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CHAPTER 7

‘Stories of long ago’ and the forces of modernity in South Pentecost

Murray Garde

In the Sa language of southern Pentecost Island in Vanuatu, mythical narratives are known as *dun*. Notions of authenticity in the telling of *dun* engender debates about the status of competing versions and the links between *dun* and place. A current example I examine is the annual *gol* ‘land diving ritual’ and the disputes which have developed over who is entitled to benefit from the commercial benefits of this ceremony. *Dun* narratives in such contexts are increasingly being appealed to as sources of authority, capable of indexing what is considered ‘authentic’ knowledge about history, place and cultural practice and reflecting their significance as foundations for identity.

1. Introduction

In the Sa language of southern Pentecost Island in Vanuatu, mythical narratives are known as *dun*. These are culturally significant traditional stories told in everyday language which are accompanied at intervals by songs jointly sung by the narrator and audience. The song texts are however not always in ordinary register but a mix of everyday and archaic or less semantically transparent forms. Performances are often spontaneous and typically involve older performers and younger audiences, suggesting a strong didactic function that exposes younger people to canonical elements of Sa verbal art. A wealth of documentation of these mythic narratives exists in the early textual transcriptions by the French Marist priest Elie Tattevin which appear in mission records (1915) and in the anthropological journal *Anthropos* (1929, 1931). More recently, various works spanning three decades by Margaret Jolly explore the ethnographic context of *dun* narratives and their thematic diversity (for just a selection see Jolly, 1981, 1991, 1994a, 2003). I do not intend to revisit the ethnographic background material for South Pentecost which Jolly and others have already so extensively detailed but I will take as a point of departure, a theme in Jolly 2003 that side-steps either structuralist

or functionalist analyses of the content of *dun* narratives and focuses instead on instances of myth telling that include issues of speaker agency made manifest in variations of the same narrative and their telling across different regions of South Pentecost and by different narrators. As Jolly puts it ‘different versions of myths reflect not just the different strategic interests of particular individuals but also broader shifts in the situation of the Sa speakers – the effects of history and textuality on their oral traditions...’ (2003, pp. 189–190).

The kind of changing circumstances experienced by Sa speakers I have in mind here relate to their growing participation in the cash economy and the growing space accorded to ideologies of individualism. The commodification of various cultural practices are increasingly the subject of anthropological enquiry and in South Pentecost an example of longstanding contestation is the *gol* land dive (for more extensive ethnographic analysis see again Jolly, 1994b; Lipp, 2008). Pentecost Island land diving, called *gol* in the Sa language and *nanggol* in Bislama is now an internationally recognized ceremonial spectacle iconically associated with Vanuatu and the island of Pentecost. So well known is the annual Pentecost land dive ceremony that I hardly need to describe its dramatic central features – young men with vines tied around their ankles to arrest their fall, jump into the void from twenty to thirty metre tall towers constructed from bush timber and lianas.¹

The *gol* has in recent decades been transformed into a tourist attraction that has had a range of effects on the local economy, with a seasonal influx of hundreds of tourists to the small villages of South Pentecost during the *gol* season of April to May. Until a moratorium was instigated in 2006 by the Vanuatu Cultural Council, commercial film companies were also an annual feature of the land diving season, with substantial fees being negotiated on an *ad hoc* basis between the film makers and influential community leaders or chiefs sponsoring the *gol* performance. The moratorium was instituted, amongst other things, as a result of tensions over the distribution of the significant amounts of money being paid by both tourist companies and commercial film companies to local organizers of the land diving events and the perception that the funds were largely siphoned off by individual chiefs to the detriment of the rest of the village community. These kinds of concerns are only part of an ongoing angst and ambivalence from both Sa people and external commentators, including anthropologists, about the conversion of a *kastom* ritual of ceremonial complexity and compelling visual drama into a commodity for consumption by the international tourist industry. The *gol* continues to be transformed in a variety of ways as both customary owners and the tourist

1. As an indication of its international profile, an internet search on the terms ‘land diving Vanuatu’ produces about 1.4 million results.

industry seek to expand exposure to the event. At the peak of the expansion in 2010, the *gol* season has been extended from its usual completion in late May into June and an estimated 30 performances of the event were being conducted over this 10 week period. Three or four towers at various locations throughout the south of the island are now the norm. These are mostly built in places of easy access for tourists, that is, on the calmer west coast within easy four-wheel drive taxi distance to the Lonorore airport. A *gol* performance amphitheatre has been constructed at the regional service centre of Panngi where the tower is no longer removed after the completion of the season at the end of May but is left standing for the benefit of out-of-season tourists. The varying forms of logistical management of the performances for tourists and the administration of the financial benefits are still largely a work in progress with trials of various arrangements constantly in flux from one region to another.

The increasing external awareness about land diving and its projection into the world of international tourism has prompted a recent flurry of anthropological interest. Forsyth (2012) explores the status of land diving as cultural property, the competing claims to ownership and control over its performance and an exploration of the potential legal and other regulatory measures to protect it from economic exploitation. Tabani (2010) argues that *gol* land diving is a reified cultural practice or 'neo-ritualization' whose central theme is the celebration of a modern concept of *kastom* and that the resulting commercialization of such grand tourist spectacles engenders dissatisfaction with social inequalities in local communities. Taylor (2011) looks at the *gol* land dive and tourist photography and the idea that producing 'photogenic authenticity' is a dynamic and jointly constructed process that accords agency to both photographer-tourist and local performers of cultural practice. From a more general perspective, anthropologists writing about tourism and self-representation have been pointing out for some time that minority culture communities are becoming increasingly reflexive about the pressure to 'sell out' to the demands of the tourist industry, or what those demands are perceived to be. At the same time there is a need to take control of the way they represent themselves and their cultural heritage whilst still finding ways to create employment and make a profit like anyone else (Graburn, 1976, 2013). Part of this reflexivity for Sa people has resulted in an exploration of the cultural origins of the *gol* and an ongoing discussion about the competing forces, both internally and from afar, who seek greater control. As a cultural practice of commercial value, some Sa speakers believe that ownership of the *gol* must be defined in one way or another. Whether or not this is a futile quest is currently being considered by Sa people themselves and the ongoing telling of the *dun na gol* – 'the story of land diving' – is part of this process. My concern here however, is to examine some of ways that the *dun na gol* is subjected to individual interpretations and expansions, what

motivates such conversions and what are the particular meanings established by those who tell the story.

In South Pentecost, *dun* narratives are in many cases an important part of the debates about ownership and access to land as well as natural and cultural resources. Detailed recitation of a particular *dun*, many of which are rooted in particular places, can be considered evidence of interest in land or resources. Jolly (1994a, 2003) classifies *dun* narratives as either *dun na ngamômô* 'stories of long ago' or *dun na buluim* 'stories of place-based agnatic groups'. The former are of a more public and accessible nature and in many cases they are narratives associated with the whole Sa speaking region of South Pentecost. They deal with a large range of topics explaining the origins of human society, sexual differentiation and various foundational cultural assets and practices. Others include the adventures of ancestral heroes or detail stories of conflict, tragedy and threats to the well-being of human society. Some *dun na ngamômô* are linked to particular places and in certain cases explain the origins of such places. As well as being kinship based, the latter genre *dun na buluim* are also associated with arguments about rights to land ownership or occupancy. The term *buluim* literally means 'hole house' which refers to the doorway of a domestic dwelling and those who as a result of their residence, pass back and forwards through the house. *Dun na buluim* have a much more restricted public profile, as they are used to explain the origins and dispersal of agnatic groups associated with particular totemic emblems. They are used strategically by narrators during discussions and disputes about land in order to achieve particular interactional goals. *Dun na buluim* have also been strategically employed as part of claims for a narrower interpretation of ownership of the *gol* – in this case, associating the putative place of origin of the *gol* with an agnatic grouping or *buluim* said to be the traditional owners of this place (see Lipp, 2008, p. 98).

2. *Dun na gol* – variation

Variation in mythic narrative is not only speaker-based but also regional. There are numerous versions of the *gol* narrative but the most common elements are as follows:

1. A husband and wife were in an unsatisfactory relationship.
2. After much disputation the wife flees.
3. The husband pursues the wife and she climbs up a tall tree.
4. The husband follows her up the tree.

5. The woman ties vines/aerial roots/coconut palm leaf fibre around her ankles.
6. When the husband lurches to grab her she jumps out of the tree.
7. The husband falls and with nothing to restrain him, he hits the ground and dies but the woman is saved by her vines.
8. Others reflect on how the woman was saved and they copy her.

Variations of part 1 include details about the nature of the unsatisfactory relationship. Some versions state that the events occur during the yam harvest season. In some versions, the husband is sexually voracious and the woman can no longer endure the pain he inflicts on his wife. In another version the husband is cruel, demanding and lazy and in another version, the husband has a physical deformity rendering him unable to work and support her, so she leaves him. Other versions have the wife held in the relationship against her will. There is also variation about the kind of tree the woman climbs. In some versions it is a banyan tree and she uses the aerial roots to fasten her legs whilst in another version it is a coconut tree and she strips out fibre from the centre of the palm leaf and uses this to tie around her ankles. The fate of the husband is also subject to variation. In condensed versions the husband jumps and dies. In fuller versions, he is then brought back to life by the power of his wife's intervention. In versions told by narrators from traditionalist or *kastom* villages on the south-east, the woman is concerned by the loss of her husband as a sexual partner and she sets out to revive him in order to satisfy her desire. She whips various limbs and other parts of his body with the branch of a particular tree whilst singing a song that has the power to revive him. Narrators then repeat the song after each body part is whipped until she sees movement in his legs, stomach, eyes and so on. Again, in some versions told in the *kastom* region, the woman whips the genitals of her husband in order to restore his sexual interest in her. Now fully revived, she commands him to stand and they return home to a less-troubled domestic life. Others eventually hear of the event and copy the jump technique. In some versions, the woman later demonstrates to others how it was that she managed to jump and evade death. Men decide that the idea of women jumping is immodest considering that their grass skirts invert during the fall and their genitals are exposed. Other versions emphasize the idea that land diving was 'handed over' from women to men and it is now only men who jump as a response to the ploy of women who were able to cleverly outwit them.

3. Chief Telkon Watas' *dun na gol*

In September 2012 I was asked by Chief Telkon Watas and some of his family from Bunlap village to make a film recording of him telling the *dun na gol*. I have known Telkon Watas and his family for some 17 years. Since about 1995 he has lived permanently in Port Vila and has made a living acting as a broker for tourist companies, commercial film projects and academic researchers seeking to work in Bunlap, which is a large and well-known *kastom* community in South Pentecost. I wondered if the request to film the *dun na gol* was going to be another kind of commercial exercise into which I was being manoeuvred. There were two reasons I was given however for why this was not the case. The first was that Telkon is now advanced in years and had been suffering ill health, and that whilst he was still relatively vigorous, his knowledge about the *gol* should be recorded. Secondly, the *dun na gol*, like other *dun* can be used as evidence during disputes over rights to ownership of places and cultural practices and this performance recorded on film would be an archive of Telkon's forthright views on the subject.

Chief Telkon is a controversial figure who is no stranger to both local community and wider national politics surrounding land diving. He has effectively made a career of developing the *gol* as an economic asset for the tourist industry in Vanuatu. He has by no means been alone in this endeavour but his residence in the capital Port Vila and his aggressive negotiating style has earned him a high profile. He has both supporters and detractors but his program of commercialization of the *gol* is in fact quite consistent with the rhetoric of the national government, as numerous media stories such as this one in the Vanuatu Daily Post reveal:

... the Director of Tourism Development George Borugu ... says the highest stumbling block to helping communities in the Provinces to cater for foreign tourists is a budget to enable them to visit the villagers to help them improve their existing products as well as create new ones. He says a perfect example is the tourists to Pangi in Pentecost to watch the 'nagol' or traditional land dive. "Our visitors pay their way there to see the event and when it is over then there is nothing more to see even though we have our spectacular custom dances, the water fall and other interesting ceremonies that the villagers can turn into new products", Borugu says. "... we need to help the community to improve on the quality of their products to meet the expectations of the visitors and add value to the products." (Garae, 2013, January 14)

Telkon's detractors criticize him on the grounds that he has sold out to the tourist industry, therefore damaging the cultural authenticity of land diving. Further, it has been claimed that he is attempting to totally exclude the rest of the Sa community from the commercial benefits of land diving and that he has no interest in

the cultural intricacies of the *gol* performance that are not related to profiteering (Thorolf Lipp, quoted in Forsyth, 2012, pp. 18).² The small rural communities of South Pentecost and the emerging state of Vanuatu have until recently had no recourse to a regulatory framework for dealing with claims to ownership of such intangible cultural objects. Protagonists in recent years have been offering various forms of evidence as part of the ownership debate and Chief Telkon's version of the *dun na gol* is part of this contestation. The public discourse about Pentecost land diving has recently moved into a phase where terms such as 'intellectual property' and 'copyright' are now frequently employed. Forsyth (2012, p. 18) details this development:

According to the director of Tourism, the quest to find the "owner" of the *nagol* started in 2000, the year that the Copyright Act was passed by parliament (but not gazetted) and the discourse of intellectual property entered the public arena. This quest has recently been reinvigorated as a result of the gazetting and entry into force of this law in 2011, and also as a result of perceived unfairness in the distribution of benefits arising from the *nagol*.

In September 2012, when I arrived at Telkon's Port Vila residence together with my colleague, the ethnographic film maker Kim McKenzie, Telkon and his son Warisus were in *kastom* dress, *pipis* 'pandanus penis sheaths', *wawa* 'belts' with *lu bwi* 'pig's tusks' hanging from their necks indicative of their elevated rank. We were lead off into the nearby gardens away from the public area of the houses to the 'film set'. To our surprise they had constructed in miniature (about three metres in height), a replica of a land diving tower complete in every technical detail. Telkon then proceeded to tell his version of the *dun na gol* in Sa language, extracts of which are transcribed and translated into English below. This version is characterized by a particular temporal structure that seeks to link the origins of Sa society and cultural practice with contemporary agendas. This includes linking the origins to a particular place – the village of Bunlap and the nearby site Rebrion, associated with Telkon Watas' *buluim* and accorded cultural significance in many versions of the *dun na gol* as the birth place of land diving. Rebrion is today unoccupied and considered *ôt loas* 'a sacred/restricted place'. The *dun na gol* we recorded from Chief Telkon is effectively, from his perspective, the assemblage of parts to construct a whole – his big picture. It is in some ways innovative in that it incorporates indexical links to a variety of other *dun* dealing with origins, as well

2. Thorolf Lipp who is a passionate critic of Telkon Watas was engaged in bitter conflict with him during his fieldwork at Bunlap and as part of the preparations for an exhibition at the Staatlichen Museum Für Völkerkunde in Munich in 2009. Pigliasco & Lipp (2011) describe the conflict from his perspective in a memoir about this exhibition.

as discursive wanderings into a variety of topics such as the link between land diving and yam cultivation, the primacy of *kastom* ideology as a justification for control over the *gol* and the gendered symbolism of the *gol* tower and its physical structure. From early history, we then move to more recent developments – the coming of Christianity and its rejection by a minority of people on the south-east of the island who use the label *kastom* to describe their opposing world view. Finally, Telkon deals with the commercialization of the *gol* – ‘land diving is a business that belongs to Pentecost’ and his own central role in this process. The complete narrative is too long to present here, but the following summary sets out the thematic sequence. The most common features, or the most frequently occurring episodes of the *dun na gol* in a standard performance (as detailed in Section 2 above), are located within points 4 and 5 below.

1. The origins of humanity and the primordial set of six siblings.
2. The origin of yams.
3. The origins of the first woman and the marriage of Warsangul and Sermop.
4. The conflict between the husband and wife and the woman makes her leap from a coconut tree.
5. The husband's death and revival; the *dun na gol* song appears here.
6. Return to the story of yams and the killing of *sêngêt* ‘disabled person with skin sores’ and how his butchered body became yams.
7. The husband and wife establish the first yam garden, then the husband returns to the men's house to tell the others about the woman's jump.
8. How yams act as a calendar plant in relation to the *gol*.
9. An experiment with a stone tied to vines is carried out. It is thrown out of a *li-adê* tree.
10. The first tower is built, and the structure is adapted by trial and error.
11. The symbolism of tower features and human body parts, especially the role of the stabilising structures equated with male and female genitals.
12. The woman does the first jump from the first tower. Her skirt inverts and her nakedness is deemed immodest, so jumping is ‘handed over’ to men.
13. The woman insists that if men are to assume control over the *gol*, some part of the tower must reflect its original association with women. The stabilising structure representing female genitals *sên bwela kenen* is inserted into the tower.
14. The varieties of tower structure are developed and named.
15. The arrival of Christianity and the resilience of *kastom* at Bunlap.
16. Land diving is commercialized and Telkon outlines his role in the tourist industry.
17. The uniqueness of this version of the *dun na gol*.

The following extracts from the transcript reveal something of the way this particular telling is shaped by ideas about origins, ownership, control and self-representation. This is an excellent example of narrative as a declaration of identity (Bamberg, 2009, 2011). The extract in (1) launches into these themes, and a strategy worth noting is the choice of pronoun. That which is perceived as beyond dispute is marked with the first person inclusive pronoun *kê[t]* (line 5) – 'we [all inclusive] know that land diving started in Vanuatu and in Bunlap village'. However, *gema* (line 9) 'we exclusive' will take the dispute over control to court to determine who owns the *gol* – the first person exclusive pronoun is used in the context of disputation.

(1)

1	00:01.710	<i>um, lon saruan na gol</i>
In talking about land diving
2	00:08.288	<i>ene ngamômô lon taem enene</i>
long ago at that time
3	00:12.255	<i>ratan pat</i>
the earth [already] existed
4	00:14.639	<i>aê papan bê ne gol tabtôn?</i>
so how then did land diving begin?
5	00:16.599	<i>ne kê marngo dal natê ne pe gol tabtôn</i>
we all have heard that land diving started
6.	00:18.784	<i>Vanuatu</i>
[in] Vanuatu
7.	00:20.494	<i>i mtabtôn Bunlap</i>
it started in Bunlap
8.	00:23.654	<i>aê lon dal natê en bama ne ma ne esotê taem nagmare</i>
<i>aê</i>
and this story has been passed on to reach us today
9.	00:28.455	<i>gema ma</i>
we now [exclusive]
10.	00:29.977	<i>erbe ba nê pepe mete lon kot aê gema marbe ne hlu</i>
<i>ulin histri beliôru</i>
are taking this story to court to sit down [and
discuss it] because there are seven [different com-
peting] histories
11.	00:35.956	<i>gema mpe gema mejikêrinê epepe mtabtôn gol</i>
we want to find out how land diving started
12.	00:39.352	<i>aê dorotan ene en pat ne</i>
there is an idea which
13.	00:41.111	<i>antôn êr makêlê bonga epepe gol aê i mamra Rebrion</i>
everybody knows, that land diving originated from
Rebrion
14.	00:45.400	<i>so mamra Rebrion aê</i>
so it originated in Rebrion

15. 00:47.978 *êr beliêtêl lon taem ene tan do aê antôn beliêtêl*
At the time when the earth was born, there were
eight men³
16. 00:52.299 *sek ran tan kemesê ôt êr enene en tabtôn gol*
who lived on the earth at the very beginning, when
land diving commenced

This introduction also establishes a link with other *dun na ngamômô* about the origins of human life, sexual difference and also the origin of yams. The primogenitors of Sa society are said to be six men (or in some versions eight men) – a sibling set who were born from the spathe of a coconut. This is the first time I have heard them individually named in any single Sa *dun* as Warsangul, Mau, Marelul, Tebat, Sermop and Tema, although Marelul appears in another *dun* about the origin of death and Tema is the man who is *sêngêt* ‘disabled [with sores]’ who appears in another *dun* about the origins of yams. Warsangul is also the term used to refer to ‘a person of high grade or social position’ as well as the system of the graded society in South Pentecost. In other versions of the *dun* about human origins, the name Barkulkul is used instead which in Christian communities is also now an adopted term to refer to the Christian deity. Effectively, Telkon has combined what have usually been separate *dun* about human origins together with the *dun* that tells of the origin of yams. These are both woven into the introductory section of his version of the *dun na gol*. These two foundational myths synchronize with themes in the *dun na gol*. Firstly (lines 15 and 16 of extract (1)), Telkon is concerned with the determination of origins as a basis for demonstrating authenticity and so we are taken back to the primordial period in Sa mythology to the origins of humanity, a time perceived to be contemporaneous (in this telling of the *dun na gol* at least) with the origins of cultural practices such as land diving. Secondly, the mythic narrative about land diving deals with domestic gender relations and so in this version we also have the origins of sexual differentiation woven into the narrative and the first woman, Sermop, now becomes the female protagonist in the land diving myth (see text extract (2)). Recognition of these interpenetrating episodes from a variety of foundational Sa *dun* relies, in this telling, on common cultural ground. Other *dun* are indexed by key elements from them but full details are not provided. In extract (2), lines 37 and 47, there are abbreviated references to an episode in the myth of the origins of sexual differentiation. The story tells of how the first men created a woman from one amongst them by throwing hot chestnuts at his genitals which then transform from male to female organs (see also Jolly, 2003).

3. Telkon some minutes later points out that this should be ‘six men’ not eight. There are other versions of this *dun* however, where ‘eight men’ are also cited (see Jolly, 2003, p. 194).

(2)

35. 01:52.621 *aê êr*
so they
36. 01:53.750 *ma erbe êsên su*
take a woman
37. 01:56.333 *ne êr ma ekêlê, kêr bonga kêr makêlê epepe mabsai*
nê mob
they all know, we all know that she was stoned with
the fruit of Tahitian chestnuts
38. 02:00.326 *aê êsên en re tabtôn ngan ma e lagju mali dam*
and so it was her who in the beginning, comes to
weed the yam garden
39. 02:05.075 *im lagju mali dam menok*
she finishes preparing the yam garden
40. 02:07.381 *âe êr ba tôntôn*
and they all go and plant yams
41. 02:09.173 *aê eba re aê*
they go there and
42. 02:13.721 *eba tôntôn*
go and plant yams
43. 02:15.181 *aê eba re aê êsên en re mtabtôn ngan sahrunê*
and so the woman starts to talk
44. 02:18.191 *soksok êr ene ne*
about all the things
45. 02:20.995 *en hapen en mer hapen*
that happen [in the story]
46. 02:23.915 *ulin ngane êsên re ngan re aê*
because this woman is the one
47. 02:27.013 *êr malê i ne i mbe êsên, lon taem en re aê êr mapsa*
i nê mop, ne i mbe êsên menok
they took and created [from a man], from the time
when they stoned him with chestnuts, and so now she
was already female
48. 02:31.053 *aê êr ma e jusum nar warsangul aê i mba par bwilin*
and so they came and they chose their chief [man of
high rank] to come and sleep with her
49. 02:33.807 *aê edingnê laan re i*
and he takes her as his spouse

Thirdly, as extract (2) has already suggested, land diving is closely articulated with yam cultivation and so the *dun* about the origin of yams is also incorporated (see text extracts (3) and (4)). Later in the narrative Telkon produces an actual yam as a prop in the telling of the *dun* (see Figure 1). The *dun* about the origin of yams then becomes an episodic branch of Telkon's *dun na gol*. This is not extraneous material but relevant in ways which are not made explicit. Aspects of well-known *dun*, sometimes have lesser known elements which are regarded as secret and as such, are restricted to certain families or members of particular *buluim*. For

Figure 1. Chief Telkon Watas (with yam) performs the *dun na gol*. Erakor Haf Rod, Port Vila, September 2012. Photo by Kim McKenzie

example, there have been claims that in the 1970s Chief Telkon was solely responsible for shifting the *gol* from the remote and inaccessible east coast of South Pentecost to the west coast where tourists could more readily travel to land diving performances (see Forsyth, 2012, p. 18). Those on Pentecost I consulted about this claim stated the move was primarily the result of pressure from Chief Luke Fargo from Londot near Wali on the west coast and that his justification for the request was based on an appeal to the *dun na dam* ‘the mythic narrative of the origin of yams’. The *dun* contains information which is not in the public domain (and which I was asked not to disclose here) concerning the site Londot. This place is under Fargo’s custodianship but this restricted part of the *dun* provides him with a right to make a claim of interest in the *gol*. In this case, the relationship of influence between *dun* and the changing circumstances of modernity in South Pentecost work in both directions.

(3)

- 00:56.534 *aê êr en re aê êr tabtôn gol re dam*
so everyone starts the land diving at the time of
yam
- 01:00.388 *êr tabtôn gol re dam remanene êr tabtôn dorotan*
natê aê tabtôn re dam
they start the land diving at yam time, they start
thinking about land diving because of yams
- 01:05.874 *re ngane su re êr ma*
and one man amongst them,
- 01:08.611 *ebe sêngêt*
who was disabled [had sores all over his body]
[launches into the story of the origin of yams]

Versions of the *dun na gol* are told by both the majority of Sa speakers who are Christians as well as those who adhere to *kastom*. Whilst both have enthusiastically transformed the *gol* into an economic activity in the tourist industry, it is *kastom* people who still observe rules governing the relationship between yam cultivation and land diving. One would expect that with the significant increase in *gol* performances and the pressure to meet the demands of paying visitors, it is not surprising that there has also been a concomitant increase in land diving accidents. Those in *kastom* communities point to a lack of observance of the traditional regulations and cultural practices governing the timing of tower construction as explanations for injuries and deaths during *gol* performances (see extract (4)). Such concerns are absent in versions of the *dun na gol* told by Christian narrators.

(4)

- 04:12.610 *aê tabtôan na gol aê i mbe dam*
 so the start of the *gol*, it's about yams
 [i.e. the land diving season starts when yams are
 ready to harvest]
- 04:14.836 *tao be ta tesu tane o mistem pat na dam?*
 that is nothing on it's own, but if you do not re-
 spect the part that yams play [in the ritual]
- 04:17.234 *aê o mbal...*
 you will be injured
 [e.g. if you don't harvest yams first and wait the
 customary 10 days after the new moon in April be-
 fore cutting tower timber, jumpers will be injured]
- 04:19.746 *o mistem pat na dam aê o mbal*
 you don't follow the rules in relation to yams and
 there will be accidents/disputes

4. From orality to written text

In 2011, a year before I was asked to film the *dun na gol*, I was visited at my residence in Port Vila by a group of Sa people including Chief Telkon Watas, who had come to discuss a new tourist association that had been established to represent the interests of 26 village communities in the Wawan or 'South Pentecost' region. There have been over the years, a number of these representative associations formed in different parts of South Pentecost to deal with the management of the commercial aspects of land diving and purportedly to equitably distribute the income from *gol* performances. This most recent example, the 'Holding Nagol na Wawan Associesen' was born out of a three day meeting at Salap village in October 2008 organized by the Malbangbang Area Council of South Pentecost with the aim of discussing issues of ownership of the *gol*. There were five different

versions of the *dun na gol* told at the meeting but the version told by Chief Telkon was apparently ‘supported’ by a majority of 26 communities. The assumption was that one version must be ‘authentic’ and others deviations from the ‘true’ version. I was shown a document with the signatures of representatives of each of these 26 villages. What was also significant was that Telkon’s version of the *dun* from that meeting had been recorded, translated from Sa into Bislama and typed up on a laptop computer by a young man Reuben Bong from Randoa, a small *kastom* village from the central highlands of South Pentecost. At the meeting in Port Vila, I was being asked to translate the Bislama version into English and to make copies for distribution. This written version of the *dun na gol* is about 4000 words in length and is cited in the filmed version a number of times (see extract (5)).

(5)

- 01:15.570 *i mpat lon mal aê ekjê bêsên lin aê epahnê ba lon*
ot aê i mdê
 he stays in the men’s house and cuts off his toe-
 nails and goes to the stones at the nasara and
 drops them and they shoot [into yams]
- 01:20.242 *aê su re êr mama aê e malsê*
 and one of them comes and sees
- 01:21.957 *ape nê ta erpe sê êr natê aê êr natê aê sêr pat lon*
bôk monok
 I’m not going to mention all of their names, their
 names are already in the book
- 01:26.348 *tan merpepe kêmê medorngê ngane antôn êr metekêlê*
 if you want everyone to know
- 01:29.366 *aê êr metekêlê*
 then they can know
- 01:30.561 *êr meterbe bôk aê ekêlê sê antôn êr natê*
 they can know all their names by getting the book
 [and reading it]

Here we have a very tangible effect of textuality on the content of the oral narrative. Details either too difficult to recall or those deemed too tedious to repeat can be relegated to textual reference. Even the idea that the *dun* should be recorded as text – and by a non-literate narrator – reveals something about the perceived agency of text as a form of enduring disembodied argument or evidence, especially for a genre of narrative that is already used as part of the process of dispute resolution. Fixing a narrative in text freezes it in time, and removes the links between the narrator, the time and place of performance, and the content of the narrative. It is then easier to think of it as dispassionate evidence. On a number of occasions I have been asked by Sa speakers to copy the historical works of the French Marist priest Elie Tattevin who lived at Bay Barrier in the 1920s and whose

records of 'legends' and 'social organization' are of interest to Sa people today. On one occasion a young man from Bay Martelli asked me to provide him with copies of Tattevin's works to see if they could provide any information of relevance to a land dispute between his village and their neighbours. Narratives told in the past still resonate in the present and inform contemporary action.

5. Variations and values

Generally, no great significance is attached to the diversity of variations of other *dun* except perhaps that some story tellers are considered more expert than others. South Pentecost is an area where diversity in religious affiliation and cultural practice has been largely tolerated without too much tension. Variation in cultural practice and belief has an analogue in linguistic variation. In comparison with other languages of Pentecost, Sa has a high degree of dialectal variation and many people, especially those from smaller dialect communities, can switch their variety of speech to match that spoken in the place they are visiting. Commercial competition and the individualist modes of agency it engenders can at times however, complicate and test this tolerance of difference. The *dun na gol* is largely viewed as an historical account of the origins of land diving. Power and authority over land diving is associated with those who have a thorough knowledge of the story. Some of the Sa speakers who work with me on language documentation translate the term *dun* as 'history'. *Dun* are considered the oral records of the past which are often linked to specific places. But *dun* narratives do not come into the present as immutable pre-packaged records of the past. As Timothy Ingold's puts it, stories are not 'ready-made from the past, embedded in a static, closed tradition' but neither are they totally malleable or reconstructable to accord with each and every vicissitude of modernity (Ingold, 2011, p. 56). Each community or even individuals within the same community can hold to their own versions of a *dun* and perceptions of authenticity are based on loyalty to the narrative traditions of one's family or village. On one occasion when I was recording a particular *dun* about a species of pigeon which is now considered extinct, an argument broke out between the narrator and another senior man in the village as to whether or not this *dun* belonged to their village in South Pentecost or whether it was imported from North Ambrym, a few kilometres across the Selwyn Strait to the south.

The written version of Chief Telkon's *dun na gol* (see extract 6, transcribed by Reuben Bong) commences with the following claim of true ownership, translated from Sa into Bislama:

- (6) *Emia, i onli mo ever kastom biliv blong Nangol histri blong Rebrion long Bunlap blong Wawan eria.*

This is the one and only *kastom* belief about the history of land diving from Rebrion near Bunlap in the Wawan (South Pentecost) area.

Likewise, during a performance of the *dun na gol* to a group of school children from Londar at Bay Martelli, Chief Cyriaque commences his version of the *dun* with the claim in (7):

(7)

- 00:24.246 *nê metah elo aê aê kê m mesahrônê*
I am going to sit here and we will talk
- 00:26.696 *nê mesahrônê dun na gol banê gimi*
and I will tell you the story of land diving
- 00:29.611 *dun na gol ane gim rongtanê pepe*
the story of land diving which you have heard
- [10 seconds of speech deleted] ...
- 00:39.415 *aê aê ea Panngi*
and [this is the story that] went to Panngi [to a
meeting to discuss who are the 'true' owners of
land diving]
- 00:40.961 *aê dun na gol natê ene nê sahrônê bane gimi lo*
and so the story about land diving which I am tell-
ing you here
- 00:46.181 *nê mesahrônê dun natê*
I will tell the traditional narrative for it
- 00:47.711 *dun natê aê tabtôn pelo*
that story starts like this
- 00:50.131 *remarane pepe*
in the time when
- 00:52.598 *têtanlo marenga re ôt bonga bare ane*
something like this [a traditional narrative about
land diving] did not yet exist in every place [i.e.
not everyone had such a story]
- 00:55.908 *kêm mômnê pepe ndu*
[Should] we make it like
- 00:57.163 *du Be Barê e aê du bapan ba teê o be*
the story that was there at Bay Barrier [at another
meeting about land diving] and which went down [to
other places]
- 01:00.168 *aê anre aê tabo koknga natê ere*
well that one is not the true story
- 01:02.143 *koknga natê aê ene nê msahra banê gimi lo*
the true story is the one I will tell you here
- 01:04.251 *têtanlo tabo tabtôn na ôt*
that one [the true story] didn't start there

01:05.743 *ma etabtôn ngabêlê kêr ngalo*
 it started with us, here
 01:07.415 *aê etabtôn re kêr ere ...*
 it started with us

6. Concluding comments

With the advent of the commercialization and politicization of the *gol*, the story of its origins, the *dun na gol* is told with a new pragmatic force born of contestation. Narrators of *dun* in South Pentecost are now doing things with narrative that were not done before, which brings to mind what Freeman calls the 'rhetorical dimension' of narrative and the wider social objectives of the narrator in a particular performance context (Freeman, 2001, p. 290).

However, in the exegesis of their own myths as part of the quest to determine the origins of the *gol*, the Sa themselves are faced with the same realization of Lévi-Strauss, that in the deconstruction of myths, 'there can be no end to mythological analysis, no hidden unity can be grasped... the unity of the myth is ... a phenomenon of the imagination, resulting from the attempt at interpretation (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, p. 5). Prior to the commercialization of the *gol* as far as we can determine, there had been little reflexivity in relation to the significance of variations of the *dun na gol*. As for dialectal variation of language, the development of different versions of *dun* are otherwise taken for granted as a natural process. But with the commercialization of land diving, the different versions of the *dun na gol* are now perceived as a source of trouble in folk analysis, but they need not be. As Chief Cyriaque would have it, the only true narrative is the one 'I am telling you now' and similarly for Chief Telkon, 'no one has ever told this story the way I am telling it now'. The origins of myth are collective and ownership of *dun na ngamômô* 'stories of long ago' are generally considered communal in nature. Myths are as Lévi-Strauss famously declared (1969, p. 18), anonymous and without author, which ultimately entails that the quests for authenticity in relation to *dun na ngamômô* 'stories of long ago' are not particularly satisfactory projects. What I have found worthy of description here however is the individual treatment to which *dun* are subjected and the reanimation that arises when narrators are challenged to prove the worth of a particular version. As Michael Jackson has argued in his work on the politics of storytelling, "without the perennial conversion of cultural narratives into stories that speak to private or idiosyncratic concerns, such narratives lose their viability" (Jackson, 2002, p. 267). In a similar vein, I do not feel 'sceptical' or 'hopeless' as do others (Lipp, 2008, p. 284) in relation to the changes to Pentecost land diving or the *dun na gol* wrought by the forces of

modernity, as it is through such conversions and contested interpretations that narratives maintain their vitality and relevance.

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