



From Explorers to Evangelists: Archivists, Recordkeeping, and Remembering in the Pacific Islands *

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Abstract. With a central focus on the cultural contexts of Pacific island societies, this essay examines the entanglement of colonial power relations in local recordkeeping practices. These cultural contexts include the on-going exchange between oral and literate cultures, the aftermath of colonial disempowerment and reassertion of indigenous rights and identities, the difficulty of maintaining full archival systems in isolated, resource-poor “micro-states,” and the driving influence of development theory. The essay opens with a discussion of concepts of exploration and evangelism in cross-cultural analysis as metaphors for archival endeavour. It then explores the cultural exchanges between oral memory and written records, orality, and literacy, as means of keeping evidence and remembering. After discussing the relation of records to processes of political and economic disempowerment, and the reclaiming of rights and identities, it returns to the patterns of archival development in the Pacific region to consider how archives can better integrate into their cultural and political contexts, with the aim of becoming more valued parts of their communities.

Keywords: archival theory, archives and colonialism, indigenous identities and record keeping, oral and literate cultures, Pacific Island archives

Archives, narrowly defined, were imposed on the indigenous cultures of Oceania by colonizing powers, as an introduced technology, which altered or displaced established practices. Written recordkeeping¹ was a phenomenon that arrived with travellers, traders, missionaries, and bureaucrats, and like the economic, religious, social, and administrative systems they introduced,

* This paper began as a keynote presentation to the Association of Canadian Archivists' 2002 conference, “Archival Exploration and Innovation,” Vancouver, May 2002. I would like to express my great appreciation to the ACA for inspiring the paper with their conference theme, and for assisting me to take part. It is an endeavour to begin to integrate my experiences with Pacific recordkeeping and archivists into wider streams of archival thought, and to take an opportunity for reflection, and stepping back, at a point of passing from one role to another. The views in this paper are my own, and do not necessarily accord with the views of the International Council on Archives.

¹ In continuum thinking in Australia and New Zealand, “recordkeeping” is consciously spelled as one word (as are its variants) to reflect its special continuum rather than its generic meaning, rather than as two words as a noun or one hyphenated word as an adjective. That special meaning has been respected here by the editors.

it has been adapted to suit local cultures and become integral to many aspects of island life. As a Western discipline, archival science, or recordkeeping theory, can never be merely neutral. Indeed, in the Pacific region, archival institutions have been described as a chill wind blown in from colder places,² and challenged to consider their implication in the colonial enterprise and its development-oriented successors. However, written recordkeeping is a necessity for modern governance, economic systems, and cultural needs in the Pacific islands, and archives have a vital role to play in documenting rights and entitlements and enabling interpretation of the events of the past. To understand how archives function, struggle, or succeed in Pacific environments, it is necessary to look further into the cultural and political context of Pacific island societies.

As Eric Ketelaar argues, to understand which recordkeeping strategies and methods will work in a particular environment, one must first analyze the characteristics of that culture.³ Comparative archival studies are vital to a better understanding of our professional practice, and terminology, strategies, and systems can only be understood if the professional, cultural, legal, historical, and political backgrounds are explored. Ketelaar writes that in business process re-engineering, as in information resources management, a clear understanding of cultural biases, restrictions, and possibilities is essential.⁴ Ketelaar's studies of recordkeeping and culture within Europe focus on a detailed analysis of variations in individualism, power relationships, or attitudes to risk.

Broad facets of the cultural contexts of most Pacific island societies include the on-going exchange between oral and literate cultures, the aftermath of colonial disempowerment and reassertion of indigenous rights and identities, the difficulty of maintaining full nation-state systems in isolated, resource-poor micro-states, and the driving influence of development theory. In analyzing the cultural context of recordkeeping across the Pacific, it seems more logical to look first at these broader patterns, before more detailed analysis of suitable recordkeeping strategies for individual societies can be undertaken.

² David Hanlon, "The Chill of History: The Experience, Emotion and Changing Politics of Archival Research in the Pacific", *Archives and Manuscripts* 27 (May 1999): 8–21.

³ Eric Ketelaar, "The Difference Best Postponed? Cultures and Comparative Archival Science", *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997): 142–148.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

Exploration and power in the Pacific

The Pacific region is often passed over as the powerless and empty hole in a donut of Pacific Rim superpowers, or regarded as an uninhabited area in which to isolate wastes, whether toxic, nuclear, or human. But across the Pacific Ocean spanning one-third of our globe are sprinkled constellations of islands, great and small, fragments of continents, volcanic cones, and atoll reefs, grouped into clusters or proudly standing alone among the waves. There are over 25 countries and territories in this region, ranging in size from Papua New Guinea with over 5 million people on some 450,000 square kilometres of land, to Niue with a little over 2,000 people on less than 300 square kilometres.⁵ The great majority have less than 200,000 people. Culturally, these islands are often referred to in the categories of: Melanesia, a group of larger countries with rich mineral resources and intensely diverse societies in the south west Pacific; Micronesia, comprising the atoll archipelagos of the northern Pacific; and Polynesia, an expansive triangle of islands with closely related languages and cultures in the east. To these categories, some have added Anglonesia or Meganesia: New Zealand, Hawaii, and Australia, where islanders are minorities in populations made up of later migrants and where economies are developed more stably than elsewhere in the region.

From Magellan, through Tasman, to Cook, Bougainville, and Vancouver, the Pacific Ocean is littered with the names of those who contributed to a long tradition of exploration. In playing with the idea of exploration, the reefs (or icebergs), on which there is a risk of foundering, must be kept in sight. If we do not try to remove the blinkers of a literary tradition of discoveries, we may neglect the contribution of later-comers whose names were not inscribed on the landscape, but who were equally generous with their reminiscences in the written record of the region's past, like Isabella Bird-Bishop or Constance Gordon Cumming. Or, through a lack of written records, we may be too short-sighted to perceive the voyages of over 50,000 years ago which brought people to Australia and Papua New Guinea, or the explorations of the past 6,000 years in which the farthest islands of the ocean were located and settled. We may assume explorers were powerful, as the subjects of our stories, and dismiss those they visited as powerless.

We should also keep foremost in our minds that explorers are also evangelists. On adventures and odysseys, we bring our own values, beliefs, and expectations, our cultural context, with us. Pacific historian Greg Denning describes this phenomenon through the oceanic metaphor of islands, beaches, and boats. Explorers bring their context with them, in the cultural cocoon of

⁵ These population estimates and geographic figures are taken from the CIA World Fact Book, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>, accessed 4 May 2002.

their boat; locals remain in their own context, on their island. The beach is the place where these contexts and power systems meet and interact, trade, talk or kill.⁶ Explorers can never leave their own “ship” behind as they encounter different “islands.” Whether late eighteenth-century Hawaiian religious rituals are perceived through the lenses of the Scottish enlightenment, or electronic records are approached with paper minds,⁷ explorers are prone to misinterpretations, which may result in enrichment or a fatal loss. When two power systems cross, each may assume that the other lacks strength and subsume the other’s manifestations into an imported set of expectations and beliefs.

In archival exploration, we can also never disassociate ourselves from the boats in which we travel. While our intention may be to discover the unexpected, inevitably it is more likely that on our travels we will recover an understanding of the contexts we are trying to leave behind us on home shores, and ignore the power of the foreign systems which we encounter. We look at electronic paradigms through the expectations of a paper-dominated recordkeeping tradition, and rediscover the archival principles that guided our existing practices. We look at oral cultures through the mindset of literacy, and our analysis of other cultural practices is guided by the expectations of our own discipline.

Whether consciously or subconsciously, we evangelize. We impose our expectations onto that (and those) which we discover. Just as non-endemic life-forms inadvertently travelled with explorers on their ships, and spread deadly viruses or new populations of rats through indigenous populations, so, whether intentionally or not, archival explorers influence other societies ways of recording and remembering simply through their presence. Although our intention is to explore, we also transmit our beliefs and thus exercise our power of influence as we move through other environments.

Pacific Island archives

Archivists in the Pacific Islands might be divided into the two categories of collectors and government bureaucrats. Since the first exploratory encounters with the Pacific, visiting collectors have brought together carvings and weavings, manuscripts and documents, maps, plans, biological specimens, and

⁶ Greg Dening, *Islands and Beaches. Discourse on a Silent Land: Marquesas, 1774–1880* (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1980), p. 3.

⁷ See the arguments in Terry Cook, “Electronic Records, Paper Minds: The Revolution in Information Management and Archives in the Post-Custodial and Post-Modernist Era”, *Archives and Manuscripts* 22 (November 1994): 300–329.

other signifiers of the region's past to repositories located on other continents or on the rims of the region. The development of these collections related to other countries' evolving interests in the region, whether scientific, military, economic, or political.⁸ Collectors of private manuscripts about the Pacific tend still to be located on the region's periphery, in the research library collections of Hawaii, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States.

As government bureaucrats, archivists gathered the documentary record of governance in the region into public institutions, which were initially also located outside the islands within colonial governance structures. In the Pacific today, public archives institutions provide footholds for record-keeping infrastructure within the islands. However, the existence of archival infrastructure in Oceania generally hangs on a slender thread, suffering from inadequate resources, insufficient professional staff, low political support, and a lack of cultural integration. Pacific island archives vary in resources from the relatively well-established National Archives of Fiji and Papua New Guinea to understaffed archival services with little storage space or authority over the disposal of government records, such as those in Guam, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia. A number of countries, including Nauru, Tonga, and Samoa, continue to have no legislative mandate over government records, no repositories, and no knowledge of archival systems, leaving government records either in a state of complete neglect or in the overcrowded registries of government departments.

In those countries that do have archives authorities, most institutions are very small with meagre resources. The number of full-time staff ranges from nineteen in Fiji to one in the Marshall Islands and Vanuatu. In 2001, 50 percent of Pacific Island archival institutions had less than five staff, and 43 percent employed only one archivist.⁹ A significant proportion of institutions reported that their staff had received no archival training, even where a position named Archivist was filled. Institutions operate on paltry budgets, and depend heavily on project grants from external funding agencies: 83 percent of archives' office budgets fell under \$150,000 USD. Almost all lacked technical equipment for preservation and reprography. Many were under-equipped to serve public and government users, with 43 per cent reporting no facilities for researchers to use their holdings. Over one-third of survey

⁸ An overview of documentation strategies and archives and manuscript collections relating to the Pacific region is provided in Monika Wehner and Ewan Maidment, "Ancestral Voices: Aspects of Archives Administration in Oceania", *Archives and Manuscripts* 27 (May 1999): 22–41.

⁹ Biennial Statistical Survey of Pacific Archival Institutions, PARBICA 9th Conference, Palau, 2001.

respondents were in the process of planning new repositories, due to the inadequacies of current arrangements.

These struggling repositories contrast with more powerful, better-resourced, and recognized institutions in Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii. There are also well-supported archives in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, funded by the French governments of these territories. Although the historical and cultural issues discussed in this paper are shared by these places, resource limitations are less all-absorbing and the role of archival institutions is better recognized.

The basic problems confronting archivists in the Pacific may be similar to those faced by archives all over the world, but they are felt much more keenly in developing Pacific nations. A key contributing factor is the on-going struggle for preservation against the encroaching rot endemic to tropical environments. Inadequate infrastructure for records management and preservation compounds the problem of increased deterioration caused by hot, humid, wet climates, where mould spores, rusting metal fasteners, and insect damage are constant threats to paper. Niue's National Archives operates in a Government housing unit,¹⁰ while the Marshall Islands Archives occupies part of an old shipping container.¹¹ Even in a country such as the Cook Islands, which has had a relatively good facility available for its national archives, the environment has not been sufficiently controlled to prevent deterioration or extensive insect damage, and storage conditions within the facility are inadequate. While in temperate climates, preservation of paper records may seem a simple task in comparison with electronic records management, in the tropical Pacific the very survival of records in neglected storage has never been a given. As Palau President Tommy Remengesau states:

In our tropical climate, paper is so fragile, sometimes more fragile than human memory. Our land court proceedings in some of the states have had to rely almost entirely on our old form of 'archives,' personal memories, because most of the paper records of land ownership in those particular states have been lost or destroyed. These paper documents turned out to be more fragile than human memory.¹²

¹⁰ Niue National Archives, PARBICA 8 – Country Report, *PARBICA Institutional, State and Country Reports*, PARBICA 8th Conference, Lami, Suva, 1999, p. 27.

¹¹ Marshall Islands Alele Museum Corporation, PARBICA 9 – Country Report, *PARBICA Institutional, State, and Country Reports*, PARBICA 9th Conference, Palau, 2001, p. 40.

¹² President Tommy E. Remengesau Jr., Opening Address, *Pacific Archives: Connecting, Capturing, Preserving*, PARBICA 9th Conference, Palau, 30 July 2001.

In addition, the dangers to records posed by cyclones, storms, floods, and lightning strikes make well-constructed repositories and active management still more important.

Perhaps even more insidious is the indifference to the role of archives which makes adequate archives infrastructure a rarity in the islands. The perceived irrelevance of archives to society can be ascribed to the lack of integration of written recordkeeping into Pacific island world views. President Remengesau states that:

Our failure, sometimes, to recognize the importance of archives can be blamed on the fact that we are simply not used to making written records, much less keeping them. For centuries our culture has relied exclusively on human memory. . . . We are not used to seeing the reams of old, yellowing paper which once filled the file cabinets of a former administration, for example, as vital sources of information.¹³

Records are associated with outsiders and other administrations, rather than with local interests. Following her survey of the status of archives and libraries in the Pacific region, University of the South Pacific Librarian, Esther Williams, confirmed that:

Very few decision-makers and Pacific Island leaders will link good governance and accountability to the efficient management of public sector records. . . . [Many] do not recognize the need for good information . . . for strategic planning and efficient operations. . . . [A]rchives and museums are not recognized as the repositories that hold and preserve the national and cultural heritage and identity of a country. These institutions are given minimum recurrent funding and are barely surviving.¹⁴

The familiar mantra of accountability, efficiency, and cultural heritage through written records does not resonate in most Pacific island countries. The first of two broad areas which may give some context to this situation is oral culture; the second is the legacy of colonial/imperial rule in the region.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Esther Williams, quoted in Karen Anderson, Margaret Crockett, and Laura Millar, *Distance Education for Records and Archives Management in the Pacific: A Report Prepared for PARBICA*, International Records Management Trust, February 2002, p. 19.

Oral memory and written records

No matter how widely we try to define our archival missions, archivists are primarily concerned with the maintenance and preservation of written records. This presents a problem for a broad archival enterprise in many areas of the Pacific, where oral cultures continue to predominate in daily life. Whether as collectors or as government bureaucrats, the role of archivists does not fit easily with local oral cultures.

In trying to explain the lack of archival infrastructure in his state to visiting Pacific archivists in 2001, Chief Reklai Raphael Ngirmang, the traditional leader of the state of Melekeok in Palau, stated that:

Our archives does not have written documents and books. Our cultural and historical records are contained in oral histories and legends, which are stored in the collective memories of the people of Melekeok and which have been passed from generation to generation over the centuries.¹⁵

The collective memory of many Pacific peoples is passed through generations verbally, rather than captured in recorded form. Pacific islanders did not possess writing systems until outsiders arrived on their shores, less than five hundred years ago.¹⁶ Written records thus exclude the large segment of Pacific history from the entire pre-contact period. The written records created in the early years after contact were those of visitors, who were mired in their own expectations and beliefs, and usually misinterpreted or ignored the perspectives, events, and stories of islanders.

Oral and literate cultures continue to co-exist, and influence each other, in varying balances throughout the Pacific. Epeli Hau'ofa, Pacific writer and scholar, describes the oral culture he experienced growing up in Papua New Guinea and Tonga in the 1940s and 1950s:

Apart from the bible, a few religious tracts, and the simplest school books read out in classes by poorly trained teachers to uninterested children, the written word was of little significance in most people's day to day existence. The spoken word, especially in the form of stories, was central to social and cultural life. Indeed, a people could not be known and understood sufficiently without their stories. Pacific island societies were held together by a series of stories; and divisions in a community were delineated by stories. One's links to social groups were by virtue of

¹⁵ Chief Reklai Raphael B. Ngirmang, Welcome Address, *Pacific Archives: Connecting, Capturing, Preserving*, PARBICA 9th Conference, Palau, 1 August 2001.

¹⁶ Linguists continue to debate whether the indigenous writing system of Rapa Nui/Easter Island predates European contact, or was a result of encountering a European writing system. Further discussion on this issue is included later in this paper.

one's connections to the stories of one's ancestors: where they originated, how they came to be where their descendants lived, by what means they acquired what they bequeathed through generations, and who, how, and where they married, procreated, died and were buried.¹⁷

Hau'ofa explains that he did not become immersed in the "silent" world of reading or writing until his schooling in Fiji and Australia. From his perspective, this interiorization of literate systems divorced him from an oral culture, which he was not able to re-enter after missing the years of apprenticeship in its ways. Hau'ofa argues that: "To be a writer in the Pacific one has to place oneself on the periphery of one's community, or remove oneself altogether to an ivory tower."¹⁸

Orality continues to be the dominant milieu in many aspects of island life around the region. One respondent to a survey of oral history activity in the Pacific islands claims: very few people here have a sense of recorded history. Most history remains oral and unrecorded. Another states: oral tradition is still very strong in the sense that if information or communication can be transmitted orally rather than in writing, then that is the choice most people here would make.¹⁹

The claim that any archival institution is the memory of a community or nation has been refuted repeatedly as simplistic or misconceived. Brien Brothman argues that memory is not a place; it is a process of knowledge construction, which tells far more about the present than the past: memory is not simply about storing and keeping. It involves on-going construction of the present.²⁰ Likewise, Verne Harris asserts that the notion that an archives holds the collective memory of a nation suggests a glibness about the complex processes through which archives record and feed into social memory. Elaborating on this critique, Harris specifies that, even within written recordkeeping, given the small proportion of actions that are documented, the results of inadvertent destruction, and the appraisal processes of archival institutions, archives offer researchers at best a sliver of a sliver of a sliver of any such possible memory.²¹

¹⁷ Epeli Hau'ofa, "Oral Traditions and Writing", *Landfall* 176(44) (December 1990): 402.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 410–411.

¹⁹ Unidentified respondent, in Frank Fabry, collator, *Report on a Survey Carried out by the National Library of New Zealand on Oral History Activity and Current Needs in the Pacific* (Wellington: National Library of New Zealand, 2001), p. 9.

²⁰ Brien Brothman, "The Past That Archives Keep: Memory, History, and the Preservation of Archival Records", *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001): 79, 64–65.

²¹ Verne Harris, "Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa", *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), p. 137.

In any community, collective memory is supported through a mosaic of different forms, but this is particularly the case for societies that encountered literacy and written records within the fairly recent past. Throughout the Pacific islands, the sliver of community memory and evidence constituted by written records preserved in local archival institutions is exceptionally slender. It represents a few tattered strands in a finely woven mat of sources for interpretation of communities' histories and identities, their rights and entitlements. These strands are interwoven with stories, songs, dances, myths, and traditions passed through generations by word of mouth. As anthropologist Doug Dalton theorizes, even oral cultures require physical manifestations for their stories. He writes that:

Memories require a symbolic form, a concrete embodiment in language, aesthetic objects, and structural encodings that constitute and carry them. This requirement enables their repetition and empowers them to form the basis of collective identity.²²

The Pacific is rich in these embodiments of memory. They include carvings, buildings, monuments, flax panels, pottery, notched sticks, features of the landscape, and aspects of language itself. Tina Reuhner, Director of the Belau National Museum, describes how the beams and panels of Palauan chiefly meeting houses or *bai* captured the essence of [Palau] carved and painted histories and stories. Likewise, stone money disks on Yap, carved stone *tiki* figures on Tahitian meeting grounds or *marae*, and the pitted moonscapes left by phosphate mining in Banaba and Nauru are each a form of memento, mnemonic devices that recall a myth, event, decision, or right.

Although oral culture continues to hold sway in many aspects of island life, the power of a written-recording system for communication and control over information was also grasped early by islanders. As Samuel Kamakau writes, Hawaiian chiefs were eager to adapt this new technology to their purposes:

As soon as the chiefs saw what a good thing it was to know how to read and write, each chief took teachers into his home to teach the chiefs of his household.²³

²² Doug Dalton, "Memory, Power, and Loss in Rawa Discourse", in Jeanette Marie Mageo (ed.), *Cultural Memory: Reconfiguring History and Identity in the Postcolonial Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), p. 106.

²³ Samuel Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs of Hawaii* (Honolulu: Kamehameha Schools Press, 1961), p. 248.

In New Zealand, early nineteenth-century missionaries related the phenomenon that Maori tribes had begun to develop reading skills before teachers arrived in new areas to evangelize with the written Bible.²⁴ On Easter Island (Rapa Nui), linguistic scholars now theorize, the interest generated by writing was so strong, that following early encounters with Spanish explorers who asked them to sign proclamations, islanders developed their own writing system named *rongorongo*, with indigenous glyphs, internal mechanisms, texts, and ritual uses, which became integrated into religious practices.²⁵ As the case of *rongorongo* illustrates, traditions change, and cultures shift and develop continuously.

Oral forms of recording memories have been undermined through social changes imposed by new economic patterns and educational practices, the growth of government and economic systems for which written record-keeping is an integral support, and the expectation that memory is being kept elsewhere. In Palau, Reklai Raphael Ngirmang states that:

Our records for the 20th century have not been committed to the storyboards and because everyone assumed that they have been written somewhere, we have not distilled them into forms that could be easily passed to succeeding generations in story telling format. In fact, this may no longer be possible because we may have lost the ability to commit and retain things in our collective memories as our ancestors did.²⁶

It would be wrong to essentialize any culture as static or unchanging. However, it is also a misinterpretation to search for a singular, simple, or direct transition from orality to literacy. Islanders' early eagerness to take advantage of a new technology did not mean that literacy was immediately deeply interiorized, thereby transforming existing cultures.²⁷ Instead orality and literacy continue to co-exist in differing mixes throughout the region, and many indigenous peoples maintain both oral and written means of creation, transmission, and preservation of records despite long knowledge of literacy.

²⁴ Te Ahukaramu Charles Royal, *Te Haurapa: An Introduction to Researching Tribal Histories and Traditions* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1992), p. 22.

²⁵ After many years of analysis, Steven Fischer argues that the cumulative evidence show that *rongorongo* was a recent phenomenon, which first resulted from the island community's contact with Spaniards and their writing system. Steven Fischer, "Easter Island's *Rongorongo* Script", <http://www.netaxs.com/~trance/fischer.html>, accessed 4 May 2002.

²⁶ Reklai Ngirmang, PARBICA 9th Conference.

²⁷ In describing the transition from orality to literacy, Walter Ong uses the term "interiorised" to describe the phase at which the new technology has become part and parcel of cultural practice. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (London: Methuen, 1982).

In this context, written records may tell partial stories, and yet still lack an easy relationship with the communities to whom they relate.

Disempowerment and reclaiming memory

Reclaiming the knowledge, and thereby recovering and releasing the power, embedded in written records is a recurrent theme in the movements for self-determination or indigenous rights, which are as ubiquitous in the Pacific as the colonization that preceded them. As Hawaiian writer Kau'i Goodhue states:

‘O ke au I hala ka lamaku, ke ala I ke kupukupu’ goes a Hawaiian saying. The past is a beacon that will guide us into the future. . . . It is in the light of knowledge that the darkness and confusion of the past 100 years are now being destroyed and the heroic deeds of our ancestors are being revealed.²⁸

Renegotiating memory, both oral and written, is a core aspect of re-empowerment and decolonization; it is also increasingly urgent in the framework of cultural rights. When traditions of orality shift, recordings, whether written or audio-visual, gain in significance. The records that remain become sources to prove rights and recover memories which were previously held in oral memory and its mnemonics. The stronger the impact of colonization on an indigenous society, the greater the importance which recorded memory assumes in the recovery of rights and identity.

In describing the relationship between native culture and resistance to imperialism, postcolonial theorist Edward Said reasons that: the slow and often bitterly disputed recovery of geographical territory which is at the heart of decolonization is preceded as empire had been by the charting of cultural territory.²⁹ In Said's words, a key topic in cultural decolonization is the insistence on the right to see the community's history whole, coherently, integrally. Restore the imprisoned nation to itself.³⁰

All indigenous communities in the islands of Oceania experienced disempowerment to varying degrees after their first encounters with outsiders. Spain, Britain, France, Germany, Japan, the United States, Chile, Australia, and New Zealand each assumed power over parts of the region at different stages. In some cases, direct colonial relationships have continued to the

²⁸ Kau'i P. Goodhue, "We Are Who We Were: From Resistance to Affirmation", *Oiwi, A Native Hawaiian Journal* 1 (1998), p. 36.

²⁹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), p. 252.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

present day. Although constitutional independence came to most Pacific territories between the 1960s and 1990s, imperialism extends beyond the political sphere, into economic and cultural domination of a society by outside forces. As Said writes, “imperialism did not end, did not suddenly become past with political decolonization; instead, the power relationships of development and economic dependency have carried forward imperial thought in an extraordinarily dispiriting inevitability.”³¹ In the Pacific, economic dependency and globalizing cultural influences continue to tie constitutionally independent island nations into colonial relationships.

Colonial domination is associated with written recordkeeping in the region in multiple ways. As already noted, oral cultures were displaced by written systems. Vital segments of the written documentary record of island communities were generated by non-islanders engaged in uneven power relationships. Documentary records were often not created by local communities and are not held in island countries. Many strands of the Pacific documentary record have been absent from the region almost since their creation. Evidence of the past of the Pacific in the records of explorers, travellers, missionary organizations, trading companies, imperial policy-makers, and scientific researchers are held in the homelands of the record-makers.

Records generated by colonial administrations are intrinsically associated with political systems by which local communities were subjected to outside power. For those societies, which experienced successive colonial regimes, such records also bear the confusion of flux and change. People seeking written evidence of their land rights in a country such as Palau, for example, must look to an array of possible sources from Spanish, German, Japanese, and American administrations – each created, maintained, and retained in different recordkeeping traditions and languages. Although records created by outsiders reflect the expectations and aspirations, values and beliefs, of their creators, as much as they document the communities captured in their words,³² they constitute vital parts of the evidential systems for the countries to which they relate. They are also sources for the reassertion of cultural identities and rights through the renegotiation of histories.

Archives are entangled in the reassertion of identities, as much as they are implicated in colonial pasts. The establishment of government archives in many countries in the Pacific region can be associated with a reaffirmation

³¹ Ibid., pp. 341–342.

³² William Rosenberg writes: “Archives of the former Soviet Republics, like all colonial archives, may be more valuable for understanding the practices and values of their imperial collectors and those who have preserved the records, than the societies on whom they ostensibly report.” William G. Rosenberg, “Politics in the (Russian) Archives: The ‘Objectivity Question,’ Trust, and the Limitations of Law”, *The American Archivist* 64 (Spring/Summer 2001): 87.

of national identity, and a desire to assert control over written records of previous and future governments. Hawaii's state archives saw its birth in the 1890s, as records of the Hawaiian monarchy were brought together when faced with annexation by the United States. Countries including Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the Solomon Islands established national archives as they moved towards independence from Britain and France in the 1970s. In the Federated States of Micronesia (including Pohnpei and Yap states) and Palau, public archives were established following constitutional independence from the United States, in the late 1980s and 1990s.³³ New Caledonia's territorial archives' state-of-the-art repository was constructed in 1987, in the momentum of an indigenous movement for self-determination and independence from France.

In contrast, two Pacific countries, Samoa and Tonga, each with an extremely strong sense of national identity based on continued traditions, have not yet established public archives. It could be argued that the relative lack of archival infrastructure in these countries demonstrates the continued strength of local heritage and non-relevance of written documentary supports for identity. Samoan leaders have argued against construction of a national museum, because their culture "is not dead." Tonga specialist Helen Morton writes, "Unlike colonized peoples such as Hawaiians, Maori, and Australian Aboriginals, Tongans have not had to turn to their ancient stories to reassert their identity and authenticate their claims to lands stolen by foreigners."³⁴ Tonga's palace archives focus on recording contemporary ceremonies, rather than on providing evidence for the reassertion of islanders rights. Finding strategies for recognizing the value and power of written records can be more difficult where their place alongside older means of recording memory is less clearly established.

In countries such as New Zealand, which have undergone unremitting change and where indigenous people and cultures are a minority, movements for indigenous peoples' rights have strengthened the role and bolstered the power of archival institutions by reactivating them as storehouses of evidence vitally needed to document historical grievances and subsequent entitlements. Indigenous use of written archives in New Zealand has risen dramatically over a fifteen-year period since legal frameworks were established to reconcile historical claims for land and other rights. Similar histories in French Polynesia, Hawaii, and Australia have also had an impact on the perception of archives. Oscar Manutahi Temaru, a pro-independence

³³ A brief history of the establishment of these institutions is given in Wehner and Maidment, "Ancestral Voices."

³⁴ Helen Morton, "Remembering Freedom and the Freedom to Remember: Tongan Memories of Independence", *Cultural Memory*, 50.

advocate in French Polynesia, asserts, “The history of our country, of our people, of our civilisation, of our traditions is a blank in our collective memory.”³⁵ Recovering the voices of resistance in archives of those monarchs and people who ceded sovereignty to France in Tahiti, or to the United States in Hawaii, is a critical component in reclaiming identity for indigenous peoples in these places.³⁶

For the descendants of people alienated from their lands and other property, and struggling to retain their languages and cultures as traditional knowledge is lost, information held in written records acquires greatly increased power. One New Zealand Maori librarian argues that:

It would be difficult to overstress the depth of feeling that now surrounds this information for Maori. Whereas its importance to past generations may have been determined by the spiritual connections the information facilitated, the importance today may be better understood in terms of the tenuous retention of Maori cultural identity in the face of the multitude of devastating influences.³⁷

Similar feelings were expressed by Maori consulted on cultural responsiveness in New Zealand libraries in 1997:

Many of my children, our *mokopuna* [grandchildren] don’t know their own history, and we don’t have easy access to that knowledge because we haven’t got *kaumatua* [elders] left who know it all and can teach us. We are trying very hard to recapture what we have left. It’s really important, that information.³⁸

Australians Monika Wehner and Ewan Maidment, drawing on Michel Foucault’s identification of archives with power, argue that “the struggle for repatriation of the past is a struggle for the right to control and possess the present.”³⁹ In particular, records relating to land and genealogy are a potent source of traditional evidence of current rights in many Pacific nations. In judicial systems from New Zealand to Samoa, the cultural knowledge

³⁵ Oscar Manutahi Temaru, “Maohinui (French Polynesia): The Need for Independence”, in Nancy Pollock and Ron Crocombe (eds.), *French Polynesia* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1988), p. 275.

³⁶ For information on the importance of history and its archival sources to indigenous rights movements see, for example, the essays in Pollock and Crocombe (eds.), *French Polynesia*; and ‘Oiwi, *A Native Hawaiian Journal* already cited above.

³⁷ Bernard Makoare, “Kaitiakitanga I roto nga Whare Pukapuka – Appropriate Care for Maori Material in Libraries and Archives”, *Archifacts* (1999/2), p. 18.

³⁸ Comment from Maori respondent, in Chris Szekely, *Te Ara Tika Guiding Voices: Maori Opinion on Libraries and Information Needs* (Wellington, 1997), p. 13.

³⁹ Wehner and Maidment, “Ancestral Voices”, 32.

of land rights, related in orally remembered genealogies and recorded in written land records, continues to have vital economic significance in proving descendants' rights.

The process of recovering memory from written records is obstructed for some island peoples because of the removal of significant bodies of government records from the Pacific over the course of colonization and independence. Archives of the Spanish administration of the Mariana Islands in Guam were captured by United States' armed forces in the Spanish-American War, and relocated to the Library of Congress.⁴⁰ Archives of successive administrations in Samoa were relocated to New Zealand in the 1950s.⁴¹ American Samoa delivered the majority of its administration's records to a United States' National Archives facility in California in 1966.⁴² The most heavily contested removal of archives from the Pacific region was the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office's migration of the Western Pacific High Commission Archives and records of the Vanuatu colonial administration to London in 1978.⁴³ Although it could be argued that a rigid application of the archival principle of custody contributed to such relocations, pragmatic responses to the climate and political changes of power seem more plausible motivating factors. These transfers of archival custody due to crisis, deterioration, and changes of sovereignty have had a significant impact on the current perception of archives in the Pacific Islands.

Former Solomon Islands Chief Archivist John Naitoro writes that, through the relocation of the Western Pacific High Commission Archives,

[O]nly foreigners who have access to these records in London [can] interpret Pacific history. This history belongs to the Pacific region. Our cultural heritage, oral, written and documentary is significant to our country and people. We owe to our oral culture much of the way we express ourselves, and during the period of European influence we created for ourselves a

⁴⁰ Peter Orlovich, "Archival Training in the Pacific Region", in *Archives in the Tropics: Proceedings of the Australian Society of Archivists Conference* (Townsville: Australian Society of Archivists, 1994), p. 15.

⁴¹ A.J. Fristoe, *The Samoan Archives. An Annotated List of the Archival Material of the Various Governments of Western Samoa from the Middle of the Nineteenth Century to the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century* (Honolulu: Pacific Studies Program, University of Hawaii, 1977).

⁴² American Samoa Office of Archives and Records Management, PARBICA 8 – Country Report, *PARBICA Institutional, State and Country Reports*, PARBICA 8th Conference, Lami, Suva, August 1999, 1.

⁴³ The transfer of custody of these records is described in some detail in Wehner and Maidment, "Ancestral Voices", 30–32. Negotiations are currently underway to return the records to the region, through deposit with Auckland University Library.

written history. The greatest fear is of losing both our oral and written history in the name of civilisation.⁴⁴

For the Solomon Islanders, both oral and written records are partial accounts, and both are required for a fuller understanding of the country's history. Although their oral culture is strong, without the written component, Solomon Islanders do not have access to the full sources of their past.

Location of archives can also be an issue where they are held within a country. In New Zealand, Maori have called for repatriation of archives from government and other institutions to tribal groups:

It would be good for the originals to sit here at home. . . . [T]he *mauri* [spiritual energy] that resides in those documents needs to be based at home. That *mauri* doesn't need to be trampled by people every day . . . but the stories, the *korero*, should be allowed to be traversed by everyone, and facsimiles are a good way to access the written word as opposed to the *wairua* [spirit].⁴⁵

These calls from indigenous people for return of original records documenting their ancestors' activities are similar to the desires of islanders, whose records and cultural objects are held on other shores. Justina Nicholas, Acting National Archivist of the Cook Islands, notes that

Right now there is an urgent need to repatriate, purchase, get hold of old materials, artefacts relating to the history of the country but we need to train our own people in how to take care of them once they are in our custody. Because there is no point trying to repatriate what we have held in other countries only to bring it home to rot.⁴⁶

Evangelism and archival development

Developing adequate archival infrastructure is a fundamental necessity if the documentary records that are now vital to Pacific island communities are to be preserved within island countries. Archival development in any region could

⁴⁴ John Naitoro, "Oral and Written History: Our Heritage", in Ron Crocombe and Esau Tuza (eds.), *Independence, Dependence, Interdependence: The First Ten Years of Solomon Islands Independence* (Honiara: University of the South Pacific and Solomon Islands College of Higher Education, 1992), pp. 125–127.

⁴⁵ Maori interviewee quoted in Grant Pittams, *Te Arotake I te Kaupapa Tiaki I te Mauri o te Matauranga – Wairarapa, An Evaluation of the Cultural Property Pilot Project – Wairarapa* (Wellington, 1999), p. 12.

⁴⁶ Cook Islands National Archives, PARBICA 9 – Country Report, *PARBICA Institutional, State, and Country Reports – Supplementary*, PARBICA 9th Conference, Palau, 2001, p. 10.

be seen as an act of evangelism, the privileging of one system over another accompanied by the disempowerment and rejection of a previous philosophy. Like the London Missionary Society or the Marist Brothers, archivists arrived in the Pacific with the aim to serve a greater purpose. They brought with them a strong belief in a system that could resolve problems and provide great benefits to Pacific island communities. For this introduced system to be successful, locals who maintained alternative existing systems would need to be converted to the new order.

Archival development judges “success” by comparison to a European ideal of the archive that is dependent on its cultural, political, economic, and social context. Particularly in resource-poor, developing island communities with continued strong links to their cultural heritage, there seem to be an array of issues obstructing archival development, despite recurrent attempts at archival evangelism. As with Christianity, a successful conversion is dependent on bending the imported system to meet local expectations and needs.

Key components of archival development include a legislative mandate for the regulation of recordkeeping, infrastructure and repositories for the protection of archives, well-functioning control systems to manage records and make them accessible, and training and professional development so that people will be available to maintain these systems. In many countries in the Pacific these components are present, albeit in deficient quantities, but the system continues to be weak and its value not recognized.

Oral cultures have been described as “living archives,” but this term could also be applied to documentary records if their management and use are revitalized. Dr. Kanalu Terry Young describes historical written records about Hawaiians “as spiritual and life-giving as bones.”⁴⁷ Like the bones of ancestors, ancestral voices in written records need to be cared for by descendants and used for current relevance.

Repatriation of knowledge, like that of human remains which some Western museums are now conceding, could entail a return of custody of records to the communities to which they belong. But repatriation can also be a matter of revitalizing archival institutions, returning the life which exists when a community recognizes the heritage contained in archival sources and is actively involved in its governance and management.

Collection and preservation of records are not adequate ends in themselves, without access, use, and ownership by communities. Pacific institutions undertaking oral history recording argue that

⁴⁷ Kanalu Terry Young, “Rethinking the Hawaiian Past”, 23rd Annual University of Hawaii Pacific Studies Conference, *Pacific Collections*, 5–7 November 1998, cited in Wehner and Maidment, “Ancestral Voices”, 24.

The need to revive the indigenous practice of history, including the oral transmission methods and explanations of the historical narratives, must be dealt with. So far, we have simply been recording and archiving some of the histories, but we have not done enough of the reviving work.⁴⁸

‘Traditional’ ways are vanishing fast and the void is not always being filled adequately by the newer traditions. Donors need to place ‘culture’ in context and out of the glass-box/ivory tower.⁴⁹

This revitalization could take many forms, from efforts to ensure relevance in acquisition policies and collecting, through changes in descriptive and other control systems to integrate local perspectives. It may entail changes in the location of custody, through movement of originals or access to copies, or it could result from shifts in institutional culture to enable increased responsiveness to community needs within existing frameworks. Promotion of awareness and easier access are as important to indigenous people and islanders as they are to other potential archives users. Most importantly, institutions must build partnerships with local communities and must act as stewards rather than owners of the records they hold.

In New Zealand, the endeavour to make archives (and other government institutions) responsive to Maori needs has led to changes at each of these levels. Changes at governance level include the establishment of Maori senior management positions, of dual leadership positions, representation of Maori on governance boards, and the establishment of separate Maori advisory committees with varying degrees of power. Strategies to create an environment more receptive to Maori include adopting Maori names for institutions and positions; putting in place bilingual signage; commissioning or purchasing and displaying Maori art-works; producing Maori language information brochures; recruiting Maori staff; establishing specialist Maori liaison or archivist positions; training non-Maori staff in Maori language and culture; and creating specific spaces for Maori research which enable group work and discussion. Relationships have been established with different Maori groups through formal agreements and less formal advisory networks.

These and other strategies are also in place in other Pacific institutions, sometimes as a natural consequence of the environment in which archivists work. Where written brochures and guides are more likely to be useful to overseas researchers than to locals, institutions use radio coverage, talks at village events, or “traditional island publicity” to raise awareness of the

⁴⁸ Unidentified respondent, in Faby, *Report on a Survey Carried out by the National Library of New Zealand*, p. 12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

potential uses of written records with local communities.⁵⁰ The reassertion of traditional boundaries as grounds for withholding access has become part of the policy of the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau, as a result of the extension of its archival microfilming projects to records kept in the Pacific islands.⁵¹ While overseas researchers know the methods and potential of archival sources, forging connections with local communities is vital for written records to be recognized as a core component in collective memory-making.

Indigenous researchers in Hawaii have openly criticized institutional conventions which acted as a barrier to local use of core sources on local identity. Amy Stillman states that

[It is] not a simple matter of mining the vast collections of repertoire in the Bishop Museum library. For one thing, the hula community has had to overcome its deep distrust of institutional practices of access that seemed designed to separate seekers from resources. Institutional practices have resulted in a schism between poetic texts as material artefacts and those who would enact their contents in a performance.⁵²

To overcome distrust, archival practices must be adjusted so that they are transparent and understandable for local communities, and local people should be encouraged to use the records held.

Conclusion

To ensure a living relationship with documentary records, and to repatriate the knowledge in them to the people, archivists must make the records they care for accessible, known, and relevant to Pacific island communities.⁵³ Strengthening the archival infrastructure of the region is vital for this decolonization of the documentary record, as well as for the protection of records currently being created. Archival development is thus a necessity if written documentary records are to take their place alongside oral evidence in the fabric of island identity.

⁵⁰ American Samoa, PARBICA 8 – Country Report, 3; Solomon Islands, PARBICA 8 – Country Report, *PARBICA Institutional, State, and Country Reports*, PARBICA 8th Conference, Lami, Suva, 1999, p. 8.

⁵¹ Wehner and Maidment, “Ancestral Voices”, 37.

⁵² Amy Ku’uleialoha Stillman, “Re-Membering the History of the Hawaiian Hula”, *Cultural Memory*, 200–201.

⁵³ Wehner and Maidment, in “Ancestral Voices,” use the term “repatriating knowledge” drawing on Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972), p. 129.

Historical exploration of the traditions which have guided the creation and maintenance of information in different island societies, and their continued roles today, is fundamental for archivists to design systems and processes which will function effectively. It should be recognized that this exploration takes place within a framework of principles which evolved elsewhere. However, cultural change, and the integration of systems supported by written recordkeeping into island life, mean that archival principles are not wholly foreign to the countries of the region. Rather, their place should be asserted in a broader schematic that includes other forms of recordkeeping and remembering, other embodiments of memory and evidence.

To be successful, archivists need to understand the different cultures which they encounter, and be sensitive to their continual development to suit changing contexts. It is not sufficient to bring a preset belief system to different communities in the expectation that it will be welcomed for its obvious benefits. Instead, the system itself should be seen as open to bending to suit various environments, without losing its core purposes and principles. Perhaps through this bending, we will achieve the decolonization of a system that evolved from a colonizing tradition, and be able to establish living archives through our institutions.

