

# The Photograph and the Malanggan: Rethinking images on Malakula, Vanuatu

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From the recent efflorescence of anthropological engagements with photography we are by now aware that photography is an embodied practice and that photographs are complex materialisations of the subjective and experiential as well as the objective and evidential. Despite discussions of ‘visual repatriation’ (e.g. Brown and Peers 2006), and of local responses to colonial photography and other kinds of archival images in the Pacific, little has been discussed regarding the status of photographs as particularly ‘Pacific’ artefacts—objects that make sense in indigenous terms as well as being understood in terms of the connections to other places that their production and circulation might signify. Following Wright’s exhortation to recognise ‘the provincial nature of Eurocentric notions of photography and ... suggesting that a certain corporeality and materiality constitute elements of its identity’ (2004: 74), I discuss the resonance of historical photographs in Vanuatu, building an analogy with Malanggan—funerary carvings from Northern New Ireland. I do not mean to suggest that photographs are complex ritual artefacts, but rather follow the ways in which Malanggan have been used as anthropological conceits, in order to discuss the representational efficacy and materiality of Melanesian images in facilitating the crystallisation of memory and history (Küchler 1988), the enchantment of technology (Gell 1998, 1999), and the consolidation of certain kinds of property relations (Strathern 2005b). As my title suggests, I draw on Strathern’s combination of Malanggan and Patents to rethink the potential utility of Malanggan as a ‘way to think’ about the meanings of photographs in Pacific communities.

*Malanggan are manufactured in such a way as to suggest multiple identities*

(Strathern 2005b: 96)

## THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF PACIFIC IMAGES

There are many celebrated accounts of ‘art’ in Oceania, which focus on the agentive, and efficacious, nature of image-making. This perspective on Pacific images has a lengthy tradition—feeding into what might be termed an ‘art history’ of Oceanic materiality in which, following Gell, ‘art production and the production of social relations are linked by a fundamental homology’ (1999 [1992]: 178). This theory understands art not as ‘a representation of anything in the natural or spirit world, rather it is *about* the relationships between things’ (Forge 1973: 189; see also Forge

1962). This is a non-representational theory of art (art does not reference events and people somehow outside of the 'frame' but is itself part of these social engagements between people and things, and is part of the performative context of social life) and is framed by a shift of focus away from language towards materiality as a dominant interpretive trope. This shift of focus moves away from questions about what images mean or represent towards questions that ask what images might do and embody (see Freedberg 1991; Gell 1998; Mitchell 2005). Such questions do not separate form from meaning, symbolism from exegesis (see Bell and Geismar (p. 3), Veys (p. 131), Bell (p. 28), and Baker (p. 112), this volume).

This approach is exemplified within Battaglia's discussion of Sabarl adzes as metaphorical condensations of local cosmologies Battaglia (1983, 1997); Gell's (1993) description of tattooing in the Marquesas in which images on skin socialises people; in the enchanting effects of brightly painted and carved Trobriand canoe prows within Kula exchanges (Gell 1999 [1992]: 178); in MacKenzie's (1991) analysis of the ways in which bilum bags in Papua New Guinea are used to think through key distinctions and consolidations of gender relations; and in Myers' (2002) and Morphy's (1991) demonstration of how Aboriginal images momentarily materialise imaginaries about place, history, memory, knowledge and colonial experience in Australia. All these studies point to how images, as objects, simultaneously represent, embody and effect these complex social and political engagements (see Thomas 1999). These images are materialisations of sociality, which perpetuate indigenous imaginaries and thus contribute to their own reproduction, in one form or another, showing marked resistance to transformation, as much as they are continually transformed.

This influential approach to images reaches its apotheosis with the reification of New Ireland *Malanggan* into an ethnographic conceit that highlights the interdependency of form or image and meaning or practice.<sup>1</sup> One of the most collected and exhibited Oceanic artefacts (see Kuchler 1997), Malanggan have long intrigued scholars who have sought to untangle the complex interplay between anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms, the celebration of life and death, and the assignation of economic and political entitlement (see e.g. Lincoln 1987; Gunn and Peltier 2006). As much as these slender pieces of wood twist and turn through being fish, bird or person, so too has the ethnographic form of Malanggan twisted through a number of anthropological perspectives (Fig. 1).

Gunn (1987) describes the ways in which Malanggan are fundamentally ciphers for the entanglement of cosmology and political entitlement. He uses the term 'copyright' to describe how Malanggan emerge through the layering of the ancestral spirit world onto the domain of ritual practice as fully formed embodiments of hierarchy and property claims. As one of the curators of a recent exhibition of New Ireland arts,<sup>2</sup> Gunn highlights the spectacular nature of Malanggan, the ways in which they perform meaning in both the ritual context of New Ireland villages and in the museological context of galleries in museums such as the new Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. As the exhibition blurb for the museum notes, 'New Ireland objects are



**Figure 1** Malanggan. Malagan Male Figure, Northern New Ireland, Tigak region collected in New Ireland by H. H. Romilly, 1883. Wood, shell, lime, ochre, pigments, putty and hair. Copyright: The Trustees of The British Museum.

closely linked to social rules and regulations. Each sculpted piece is inseparable from the world of ancestors and spirits at the heart of Melanesian life. A work of art never represents an ancestor however: rather, it expresses their presence among men’.

Küchler’s discussion of the Malanggan carvings in New Ireland (Küchler 1987, 1988, 2002) also interrogates the ‘expressive’ nature of Malanggan, arguing that these intricate three-dimensional carvings are best understood as materialisations of mental images. The imagined and remembered image is consolidated through the process of carving, and revealed at key moments during mortuary ceremony. The destruction of the carvings, almost as soon as they are finished, indicates that it is

the mental form that perpetuates, with the potential to be infinitely reproduced, rather than the physical. Social relations, knowledge and entitlement are 'formally' constituted by objects at key life cycle events, which in turn act as image banks of collective remembering: 'What is circulated in the exchanges is not things, but the right to reproduce images that are remembered and recalled for re-embodiment in ever new sculptures.' (1988: 627). Malanggan are thus complex mediators between mental and material worlds; they are artefacts of memory, bringing sociality to the surface.

Gell uses Küchler's work as a starting point for extending this discussion into an examination of the magical effect of technologies of image production, suggesting that Malanggan present an example of mobile and agentive patterning—the extension, and materialisation, of mental energy:

The example of Malangan art is useful in that it can start to undermine the distinction we commonly make between the material and the mental (or cognitive) with respect to material culture. The Malangan are indisputably material objects, but the socially relevant Malangan are internalized images which New Irelanders carry about inside their heads. Being a material object is merely a transitional phase in the biography of a Malangan, most of whose existence is as a memory trace, or, idiomatically, as an internal 'skin'. The Malangans of northern New Ireland itself – rather than the Malangans in collections – are walking about, making gardens and political speeches, engaging in exchange transactions, marrying and having children (1998: 228).

Here, Gell co-opts Malanggan into a larger intellectual exercise in which he draws out the connections between art and agency, the ways in which art itself may be defined through the sublimation of technology into magic, the inspiration and affect such material manifestations of human creativity may impart (*cf.* Coupaye, this volume, p. 93).

As the title of this essay suggests, I use as inspiration another discussion of Malanggan, 'The patent and the Malanggan' by Strathern (2005b). Building on this tradition of ethnographic description, Strathern is interested in how Malanggan may be used to describe, and problematise, certain kinds of assumptions about Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). She suggests that, rather than describing local legislation over Malanggan production in terms of copyright, the language of patents might be more appropriate. Copyright legislates over material productions, whereas patents provide the right to exploit ideas, and 'New Irelanders aim to produce images of persons as concepts or categories whose form they wish to own' (2005: 87). In juxtaposing patents and Malanggan, Strathern rethinks the thread of connection between ownership, formal imagery and revelatory ritual practice. Malanggan are local and anthropological theorisations of image-making in which 'the image is a categorical rendering of the person that is capable of being communicated to others, and thereby so to speak interpersonally reworked...an image reifies (categorises) a relationship by presenting the whole person as seen from the view of their claimant/relative.' (2005: 88, see also Strathern 1990).

All of these accounts are united in the ways in which they insist on a form of analysis that views Malanggan in terms of the relationships they engender and embody and the ways in which they interrogate the entanglement of image and idea. The form of the Malanggan is but one component of its broader meaning and social efficacy. Strathern's paper suggests the use of analogy as a form of ethnographic description. In using the method of analogy (which focuses on both similarities and differences between compared entities) in my own comparison of Malanggan and photographs, I hasten to acknowledge that Malanggan are not exactly like photographs. Strathern's analogy between patents and Malanggan does not draw on an indigenous exegesis in which Malanggan are explicitly connected to patents. As Strathern (2005: 87) comments, 'It is the anthropologist who puts these people and their ideas together'. Nor does it assume that patents hold the same local resonance or ritual importance as Malanggan (and indeed within this kind of thought experiment, one has to distance oneself from some of the more ritual elements of Malanggan ceremonies to focus more narrowly on Malanggan objects, even as these objects are ever more broadly conceived). Strathern's thought experiment (thinking about IPR using Malanggan) in turn elucidates how one might reconceptualise the boundaries of IPR when one is committed to elevating the specificities of ethnographic description into a much more general discussion (see Strathern 1999; and Strathern and Hirsch 2004).

Following Strathern, I want to build on the ways in which Malanggan have been useful for thinking about some of the philosophical issues around images in Oceania. In this interpretive vein, my suggestion that photographs be understood through the lens of Malanggan also takes its inspiration from another paper by Küchler, in which she describes how the process of colonial museum collection of Malanggan in the nineteenth century served the indigenous need to make Malanggan disappear as much as it did European initiatives to salvage disappearing cultures (1997). Küchler describes the sale of Malanggan to museum curators as akin to the ritually symbolic destruction (or decomposition) of carvings just after the moment of their revelation. If the commodification and appropriation of Malanggan by European anthropologists and others may be understood as fitting firmly into an indigenous cosmology (or as providing the same solution to the problem of these objects that ritualised destruction provides), then perhaps the analogy between photography and Malanggan may not only be a useful connection for anthropologists, but may also resonate elsewhere. Why can't colonial or museum photographs, returning through networks of museums and archives in the present day, pass through similar appropriations?

## **PHOTOGRAPHS AND MALANGGAN**

Photographs in Malakula are unlike Malanggan in that they are not produced locally, they are not used ritually, and they are not given away or decomposed after their production. In fact, their importance often stems from the fact that they are

produced either externally, or with external collaboration; they are used very pragmatically, and they are generally made to preserve and keep. However, photographs are very much like Malanggan in the ways that they consolidate memory in a revelatory manner; they congeal relationships, which in turn are mapped onto existing connections (between people, and between people and places). They also engage one's awareness of the mutual constitution of form and substance, via their potential for endless reproduction. I therefore ask the reader to allow me to proceed with this caveat—that comparing photographs to Malanggan is an imposed anthropological conceit that is very useful in understanding the resonance of photographs in the social world of Small Islanders of Vao and Atchin, half a mile from the coast of North-East Malakula in Vanuatu.

As manifestations of mental images, Malanggan are like Marquesan tattoos (Gell 1998) or like patents (Strathern 2005b)—curious hybrids between the mental and the material; forms that reformulate and, in doing so, reinforce the distinctiveness of images as social agents. Like Malanggan, a photographic template—the negative in print photography or the original data file in digital photography—provides a malleable, yet curiously intangible base for infinite, even playful, reproduction. This potential for reproduction suggests a location for the photographic image that may best be understood as situated within the 'mind's eye'. More often than not, what prevents us from playfully manipulating most photographic images (particularly in the age of *Photoshop*), and what continues to give photography a quasi-legal status as 'evidence' (Tagg 1988: chapter three), is our idea of what the photograph is supposed to present: a mediated, yet authentic representation of a 'real' event, person, or artefact. This idea is based upon an original moment of witnessing—even if, more often than not, what one witnesses is the making of the original image, rather than the original event, which one sees from the start through the camera lens.<sup>3</sup> There is thus a cyclical interdependence between image and reality—neither can truly be disentangled from the other. Here is the first instance in which photographs are like Malanggan. Both are understood to circulate as images, *not* objects, even as they are materially manifested (in wood, or on paper).

As Barthes (1981) so famously pointed out, a photograph is the ultimate index, so connected to another point in time that it effaces its own materiality (a photograph is 'invisible. It is not it that we see'). The same is true for wooden Malanggan. It is almost as though their lavish carving is an attempt to draw our minds back to the present from their evocation of the cosmological and political order of things. Both photographs and Malanggan are produced via specifically representational technologies—carving and photographic printing. Yet, also on the surface, they both effect a profound consolidation of different spaces and times that transcend their media. Barthes's discussion of the ways in which photographs balance the 'studium' of received time, with the 'punctum' of the almost shocking interpenetration of past within the present, may provide an alternative language with which to describe Malanggan.

## JOHN LAYARD AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN VANUATU FROM THEN UNTIL NOW

My analogy between photography and Malanggan emerges out of fieldwork and archival research that I began in 2000 and which has followed the movement of a photographic collection made by the anthropologist John Layard on Malakula in 1914, as it travelled back and forth between England and Vanuatu via the United States (Geismar 2006; Geismar and Herle 2008). Layard, a student of W. H. R. Rivers and A. C. Haddon at Cambridge, was part of a new generation of social anthropologists who, rather than conducting survey work or team research, started to explore the methodology of solitary, immersed, long-term fieldwork in one place (Urry 1972, 1993; Langham 1981).

In 1914, Layard travelled with Rivers to the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). Their original plans disrupted due to the outbreak of World War One, the anthropologists decided to follow up on a recent publication describing the 'Megalithic' ritual culture of the Northern and Central Islands of the archipelago (Speiser 1913). Encouraged by the British Resident Commissioner in Port Vila, Merton King, they travelled together to the Small Island of Atchin, a mile from the coast of North East Malakula. After a week or so together, Rivers left a somewhat chagrined Layard alone and continued his survey of the archipelago. Layard, who was equipped with the latest anthropological equipment—a box camera, an Edison wax cylinder recorder, duplicate notebooks, filecards and typewriter—set about learning Atchin language and befriending the islanders.<sup>4</sup> From 1914 to 1915 he was based in Atchin, travelling with his friends to the mainland and neighbouring islands, especially to Vao. In December 1914, he went to Sydney, where he tried to enlist in the armed forces and returned to Vanuatu in April 1915, via Norfolk Island, where he recuperated from his island ills for several months. He remained on Malakula until October 1915, returning to England by the end of that year. During this time, Layard took nearly 450 photographs, collected almost 400 artefacts, made thirty-two wax cylinder recordings, and produced many boxes of fieldnotes, cards and typed manuscripts, kinship diagrams, copies of sand-drawings and so on.<sup>5</sup>

Since they were shipped back to England with Layard in 1915, Layard's photographs have circulated broadly and in diverse ways. Layard made copy-prints for Haddon at Cambridge, and for other colleagues such as Jean Guiart, a French ethnologist who worked for the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides and for the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. These sets of copy-prints were accompanied by different caption lists, each of which provided the images with a different focus from a personal account of both people, places, and technical photographic information ('Cutting out stern of Malmatur's canoe (which is upside down), F.16, 1 sec'), to a list more suitable for Haddon's photographic collection ('Atchin. Cutting out the stern of a canoe'), to a list focused specifically on material culture for Guiart ('The general word for canoe is *na-ak*, *na*-being the inseparable particle and *ak* a variant of the frequent Melanesian *waga*, "canoe" (*Vao nu-wak*')) and so on.<sup>6</sup>

This complex circulation of image and text inculcated an interdependence between visual image and a developing ‘anthropological knowledge’ which in turn has been re-circulated and negotiated within Vanuatu over a period of many years (see Geismar 2006).<sup>7</sup>

We do not know if Layard sent images back to his friends in Atchin and Vao. However, each successive generation of anthropologists working on Malakula has carried back copies of Layard’s images and they have been used extensively in both foreign and local excavations of past traditions. For instance, Bernard Deacon took Layard’s fieldnotes and drawings with him to South-West Bay, Malakula, in 1926 (and they were amongst his possessions when he died there, of Blackwater fever, in 1927). Camilla Wedgwood, the editor of Deacon’s (1934) posthumous monograph, unwittingly incorporated Layard’s fieldnotes into the text of *Malekula: A Vanishing People in the New Hebrides*, prompting a series of irate textual interventions by Layard just before the book went to press. In the 1980s, Joan Larcom returned to Malakula and worked extensively with Deacon’s material and, therefore, with Layard’s (Larcom 1983). A full set of copy prints of Layard’s photographs (and microfilm of his fieldnotes) has been in the Vanuatu Cultural Centre since the early 1980s, brought by Cambridge anthropologist-turned-curator Kirk Huffman, who used photographs extensively in his own fieldwork on Malakula and his subsequent work at the VCC (see Huffman 2008).

However, Layard’s photographs are not merely filtered through western academic and museological practices (see Geismar and Tilley 2003). Deacon’s book and Layard’s (1942) magnum opus, *Stone Men of Malekula* have since become vital resources on Malakula—cultural documents used as tools for the revitalisation of traditional practice. These texts, which circulate primarily in the form of photocopies are used locally as reference works in the regeneration of customary activities—the reproduction of dances, objects, and music, all of which is inscribed within. Vianney Atpatoun, the first curator of the Malakula Cultural Centre, refers to *Stone Men of Malekula* as ‘the bible and dictionary of Vao’ (personal communication, 2001).

One of the core projects of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and National Museum (VCC) has been to compile an archive of documentary material pertaining to the archipelago which can be conserved in order to develop its potential for local activation. Copies of all of Layard’s images, alongside those made by visiting researchers, and many others gleaned from museums and other collections around the world, are collected within the VCC archive. Since its inception, villagers have been encouraged to use the air-conditioned rooms as a safe-house or, as former VCC Director Ralph Regenvanu explicitly terms it, a ‘bank’ for *kastom*—to conserve valued images, recordings and other documentation, for use by future generations. The archive has a ‘Tabu Room’ that is regulated by *kastom* guidelines—access to the special collections within may be restricted by gender, by locally defined property rights, or by traditional status. Only entitled people are allowed to hear these recordings and see these images. The Tabu Room, and by extension much of the

other work of the VCC, thus uses museum technologies of audio-visual recording (photography and video) to make new kinds of 'museum objects' out of the documentation of personal testimonies, stories, myths, music, ceremonies, ritual practices, and national political and cultural events (Geismar and Tilley 2003).

These new museum 'objects', primarily in the form of photographs, videos, film, and sound recordings, open new avenues for participation in social life. The return of images such as those by Layard to Vanuatu has always been associated with the idea of 'doing' something, both inside and outside the museum. Local villagers who collaborate with foreign researchers expect not only that researchers will return copies of notes, photographs and publications to the community but also that the direction of research itself should benefit community interests and agendas. Documentation is not there just to be collected and exhibited in a museum gallery or stored within the archive; it is there to be activated within communities. There is an understanding that historical photographs are vital tools in a process that, following Huffman, is often described explicitly as 'cultural reawakening or revival' (Huffman 1997: 2). Local people are encouraged to *use* images to remind themselves of past practices, with the hope that they will start to do them again. Thinking with images is thus an important way of making things happen.

Many of the projects implemented through the Vanuatu Cultural Centre have used historical images and other archival material as a springboard for research, as a conduit into local practice, outside the museum's walls. Local engagements with anthropological images have had a profound effect on the constitution of contemporary culture in present day Vanuatu (paradoxically making these documents of old ethnographic description simultaneously documentation of new social forms). For example, historical photographs have been used by researchers to revitalise the production of barkcloth on the island of Erromango (Huffman 1996), to reinvigorate the making of mats on Ambae (Bolton 2003), to revivify male status ceremonies in Southern Malakula (Geismar 2007), and to reaffirm the practice of sand-drawing on Malakula, Pentecost and Ambae (Zagala 2004). These initial projects, which used photographs of artefacts and copies of photographs in archives as a starting point, have re-embedded these images into local practices of tapa production, mat-making, mask-making, and sand-drawing. They have encouraged people to create new kinds of images and objects, through these artistic practices and in the extensive audio-visual documentation produced by researchers, local and foreign. Photographic images also activate other social and political activities in many different ways. The projects mentioned above have facilitated the growth of a dynamic contemporary art movement on Erromango, initiated a longer dialogue within the Women's Culture Project of the VCC about women's *kastom*, reconnected Southern Malakulans to European museums, and spearheaded Vanuatu's participation in the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage.

For all of these projects, the process of working with archival photographs in the field and the production of the new objects they inspired has in turn been re-photographed by visiting researchers and by the audio-visual crew of the VCC,

creating new images of research, with the potential for future activation in communities. The National Photo, Film and Sound Archive, part of the VCC, has continued to develop its archive in collaboration with libraries, museums, and researchers around the world. It now holds the world's most comprehensive collection of visual material pertaining to Vanuatu and continues to develop, its agenda being 'to assist in the preservation and promotion of aspects of custom and culture'.<sup>8</sup> The boundaries between the VCC and community, object and practice are thus much more porous than is normally presumed of museums, which are generally perceived to fossilise, reify and freeze in galleries and storerooms rather than channel agency in and out through open doors.

This efflorescence of ni-Vanuatu uses of images in archives and museum collections may give a deeper insight into the context in which anthropological and historical photographs are understood and used in Vanuatu. Photographs act as 'lures' within networks of social research, enticing ni-Vanuatu and foreign researchers to travel to Port Vila, to do research inside the Tabu Room, and to make copies and return them to the places they were initially produced. The seductive (or to follow Gell (1998, 1999), enchanting), nature of archival material, coupled with the technologies of photographic reproduction, enables these images, each an infinitely reproducible copy of a unique event or artefact, to move along multiple trajectories at the same time. These continuous movements make photographs into active participants within dynamic moments of social change and creativity. Photographs move from being evidence of, or references to, social practices, to become mediators of, and agents within, social practices. Many of the new mats made on Ambae, or painted barkcloth from Erromango, are objects that simultaneously reference historical images, the research projects that they are used within, and the contemporary ceremonies or other social practices of which they are a part. Photographs, reprinted and photocopied, are a vital technology by which this cultural reproduction is facilitated.

## WALKING WITH PHOTOGRAPHS

The return of these 'museum objects' to their 'source communities' has provoked a heightened awareness of historical consciousness in Malakula and of the ways in which photographic images are consistently used as contemplative vehicles to make sense of the past in the present (Fig. 2). Within this rich context of museological engagement, photographic images and practices are incorporated by the people of Atchin and Vao into historical narratives, as multi-sensory and multivalent artefacts, in creative ways.

Working on the Small Islands of Vao and Atchin with Layard's photographs was an experience that compressed time and space, drawing out ideas about connection to place through an enhanced awareness of visual culture. In the summer of 2003, having spent several months working with Layard's images as part of a broader project to fully catalogue and research the CUMAA photographic

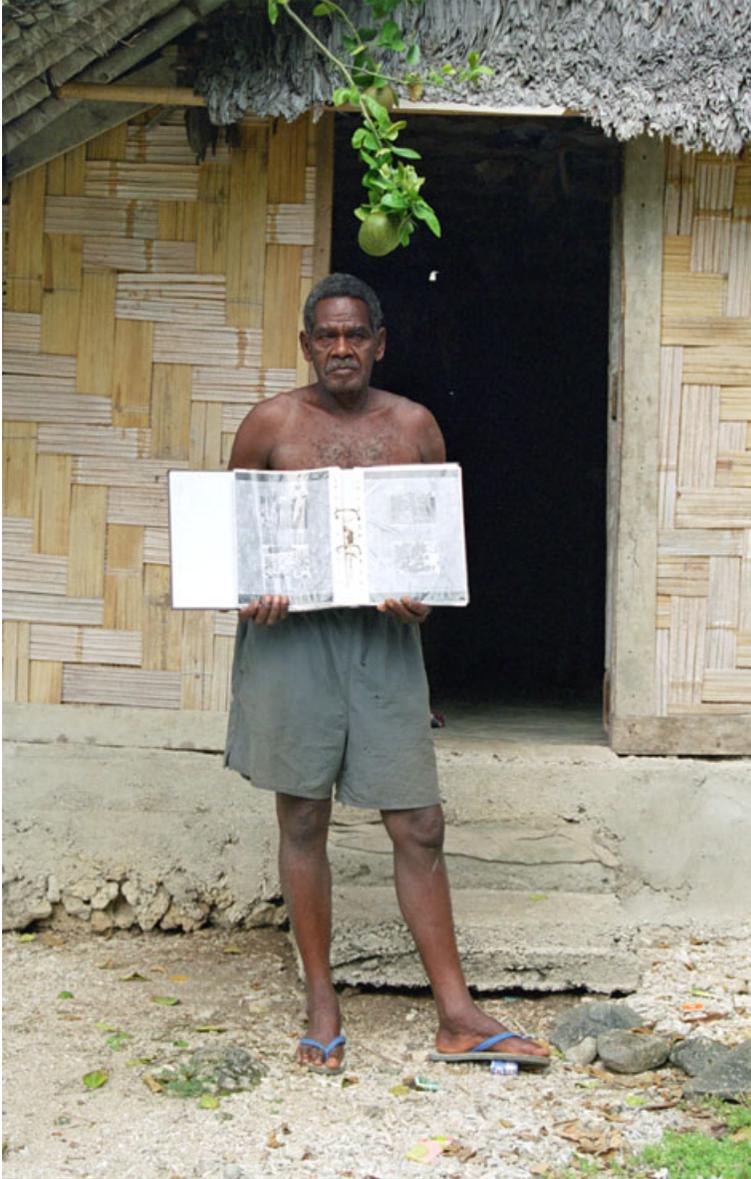


**Figure 2** Chief Paulo Clem and schoolchildren looking at Layard's photographs, Senhar station, Atchin, 22 July 2003. Photograph: Haidy Geismar.

collections from Vanuatu, I went back to Malakula carrying photocopies of nearly all of Layard's images. I had already worked on Vao for several weeks during my doctoral fieldwork (2000–01), during which I had spent much of the time talking about Layard and reading through a photocopy of *Stone Men of Malekula* with local men and women. In 2003, I travelled to Vao and Atchin with Numa Fred Longga, the curator of the Malakula Cultural Centre, a satellite of the VCC, where we met up with Vianney Atpatun, a former fieldworker from Vao. Being from an adjacent Small Island, Uripiv, which is part of the same cultural chain, Numa was also interested in recording the histories encapsulated within Layard's images, many of which intersected with his own family connections to Atchin. Vianney had already undertaken extensive research into Layard's *oeuvre*.<sup>9</sup>

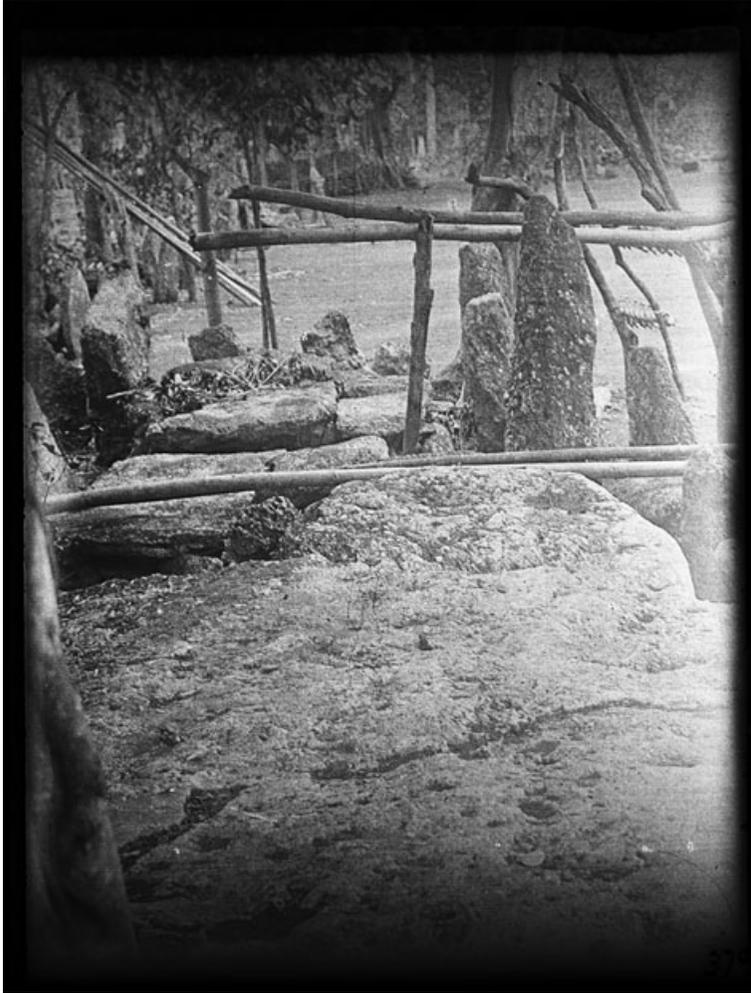
The public meetings we held to discuss the images with local elders inevitably drew us onto circuitous village paths, as Atchin and Vao men were eager to retrace Layard's images onto the contemporary contours of the island. Our research into Layard's photographs was increasingly configured around the process of re-photographing the images, held up by the people of that place, where they were originally taken (Fig. 3).

Walking around Atchin and Vao with Layard's images demonstrated how both taking and looking at photographs is an embodied practice, deeply embedded within local experience, and started to highlight how ideas about evidence are



**Figure 3** Claude Telukluk, the grandson of Layard's chief informant, Mal Taru, holds Layard's photographs. Vao mainland, 19 July 2003. Photograph: Haidy Geismar.

matched with ideas about malleability in assigning meanings and memories to images. Walking across the islands looking at places in relation to the places in the photographs mimicked the ways in which the original images embody Layard's own pathways across the Small Islands. Most particularly, Layard's panoramic shots of



**Figure 4** Layard's photograph of Togh Vanu nasara, Vao, taken standing on the top of a dolmen. CUMAA N.98805. Reproduced with kind permission of the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

the dancing grounds encapsulate a sense of being immersed in the materiality of the island; in particular, weighed down by the stones that mark out the islands' sacred spaces and social organisation. It was this sense of emplacement that was mimetically performed in the present, through the re-enactment of Layard's original images by contemporary Vao and Atchin islanders (Figs 4, 5 and 6).

The images themselves impart a sense of 'being' in particular places on Vao and Atchin, a sense strong enough to inspire similarly evocative activities. People not only matched the contemporary environment of the island to Layard's images, but also they used their own bodies to form connections between the two. Men on Vao



Figure 5 “Dancing ground showing gongs, and the fence built around the large flat dolmen in connexion with the death of an old man.” Togh Vanu, Vao, 1915. Photograph: John Layard. CUMAA N.98803. Reproduced with kind permission of the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

stage-managed the process of re-photography by positioning themselves within the frame of the new images we were creating, touching a drum or tree recognised from the photograph and claiming them as a part of their own personal heritage. These acts of re-photography and re-enactment of the past were both mimetic and creative. Layard’s images were consolidated as embodiments of connections between places, people and their ancestors, and the taking of a new set of photographs became an important articulation of people’s connection to their ancestral land, and of the contemporary tracing of these histories. The resonance of visual images, over other more discursive methods of narrating the past was reinforced when, in 2006, I returned with the images, this time with the caption lists I had discovered in the archives in San Diego.<sup>6</sup> With these lists it was, it seemed, no longer necessary to walk the island paths. The perceived veracity of text overwhelmed the potentiality of images to construe meaning in place. Instead of using photographs as explorations of experienced knowledge, the photographs’ captions became primary vehicles of knowledge transmission. That the text overwhelmed the specifically visual quality of photographic knowledge radically altered the ways in which islanders reconnected



**Figure 6** Jean Mal Varu and Harris Melteas, Togh Vanu nasara, Vao, 18 July 2003, standing at the site of Layard's photograph, reconnecting as the descendents of the slit-drums within. Photograph: Haidy Geismar.

to the memory and history of Layard's visit to their islands. This is not, however, the usual context in which people experience photographs.

Working with the images alone in 2003, and before connecting captions to images, I became intensely aware, via my own participation in the process of photography, of how the very practice of making a photograph embodies the complex tension between material space and technology and the human body. It was then that I first started to think about Malanggan, of the ways in which 'enchantment is achieved through the technique by which the form simultaneously extends into past and future while holding it all at a single moment in time and space' (Strathern 2005b: 98).

A photograph is born of the act of looking through a viewfinder, framing the image in the context of the relationship between one's eyes, the camera viewfinder, one's perception of space in both the broader environment and the dark-rimmed box of vision made by pressing the eye up against the machine. It is equally created out of the imagination of the people being photographed who were thinking about what the photographer is seeing and placing themselves appropriately (thus referencing other photographs seen by participants in making the shot). It is also made out of the photographer's environmental awareness, perception of light and shadow,



**Figure 7** View from Pinalum point, looking N.W to Rano mainland, [HL 1915]. Layard's fingerprints have been inscribed in the process of fixing the emulsion to the glass plate negative. CUMAA N.98721. Reproduced with kind permission of the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

and tinkering with flashes, film speed and filters, alongside the brief reminders to your subjects to hold still, smile, move closer. It is in turn created out of the physical world—the play of light, the time of day, the weather and the environment—that these complex subjectivities inhabit. And finally, it is produced through the pressing of one's finger onto the button, and the strange disconnect between the click of the button and the snap of the shutter. All of these environmental, bodily, retinal, perceptual, creative, imaginative and replicative processes combine materially to produce a single image. Then, of course, comes the process of developing, printing, editing and presenting the photograph (Fig. 7).

On Vao, the process of re-photographing Layard's photographs focused almost entirely on the sacred dancing grounds, which exist in almost the same form today as they did in 1914. Whilst everyone on Vao has by now converted to Catholicism, the last full traditional grade-taking ceremony taking place in 1986, the dancing grounds have been well maintained, and are sites of ancestry, memory and identity for present-day Islanders. Following their instructions, I re-photographed enthusiastic villagers who matched each piece of still-existing dry-stone walling, each rotted

tree stump and slit-drum to its echo in the photographs. Standing in the Vao dancing grounds, the two-dimensional image and the three-dimensional space were both understood to be referents to the celebrated activities and high stature of the ancestors. By holding the images up in the space for these new photographs, villagers were actively forging an equivalency between photographic images and important cultural sites, as indices of past practice. In this context, taking a new set of photographs became an important method of locating meaning and memory in place.

On Atchin, this practice of re-photography reversed the effacement of place that has occurred since Layard's photographs were taken. Whilst some material remnants of the dancing grounds are still present, they proved much harder to re-photograph. Indeed, in contrast to the clear linkages of photo-image and social geography on Vao, looking at the photographs on Atchin both invoked and helped to overcome a sense of physical loss, the photographs often acting as substitutes for, and fragments of, places long since changed almost beyond recognition. Subsequent to the general conversion of many islanders to Seventh Day Adventism following the arrival of the first SDA Missionary, Mr Parker, in 1912, there was a general cessation in ritual practice. The last full-scale grade-taking ceremony (Maki) was held in the early 1940s; during the ceremony two white traders living on the island also took grades. Over the years, coconut trees, to make copra, were planted on many of the dancing grounds, and cattle were brought over to graze on the island. In the present day, new churches have been built over the old men's houses as new denominations have entered the island, and many of the sites Layard photographed are now totally overgrown.

Walking around Atchin with Layard's images was therefore like a form of archaeology—we used the photographs to dig down, beneath the over-grown bush and the coconut trees to the layer beneath, made visible on the paper images for the first time in many years. Digging down with images, we uncovered, amongst other things, one of the last standing slit-drums on the island, at Amal Tara, Senhar. The practice of photography, the act of looking at photographs and the development of photographic exegesis was therefore a literal process of materialisation, using image to excavate narrative and both image and narrative to excavate and reconnect to place (Fig. 8).

For Atchin and Vao islanders, the places in Layard's images were the first things to draw commentary and discussion, which engendered a mimetic process of re-looking at and experiencing their island homes. The form of our research—walking with photographs, and re-photographing the old photographs in the same sites with new generations—demonstrated a parallelism between the inscription of memory in land, and the inscription of memory within photography (Edwards 2001: 100). Multiple relationships, between Small Islanders, their ancestors, and their land, are therefore entangled or inscribed within Layard's images, in a similar fashion to the entanglement of land rights, kinship structures, and ideas about intellectual property within the curvaceous fretwork of Malanggan carvings. All of these photographs were linked to a multi-sensory performance of these relationships (between Small Islanders and between Small Islanders and visiting anthropologists). Looking at images of drums,



**Figure 8** Haidy Geismar with Martino Metsan at the now empty site of the large drum, recording a song for the drum pictured in Layard's photograph, relating how it was brought from the big island to Atchin by one of his ancestors, who then carved the face of the drum. Photograph: Numa Fred Longga, Atchin, 21 July 2003.

for instance, not only prompted the performance of reconnection to places, and rediscovery of the links between newer and older drums, it sparked the performance of songs, accompanied by beaten bamboo, story-telling and evoked the memory of dancing. This interconnection of narrative, image, music and performance makes each photograph more than just a visual image, but an entity that may be experienced in many ways. As Edwards has commented, 'orality penetrates all levels of historical relations with photographs' (2001: 94). In this context of remembrance, Layard's photographs are more than just objects of recognition. They are, like Malanggan, incontrovertible proof of relationships that criss-crossed in and out of their own frames.

## **PHOTOGRAPHS ARE LIKE MALANGGAN**

As I have tried to draw out by juxtaposing a brief discussion of the anthropology of Malanggan with an ethnographic account of working with Layard's images on Vao and Atchin, there is a striking similitude between the ways in which photographs and Malanggan may be described. In light of the ethnographic account above, try reading the following, substituting photograph for Malanggan: 'Motifs travel between these figures, then, and each new Malanggan is a composite of elements drawn from other Malanggan. It is a place that gathers places from elsewhere to

itself, a person (to which Malanggan are likened) who gathers the interests of other persons into him or herself' (Strathern 2005b: 97). As on Vao and Atchin, Brown and Peers, working with Beatrice Blackwood's photograph of Kainai people, found that photographs 'turned out to be...about relationships—both the historic cross-cultural relationships documented in the photographs and the potential relationships which can be developed around such materials in the present.' (2006: 4). Similarly, Bell comments on his photo-elicitation work in the Purari Delta that 'photographs emerge as relational or 'distributed objects' (Gell 1998: 223; Bell, this volume, p. 28) enmeshed within various networks of telling, seeing and being, that extend beyond what a photograph's surface visually displays and which are embodied in their materiality' (Bell 2008: 124–125).

Edwards describes photographs as 'sites of intersecting histories' (Edwards 2003: 83) in which multiple moments of time are both condensed and conceived. Try reading the following substituting Malanggan for photograph: Photographs are:

interlocutors in the process of telling histories. This dynamic model constitutes photographs not as passive images in which communities merely recognise an ancestor... It is more than simply responding to images through sharpened memory. Photographs are active in the dialogue, become social actors, impressing articulating and constructing fields of social actions and relations...powerful stimuli for the maintenance of indigenous knowledge...Photographs allow people to articulate histories in ways which would not have emerged in that particular figuration (Edwards 2003: 87–88).

Similarly, Strathern writes of Malanggan, 'The dimensions are of both time and space, and here we stumble across what can only be called a *technology of enchantment*. For the figures are constructed in such a way as to bring together in one place simultaneous reference to the past, present and future.' (2005a: 97). As with Malanggan, the ways in which photographs enmesh time and space is also achieved by an enchantment of technology, in which the objective and subjective co-inhabit the same process.

## THE MAKING OF PAST KNOWLEDGE INTO KNOWLEDGE OF THE PAST

Like Malanggan, photographs may be understood as 'visual histories' (Pinney 2004: 8) (Figs 9 and 10). Rather than being mere representations of history 'made' elsewhere, Layard's photographs present not only a history of anthropology and photography in Vanuatu, but also contain a history of ideas that have, in turn, been partially made by photographs. Complex social and political relationships between visitors and Small Islanders, and between generations of anthropologists, have been embodied within Layard's photographs from the outset. These relationships continue to be replicated and reflected upon with the reproduction of each image—as they are printed, photocopied, digitised, and finally, now published.

Working with Layard's images, and making my own images on Vao and Atchin, highlighted how the reproducibility of photographs, like the reproducibility of



**Figure 9** Firmin Teilemb holding a rotting copy of Osa Johnson's *Bride of the Solomons* with Martin Johnson's photographs of Vao islanders reproduced inside. Vao, 5 August 2006. Photograph: Haidy Geismar.

Malanggan, coupled with their status as evidence of the past, evokes a multi-sensory understanding of the past that unites visual image, oral history, and the bodily experience of place. In this context, photographs facilitate a lateral, or stratigraphic, movement through different historical perspectives as well as a more chronological engagement with the past. The fixed inscription of the original image inspires performances, 'specific readings and enactments' (Edwards 2001; Wright 2003: 166), which, in turn, illuminate ideas about the visual record, memories and histories. Working with photographs in this context may also be described as a performative act of mimesis, which Taussig (1993: 21) defines as 'To get hold of something by



Figure 10 Vianney Atpatoun's archive and library, Mainland Vao, 5 August 2007. Photograph: Haidy Geismar.

means of its likeness'. In this case, a mimetic engagement with Layard's photographs allowed Vao and Atchin islanders to get hold of the past through both 'copying or imitation, and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived' (Ibid.). As with Malanggan, this sense of 'likeness' moves beyond our own, perhaps limiting, notions of realism. The likeness effected within Malanggan is similar to that of photography in that as 'real' as the animals and people within the fretwork seem, what is truly being reflected upon is the relations that comprise, and legitimate, their being.

Strathern discusses how images 'contain' events, 'in producing images, people produce the effects by which they know what they themselves really are' (1990: 25, 36). Upon their return to the island, Layard's photographs were immediately co-opted in the mimetic performance of a multi-sensory experience of history and memory-making. Vao and Atchin islanders respond to the same tensions in photographic practice as many academic analysts. They appreciate photographs for their value as objective evidence, and for their malleability of meaning. They exploit the reproductive potentials of photographic technology to recursively reproduce, even to refigure, the past in productive ways that permits a re-evaluation of history in the light of local agency, and a reconnection to a traditional past that may now be used as a model for future development. The repeated journeys of Layard's images between England and Vanuatu mimic the trajectories of the anthropologist and islanders who jointly created them. Taken in Malakula, developed in England,

donated to Cambridge, returned to the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and to the Small Islands,<sup>10</sup> these images have been crucial in the constitution of ideas about history as a shared enterprise for anthropologists and ni-Vanuatu. In this way a new, collaborative theory of photography emerges, one that explains how photographs, like Malanggan, are simultaneously evidence of the past, present proof of the performative and phenomenological aspects of vision and mimetic reproductions of the creative act encounter that engendered the original image.

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## NOTES

- 1 In addition to developing a particular theory about images, Malanggan are also paradigmatic in discussions of property relations in Melanesia. (e.g. see Strathern 1999; Kalinoe and Leach 2001; Sykes 2001).
- 2 The exhibition *Nouvelle-Irlande, Art du Pacifique Sud*, co-produced by the Saint Louis Art Museum, the Ethnologisches Museum of Berlin and the Musée du quai Branly, Paris from 2006 to 2007.
- 3 Hence talk of ‘flashbulb memories’ in which important events are remembered in great detail: a process compared to the illumination and freezing of scenes by the flash of the camera.
- 4 See Geismar 2006 and Geismar and Herle, forthcoming, for a fuller biographical and analytic discussion of Layard’s life and work.
- 5 Layard’s original glass-plate negatives and artefact collection were given to the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (CUMAA). His archive was deposited posthumously by his son, Richard Layard, in the Special Collections of the Mandeville Library, University of California at San Diego (MSS 84). His original wax cylinder

recordings are in the National Sound Archive, of the British Library. Copies of all of this material are held in the Vanuatu Cultural Centre.

- 6 There are four different caption lists in Layard's archive and the CUMAA dating from 1914 through to 1963, which each vary in detail and emphasis: Layard's original handwritten list of images taken in the field (1914–15), a later, undated transcribed typescript of this list, the typed list of photographs sent to Cambridge (c. 1935), and a list of photographs of artefacts prepared for French anthropologist Jean Guiart (1963). The complex interaction between images and text, especially within textual productions such as academic monographs and museum catalogues, plays a vital part in facilitating our understanding of these images.
- 7 In this paper, the captions for Layard's images in this volume are drawn from four distinct lists, compiled between 1914 and 1963, which vary in detail and emphasis. These captions are reproduced in italics and referenced following the conventions noted below. Quotations from published sources are referenced bibliographically. My captions for photographs are printed in plain text. HL (Handwritten 'List of photographs (original)', 1914–15. LP, UCSD, Box 31, Folder 10). CUMAA-TL (Typed catalogue cards for prints donated to the Haddon Photographic Collection, c. 1935). CUMAA. TL1 (Typed list of photographs entitled: 'New Hebrides photographs by J. W. Layard.' LP, UCSD, box 31, folder 10.) TL2 ('Copy of catalogue of my photographs (some of my Cambridge collection). Made for and sent to Jean Guiart with help of Raymond Clausen circa 1963.' LP, UCSD box 31, folder 6.)
- 8 See the national film and sound unit policy, <http://www.vanuatuculture.org/film-sound/050517nfsu.shtml>
- 9 I did not take Layard's photographs of South West Bay, Malakula to the Small Islands, in part because of the ways in which knowledge is regulated within and between cultural areas, and also because several of the photographs Layard took there have been identified by VCC fieldworkers as highly *tabu*, and their circulation has been restricted entirely.
- 10 As well as sending back copies of all the photographs I had taken in Malakula to both the VCC and the villages I worked in, I created an exhibition of some of the images, with the newly-found captions translated into Bislama (the pidgin English of Vanuatu), which was sent to be displayed at the Malakula Cultural Centre, and began work on this publication, which in turn will also return in the form of a book, translated into Bislama (Geismar *et al.* 2007).

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