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The Return of the Past: On Drawing and Dialogic History

Chris Ballard

Drawing is a fundamentally dialogic activity and yet it remains largely absent from anthropology's own accounts of its field practices and its history. The early Russian anthropologist of Oceania, Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay, employed drawing as a strategy to initiate dialogue with new interlocutors, often in the absence of a common language. My research on the history of Lelepa Island, Vanuatu, has built a series of conversations around Miklouho-Maclay's 1879 sketches of the community, mimicking the strategy of drawing-as-dialogue to develop a collaborative or dialogic account of the past.

Keywords: Dialogue; Drawing; Collaborative Ethnography; Encounter; History; Vanuatu

Engagement

Questions surrounding the ethics and politics of engagement with host communities pose an enduring challenge for ethnographers and other field researchers, but there were few professional precedents available to the earliest ethnographers of Melanesia, the field naturalists of the 1870s who first attempted to travel or reside for extended periods amongst local communities. In 1871, the Russian naturalist and anthropologist Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay (1847–88) embarked on a major project of field enquiry into the anthropology and ethnography of the Papuans, whom he took, following the conventions of the period, to include the darker-skinned inhabitants not just of New Guinea but also of the surrounding archipelagos in Island Melanesia and Indonesia (Webster 1984; Stocking 1992). Miklouho-Maclay spent much of the next fourteen years to 1883 either living alongside or visiting 'Papuan' communities from New Caledonia through to peninsular Malaysia.

When Miklouho-Maclay first landed on the Rai Coast of northern New Guinea, an area with no prior experience of contact with Europeans and no *lingua franca* or trade language that might have facilitated communication, his early entrance at one

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village was met with consternation and brandished weapons; unsure how best to proceed and incapable of expressing himself verbally, he lay down on a mat in the shade and fell asleep (Miklouho-Maclay 1975, 31–4). In subsequent elaboration on this 'slow ethnography', Miklouho-Maclay took to blowing whistles as he approached settlements, to alert those who wished to flee, and deliberately adopted the practice of seating himself in full view of the residents and making notes or drawing sketches. Sketching, in particular, became his signature strategy in encounters with new communities. Pictures, in and of themselves, were of little value in such situations—initially Rai Coast people appeared to find the illustrations in Miklouho-Maclay's (1975, 35) books 'frightening'—but the act of drawing and the production of recognisable portraits introduced a dialogic sense of engagement which enabled relationships to develop in the absence of a verbal dialogue.

This paper considers the nature of drawing—and of portraiture specifically—as a fundamentally dialogic activity, and reflects on my use of Miklouho-Maclay's drawings in the practice of historical enquiry amongst source communities. In particular, I draw attention to two areas of analytical opportunity that emerge from the conversation between history and anthropology: the reluctance of most historians to seriously entertain the possibility of a dialogic approach to the past, and the curious neglect of drawing evident in anthropology's account of itself as a field discipline. More concretely, I aim to understand how a dialogic approach to the interpretation of history might consciously and productively learn from and repeat the strategies of drawing, as a dialogic activity itself. Far from reporting on some completed project, these are preliminary notes arising from a continuous process of working towards a more collaborative or dialogic form of history in the Pacific, and an attempt to show how a renewed attention to drawing might contribute to such a history.

Dialogue

The resurgence of interest during the 1980s in the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin, given particular impetus by the translation and publication of his key essays on dialogism (Holquist 1981), was strongly marked in anthropology, where the potential of an openly dialogic or collaborative approach to enquiry resonated with a discipline already engaged in debates about decolonisation, fieldwork and academic authority. While some form of interpersonal dialogue is presumed in any field enquiry, the quality of that interaction and the over-riding monologism of subsequent analysis and writing have been the subjects of extended self-critique amongst anthropologists (see Feld 1987; Tedlock 1987). There is broad recognition of the importance of directing attention to the precise nature of the communicative exchanges through which meaning and understanding are jointly produced. Kevin Dwyer's (1977) compelling account of dialogic ethnography promotes the intellectual and ethical imperative of research programs that are mutually constituted through the collaboration of partners in dialogue, an acceptance of the presence of 'the other's project . . . within our own, and ours within the other's' (149). In a recent elaboration,

Luke Lassiter (2005a, 2005b) seeks to move beyond the intellectualism of dialogic ethnography to a more explicitly collaborative ethnography in which the definition of topics and modes of enquiry, as well as the nature and content of published results, are generated through an iterative process of continuous re-engagement. Collaboration, in Lassiter's view, is not simply a means of producing more nuanced accounts for academic peers, but rather a privileging of the interaction and discourse between ethnographer and 'consultant', and of published results that serve the interests of this relationship over those of the academy.

The scope for a dialogic approach has been considered across a wide spectrum of disciplines, including psychology, cinema, pedagogy and communication studies, but only rarely by historians. Thus Amy Elias (2005, 168), in her rather wistful argument for a dialogic history, laments the apparent inability of historians to engage in dialogue with texts, which 'do not, cannot, answer us . . . not [being] written with dialogic interaction in mind'. This reflects a curiously narrow conception not just of the stuff of history but also of the relationship between past events and narrators, interlocutors and readerships in the present. Oral historians have long been aware of the potential—or indeed the inescapability—of dialogue in the making of history. The notion of a 'shared or sharable authority' between oral historians and their interlocutors, promoted most notably by Michael Frisch (1990), closely parallels similar calls for collaborative ethnography in its critique of professional authority and its insistence on the participation of interlocutors in the design and development of historical research. The importance of sustained relationships to a dialogic mode of enquiry is perhaps self-evident to ethnographers, but it requires particular emphasis for historians. Equally, historians are possibly more prepared to appeal to the authority of respect for the past in their injunction that 'while both parties may need to cede some interpretive authority, neither party needs to relinquish it altogether' (Shopes 2003, 108). This stance echoes Bakhtin's demand that 'the writer must "not renounce his place in his time, his culture," that he must retain his "exotopy," his "outsideness" vis-à-vis the other times and other cultures that he wishes to "understand creatively"' (Kinser 1984, 309).

Familiarity with Bakhtin is no prerequisite for dialogic practice, of course, and much as anthropologists are able to identify a sensitivity to dialogue in the works of predecessors such as Marcel Griaule or Paul Radin (Tedlock 1987, 327), so too is it possible to recognise the implicit dialogism of much Pacific history. Klaus Neumann's (1992) experiments with different historical registers for Tolai history, Ben Burt's (1998) acknowledgement of local agendas for history and his series of collaborative publications with Solomon Islands historians, Michael Reilly's (2009) frank account of the changes in focus and in the sharing of authority over the course of his sustained engagement with Mangaian historians and Vincent Diaz's (2010) internal dialogue on his status as both insider and outsider in relation to Chamorro pasts, are obvious instances of attention to voice, authority and the ethics of engagement that might be claimed as dialogic in intent. In each case, there is a particular emphasis on voice (reporting actual speech events, with a privileging of vernacular forms of

expression), position (speakers are invariably identified by name and placed in their social context) and the mutual constitution of projects (each of these histories reflects local concerns and understandings about the past). Acknowledging these and many other precedents in Pacific history, what I seek to sketch here are several preliminary observations on the ways in which a dialogic approach to the past might employ and mimic the strategies of drawing, as both an archival resource and methodological tool for historical enquiry.

Drawing

Drawing, and portraiture more specifically, is a powerfully plastic form of social interaction. The portrait unfolds in the space between artist and subject, and demands a certain initial engagement while also allowing for this relationship to develop further over the time of the drawing act. Drawing both registers and enhances the quality of this relationship, and invites an iterative process of feedback between artist and subject; the subject of a portrait exerts considerable influence over the emerging form of the drawing and may even offer editorial comment on the work in progress. In this respect drawing is already a conjoint or collaborative project. In cross-cultural contexts, drawing assumes an additional value as a relatively transparent and non-verbal means of communication—the act of drawing is self-explanatory and its product usually intelligible.

Yet, despite the continued importance of drawing to anthropologists in the field production of knowledge, it is curiously absent both from anthropology's self-account of its field practices and from most histories of the discipline. Ethnographic fieldwork has always involved the drawing of maps, kinship diagrams, portraits and artefacts: the field notes and published ethnographies of Bernard Deacon (1934), F. E. Williams (1936), John Layard (1942) and Jack Taylor (2008) provide sufficient evidence, spanning both time and the region of Melanesia, for the central role of the in-field practice of drawing. However, reappraisals of ethnographic fieldwork and field notes in post-*Writing Culture* anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986) have tended to focus on text as the sole medium of record and analysis. There is not a single reference in Roger Sanjek's (1990) landmark collection *Fieldnotes*, for example, to drawing as an activity that ethnographers either might or do undertake. Visual anthropology is overwhelmingly dominated by an emphasis on photography and film as the critical media of reference, presumably reflecting the historical coincidence of the development of photographic and film technology and the emergence of anthropology as a scholarly pursuit (a simple scan of the contents pages for *Visual Anthropology* or *Visual Anthropology Review* will confirm this).

In their exquisite account of the repatriation to Malakula of John Layard's 'moving images', Haidy Geismar and Anita Herle (2010) reproduce over 200 of his photographs and just three of his drawings: a map, a sand drawing design and a panoramic view of a dancing ground on Vao Island, all examples of images which photography fails to capture adequately, and for which anthropologists have

commonly resorted to drawing. But, other than deploying the panorama to anchor a series of photographs, there is no discussion of the role of drawing in Layard's Malakula fieldwork or his archive. Historians are equally complicit in this elision, showing relatively little interest in drawing after the mid-nineteenth century, with the advent of photography. Thus Bernard Smith's (1960, 1992) celebrated histories of art in the European encounter with the Pacific Islands draw to a close in 1850, and analyses of photography and film largely monopolise scholarly treatment of the visual representation of travel encounters in the region after that date.

Recently, however, there has been something of a 'graphic turn'—a revival of interest amongst anthropologists and other disciplines in drawing as an activity and as a focus for analysis (see Gunn 2009; Canfield 2011). A slender vein of earlier writing had indicated the significance of drawing as an ethnographic practice and a strategy for engagement: as Rudolf Colloredo-Mansfield (1993, 91) noted, drawing 'interested people in what I was doing and provided them with an opportunity to approach me . . .[it was] a valuable tool for explaining to others what interested me and showing them some of the information I was recording . . . people viewed drawing as an appropriate way to record information' (see also Ramos 2004 and Hendrickson 2008). Michael Taussig (2009, 265) has drawn attention to the potential of 'what is for me a new genre—drawings in ethnographic fieldwork notebooks', both for what they offer to an understanding of the 'three way conversation . . . between the drawer, the thing drawn, and the hypothetical viewers', and for the immediate interaction between image and marginal text in notebook sketches. Tim Ingold (2011) has proposed that drawing might serve as a more appropriate medium—and the drawing relationship as a more productive model—for anthropology in general, reconnecting description and analysis, and ethnographers and their interlocutors, in the moment of engagement. How well at home Miklouho-Maclay would have felt in this discussion, as a field researcher whose drawings became not just a central component of his observational technology, but also a vital strategy in his engagement with host communities and the subjects of his sketches.

Miklouho-Maclay's Lelepa Sketches

I have visited the communities of Lelepa Island and Mangaliliu on the main island of Efate in central Vanuatu almost every year since 2001, working on questions about their past, and more concretely on the World Heritage nomination and subsequent local management of their cultural landscape, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2008 as 'Chief Roi Mata's Domain' (Wilson, Ballard and Kalotiti 2011; Ballard and Wilson 2012). As the last community in the Efate region to convert to Christianity (in the 1890s), Lelepa had enjoyed an early status as a tourist destination for visitors passing through nearby Havannah Harbour, and there is a relative abundance of late-nineteenth-century photography, artefact collections held in museums elsewhere and accounts of life on Lelepa. From amongst the materials which I have returned to Lelepa—including early land-lease documents, prints from glass plate negatives,

maps and aerial photographs, transcripts of missionary diaries containing local birth, marriage and death registers, photographs and details of artefacts, archival materials and translations from French and other languages of texts relating to Lelepa—perhaps the most intensely discussed and widely prized have been the few sketches produced over a period of several days in May 1879 by Miklouho-Maclay (some of which had been published in two Russian editions of his collected works in 1950–4 and 1990–9).

Although he possessed a camera at various stages in his travels, field drawings in pencil constituted the core of Miklouho-Maclay's observational technology (Shafranovskaya 1996). These drawings were supplemented by extensive annotations entered onto the margins of his drawn folios, as well as by journal and diary entries. In addition to their function as a primary form of field documentation, Miklouho-Maclay's drawings can be regarded as a deliberate mode of engagement in the ethnographic encounter—a slow and steady means of dialogic entanglement with the concerns and perspectives of his hosts, avoiding the social distancing of a full camera apparatus and producing tangible results that could immediately be reviewed and submitted to editorial critique by the subjects of his drawings.

Much of the precision evident in Miklouho-Maclay's images derives from his use of a portable camera lucida—a small mirror and a plate of transparent glass through which a double reflection or correct image of the subject can be viewed and traced on a piece of paper (Hammond and Austin 1987), though its correct employment requires considerable skill. Consequently, many of Miklouho-Maclay's portraits as well as his architectural and landscape sketches appear to possess a heightened and almost photographic resemblance to their original subjects, reflecting the central importance to his project of realism—of faithfulness in the description of landscapes, of people and of their behaviour.

While the primary purpose of his portraits might have been to illustrate representative anthropological 'types', Miklouho-Maclay was obviously also establishing the humanity and singularity of his individual subjects—evident in his insistence on a realist portrayal and, almost without exception, his documentation of the subject's name. Miklouho-Maclay's willingness to preserve the separate character and document the identity of his subjects might be said to have reflected his approach to anthropology, in which the racial type or category could find expression through an infinitely variable range of individual forms.

As noted above, the act of drawing also encourages a degree of intimacy between artist and subject, the artist communicating not only with the subject but also with onlookers, without the need to break into the conversation, insist on immobility, call for silence or explain one's actions. Miklouho-Maclay's folio sketches capture some of this relational richness in their marginalia, which often document the flow of conversation and the casual eliciting of information about the subject or the context, or terms in local language. These are precisely what Taussig (2009, 266) refers to as 'drawings that rarely if at all make it into published accounts, drawings that may be

larded with all manner of textual exegesis in and around the drawing precisely because it is the text-image hybrid that is here the core of the procedure'.

By 1879, when he arrived at Lelepa as supercargo on board the trading vessel *Sadie F. Caller*, Miklouho-Maclay was a highly-experienced field ethnographer (Govor and Ballard 2008). Throughout this eighteen-month voyage, which took him from Sydney through New Caledonia, the New Hebrides and Solomon Islands, to Manus, the Trobriand Islands, southeast Papua and the Torres Strait to Brisbane, Miklouho-Maclay relied on this experience to carry out rapid ethnographic and anthropological surveys of a wide sweep of 'Papuan' communities (Miklouho-Maclay 1881). In all there are at least eighty-one surviving individual sketches from the forty-five or so days that Miklouho-Maclay spent in the New Hebrides, most of them contained within a single folio album now held at the Russian Geographical Society in Saint Petersburg, with a further handful found either in his journal or as loose leaves.

Of these, just nine pages of images are thought to derive from visits to Lelepa during a period of twelve days spent at Efate, including six portraits of individual men and women, two sketches of weapons and one folio sheet containing several separate sketches and notes. This corpus of Lelepa images corresponds to Miklouho-Maclay's usual suite of subjects, which was limited largely to landscapes, portraits and physical details, houses and artefacts.

The six Lelepa portraits reflect Miklouho-Maclay's emphasis on physiognomy and other presumed racial traits, which for him included cultural modification of the body such as tattooing, scarification and piercing. Individuals with striking looks, 'characteristic' of their anthropological 'type' (Miklouho-Maclay 1881), were often selected as subjects for portraits, and the Lelepa women Liebu (Folio 31), Toumara or 'Tumera' (Folio 35) and Komeneri (Folio 37) were probably chosen to illustrate their scarification and nasal piercings. An armed chief, Lor (Folio 34), provided an exemplary image of a Lelepa warrior, and the portfolio was completed with sketches of a youth, Namangau (Folio 36), and a young girl, Maksav (Folio 39)—this last picture being one of very few in any of Miklouho-Maclay's albums to have been completed and then 'erased' with a series of scrawled lines, an enigma to be addressed elsewhere.

The two folio sheets of weaponry feature a panoply of spears, bows, arrows and steel axes with clubs carved at the bases of their handles, and seem to have served as a 'naming of parts', with Lelepa terms recorded for each weapon. The most complicated sheet (Figure 1: Folio 30) is the graphic equivalent of a moving video log, recording details of the upright *napea* slit drums at the edge of Lelepa village, on the beach at Mwalasayen, before sketching the floor of the large chamber cave of Fels, several hundred metres further on from the village. Squeezed into the margin around the cave floor are notes and a list of names, relating to the recent recruitment from Lelepa of ten men by a Mr Warren (recorded by Miklouho-Maclay as 'Woren'), the government agent on board the *Marion Rennie* ('Marian Henry'), a labour recruiter out of Queensland. Miklouho-Maclay was an outspoken critic of what he regarded as the mistreatment of 'Papuans', and became prominently involved in the blackbirding

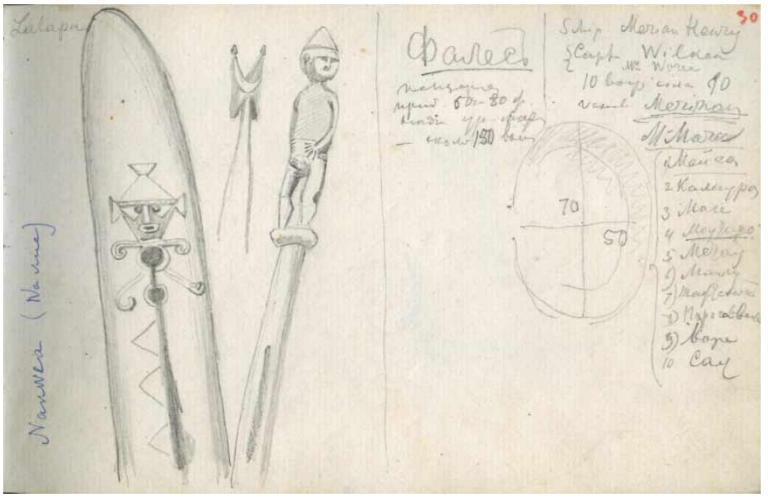

Figure 1 Slit drums, Fels Cave and the recruited Lelepa Islanders.
Source: Russian Geographical Society, Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay, Album 21, Folio 30.

debate on the basis of his experience in the New Hebrides and Solomon Islands (Miklouho-Maclay 1883).

For the Lelepa and Mangaliliu communities, these sketches have been an enduring focus of interest and a platform for discussion about both past and present since I first returned with copies in 2004. Above all, Miklouho-Maclay's practice of identifying almost all of the subjects of his portraits by name allows for the immediate introduction of his sketches to questions of current concern to the community, such as the possession and transmission of chiefly titles and family names, the matrilineal or *naflak* identity of individual names clearly marked by matriline-specific prefixes (Mak-, Tou-) and the presence (or absence in Queensland) of specific ancestors. Almost all of the names and titles documented in 1879 are held by living individuals today, who claim direct descent by blood or entitlement from the Lelepa islanders who met Miklouho-Maclay. Physical features deemed characteristic of particular families are singled out, and the practices of piercing and scarification, long abandoned and for many younger viewers a source of some amusement, are nevertheless a marker of local distinctiveness and thus a point of pride.

The details of carved decoration on spear shafts, clubheads and slit drums also excite Lelepa viewers, and have served, along with photographs of woven baskets collected by Miklouho-Maclay and held in Russian collections, as templates or inspiration for a craft revival. Slit drums, carved in imitation of the image in Folio 30, have been produced on Lelepa for the first time in more than a century, and forgotten weaving patterns reconstructed after close inspection of the photographs of baskets. There seems to be little interest in producing exact reproductions of these heirloom images, however, as contemporary makers seek to instil in their artefacts an element

of their own individual creativity and identity. Figure 2 shows one of Lelepa's expert carvers, Manearu, with the first of the new generation of slit drums, reworked to suit the tools, materials and aesthetic needs of the present.

What emerges through the conversations around these images is not just the eliciting of a richer interpretative context but a dialogue in which my own understandings of context are brought into play with those of the Lelepa community: how do these images reflect the nature of Miklouho-Maclay's interests and the brevity of his visit, the particular relationship between the Lelepa 'heathen' and the mission station in nearby Havannah Harbour at which the *Sadie F. Caller* was berthed, the conventions of European and specifically Russian portraiture of the period and the effect evident in certain drawings of the use of a camera lucida? Over time and

Figure 2 Manearu and the first of the new *napea* slit drums, 2006.

repeated visits and conversations around the same drawings, we have achieved a broad-ranging but by no means unified understanding of the images and the people and time that they depict: situating the sketched individuals chronologically and genealogically, reflecting together on their appearance, trying to identify the men on the *Marion Rennie* and their individual fates and speculating on the reasons why the portrait of Maksav might have been erased. This process has been one of shared enquiry and mutual education, learning together to see, as we have also learned together to read archival and other texts on Lelepa.

Beyond Repatriation

The return of materials from the past to source communities, or the 'visual repatriation' of images, is an important and ethically desirable act, but it does not lead inevitably to dialogue. Visual repatriation can be a strategy employed by museums to make available the image of an artefact that cannot be returned (Lührmann 2004), and there is the additional impetus in such projects of essentially mining the community through 'photo elicitation' for further contextual information to flesh out the understanding of an image. Joshua Bell's (2003, 2010) work on the visual repatriation of photographs amongst Purari Delta communities in Papua New Guinea, and Geismar and Herle's (2010) work with Malakula communities, have generated a considerably more sophisticated methodology and analysis for what I describe here as a dialogic viewing of images, with a strong emphasis on the performative aspects of the engagement with photographs and an attention to the evolving nature of the collaborative relationship between ethnographer and community.

Drawing is both an unsung and largely unrecognised dialogic act practiced widely in field enquiry—by ethnographers and others—and an available stimulus for further dialogue and dialogic enquiry about the past. To paraphrase Vincent Crapanzano's (1986, 74) critique of Geertz, the dialogic relationship in such a *visual* history consists of 'two people next to each other, viewing the same image and discussing it face-to-face'. Thinking and talking about the time of the drawing and the quality of the original relationship registered in the drawing provokes necessary questions about the time of the subsequent historical enquiry and the quality of collaborative relationships that it engenders, and have the potential to contribute significantly to the give and take of making sense of history in the contemporary Pacific.

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