe such dissolutions are important if we are to come to an understanding of how history is configured locally and how these

objects play a role in their elicitation. This photograph worked to bring these *kapea* into view and in the process helped me to weave together a narrative that more closely resonates with I'ai, and wider Purari, experiences of the world.

Reflecting upon fieldwork, Marilyn Strathern (1999: 1–3; emphasis in original) comments how fieldwork's "immersion yields what is often overlooking for: it yields precisely the *facility and thus a method* for 'finding' the unlooked for". Work with archival materials both in, and out of communities, adds another dimension to the revelations of fieldwork, many of which only emerge over time and through the multiple spatial and temporal movements they entail. While we will never know what Kauai and Kauri thought about their encounter with Williams, knowing about the *ane komara* as we do and its configurations in string, we know that the encounter was a generative one involving a set of analogies and relationships. Regardless of what was said back at Williams by Kauai through the string-figure, this photograph and the possibilities that it contains and provokes when examined with Purari communities today is worth conjuring up and thinking about because of how they help to enliven this object, our relations to it and the institutions in which such objects reside.

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### Notes

- [1] My question here is provoked by Haraway (2008: 3), who asks similar questions in relation to dogs.
- [2] The divergence between Williams and my recording of the name may be historic or an example of dialectical variation between I'ai and Koriki. *Komara* refers to salt or fresh crocodiles, and *ane* is the verb "to come". I was not able to get a clear translation of the lizard's name, and suggest that it may literally reflect that the lizard comes after people.
- [3] This paper is informed by fieldwork conducted in the Purari Delta in October 2000, from March 2001 to November 2002, in April 2006, and March 2010, as well as through letters, emails and phone calls with community members.

- [4] The Ipiko, Pawaiians and Kaura border the Purari to the north, while to the east reside the Elema and to the west the Urama and Gope. Increasingly these groups are inter-marrying, though tensions exist and are increasing between them as a result of the resource extraction projects.
- [5] Based in Mapaio, my work was principally conducted with the I'ai, who reside in the villages of Mapaio, Old Iare, Maipenairu, Aumu, Kapai and the government station of Baimuru. I also worked in the Vaimuru village of Kararua, the Kaimari village of Varia and the Koriki villages of Kinipo and Kairimai.
- [6] In the 1990s, Turama Forest Industries (TFIs) along with Frontier Holding, a subsidiary of the Malaysian conglomerate Rimbunan Hijau, commenced logging within the Gulf Province. Operating along the Purari River's East bank Frontier Holding's operations at Kaumeia (1999–2004) and now Purari Base Camp (2004–present) remains the closest resource extraction project. In 2002 the Canadian company InterOil, following earlier prospecting by the Australasian Petroleum Company in the 1950s and 60s, began oil and gas prospecting along the upper Purari River. As of March 2010, InterOil had begun a new base camp south of Bevan rapids several kilometres North of where the Purari splits into two distributaries. This new camp will replace larger operations at Subu and Wabo, which are more than a day's ride by outboard canoe.
- [7] Over the last ten years, men have slowly found employment through these projects. Communities are now also beginning to receive dividends from the royalties being paid out by the logging concessions (Bell 2009). More lucrative, however, are the informal economies that have sprung up alongside these projects, namely the sale of marijuana (Bell 2006c).
- [8] Increasingly there are tensions between town and village populations, as the latter inhabit the land and through dwelling in it, know its histories and inter-connections, while the former though disconnected from this daily activity are better able to liaise with government offices and thus secure registration rights for resource ownership.
- [9] Emerging in the wake of the Second World War, the Kabu Movement was an indigenous modernization movement led by the I'ai man Tom Kabu with support by returning members of the Papuan Infantry Battalion (PIB), and Seventh Day Adventist youth. In order to create the grounds for cash-cropping and other business activities in the attempt to transform communities socially and materially, Kabu initiated widespread iconoclasm of the artistic forms that since 1880s had fascinated Europeans (Maher 1961; Bell 2006a).
- [10] While outside the realm of this paper to discuss the impact of Christianity here, it should be noted that though the London Missionary Society had been active in the region since the 1890s, and had established a mission in 1906, it was not until the 1960s that Christianity took widespread hold (Allen 1952; Calvert 1985; Bell 2006a & in press).
- [11] Besides the actions of *imunu*, people are conscious of the unseen actions of the dead, who if displeased haunt the living, and those of sorcerers, who through their harnessing of *imunu* possess similar abilities to hide within other forms such as black cats, and crocodiles.
- [12] Though a comprehensive environmental survey has yet to be completed, in March 2010 communities reported long-term suffering from intestinal issues related to use of the Purari River for cooking and drinking, and of regularly catching fish covered with sores.
- [13] For a discussion of Williams, see Griffiths (1977), Schwimmer (1977), Young with Clarke (2001) and Bell (2006b).
- [14] A response to the moral and economic inequalities of colonialism, the 'Vailala Madness' involved communities in iconoclasm and the innovation of new rituals, often highly mimetic of European social and technological forms, to achieve connection with the ancestors and overturn colonial inequalities (Williams 1923c, 1934; Bell 2006a).
- [15] In 1936, Williams remarks in a letter that an ICA Tropica 9 × 12cm. was his "old official camera" (Williams to Government Secretary, 23 June 1936, NAPNG, A447 ML MSS 5/1, 61/2989). Though photographs were taken in the Purari fourteen years earlier, a sample

- measuring of plates and prints taken in 1922 conforms to the ICA Tropica's plate size (Bell 2006b).
- [16] Williams took his fieldnotes on paper with carbon copies, which he then cut up and organized into different themes laid out in *Notes & Queries*.
- [17] Later in *Orokaiva Society*, Williams (1930: vii) expresses more optimism about these relations and writes: "It is certainly true that there are some things which the native is anxious to conceal from the Government. But he quickly comes to realize that one is a Government Officer with a difference; that one is not equipped with any authority; and that one has no intention of playing the spy."
- [18] Tangalemo, who came from Papua's "Eastern End", worked with Williams until he developed yaws and was replaced by Aragita, who was dispatched 13 September 1922 and returned to Kerema 18 October 1922 (Williams 1924: 236; NAPNG A447, ML MSS 5/8 Item 71; NAPNG A487/429/20).
- [19] Notes made on 7 July 1922; NPNGA, ML MSS 5/7 Item 68, Acc 447, Box 2993.
- [20] Notes made on 1 July 1922; NPNGA, ML MSS 5/7 Item 68, Acc 447, Box 2993.
- [21] Undated fieldnotes paginated 64, 66, 68 and 83; NPNGA, ML MSS 5/7 Item 68, Acc 447, Box 2993.
- [22] 15 August 1922, NAPNG MLMSS 5/7 6/2993 Item 68. This notion of being able to tie the *ane komara*'s tail to a tree without its knowing was repeatedly told to me as well.
- [23] Alongside tobacco, calico cloth and beads were important currency within the colonial economy, and quickly became part of existing aesthetic preferences. Such adoptions, particularly that of calico, were lamented by Williams (1924: 43).
- [24] Among the Purari, the person is conceptualized as being composed of: bone; blood and stomach, as well as flesh. The first two substances are gendered and are received respectively from one's father and mother to form one's interior. Acts of feeding create the person's body, and it is in this way that adoption is understood to work. These substances and actions coalesce over the course of the person's life and situate them within a network of obligations to their paternal and maternal kin as well as the environment and their ancestors (Bell 2006a).
- [25] Today, communities recall four initiation grades: *pairama ukua*, *ke'ere ukua*, *upura ukua* and *mai ukua*, to which Williams in 1922 added details about *Gope*, which involved initiates being shown secrets tied to hunting (Williams 1924: 171–175). *Upura ukua* were taught how to make bullroarers (*upura* or *imunu viki* 'spirit-being's cry'), while the stages of initiation connected to the annual *aia'imunu* festival—*ke'ere ukua*, *mai ukua* and *aiavararu ukua*—were occasions when initiates were taught how to make barkcloth masks and dance regalia (1924: 198–202).
- [26] It is outside the bounds of this paper to discuss the intersecting history of the Crocodile Monitor Lizard with Papuan communities and Europeans. First described in 1878 by the naturalists Wilhelm Peters and Giacomo Doria, these lizards were renamed in 1885 by the zoologist George Boulenger after his friend Tammaso Salvadori, a noted zoologist and ornithologist. Though specimens were collected in the late nineteenth century, it was not until the 1960s that field biology was conducted on them, and to date, this has remained mostly with captive lizards due to their elusive nature. Dark brown to black with small yellow dots patterning their skin, Crocodile Monitor Lizards have been recorded to lengths of 2.65 metres of which two-thirds is their tails. Living within the rainforest canopy, these lizards are notable for being the largest predator species in New Guinea. Hunting by ambush their diet includes insects, frogs, reptiles, birds and mammals (Horn 2004; Philipp & Phillip 2007; Horn, Sweet & Phillip 2007).
- [27] The social and cultural salience of sound in New Guinea's lowland rain forests has been explored by a variety of scholars (Feld 1982, 1996; Weiner 1991, 2003; Gell 1995), being both an important aspect of these environments and a way that relations to these environments and their hosts of non-human entities are enacted in song and spoken word (Halvaksz 2003).

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