

Sous la direction de

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**LE VANUATU
DANS TOUS SES ÉTATS**

Recherches et débats en anthropologie

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1) Filming the Volcano: the matter of perspective on Mount Marum

by Haidy Geismar

Introduction

This chapter explores the making of a documentary film on the island of Ambrym, part of the Melanesian archipelago of Vanuatu, using this as a spring board to both critically unpack the visual legacies of colonial representation in the context of new filmic forms of representation, and to think through the implications of these conventions for understanding cultural difference, and a multiplicity of perspective, within visual anthropology and beyond.

The history of European representations of the South Pacific powerfully demonstrate how colonial visions have long been overlaid into documentary technologies of drawing and painting (Smith 1985, Thomas 1997, Thomas, Losche and Newell 1999, Geismar 2014, Morton 2018) as well as photography and film (Geismar and Herle 2010, Geismar 2006, Edwards 1992, 2001, Wright 2014). Across all media, visual (and to a lesser degree sonic) representations were crucial in the making of European concepts of the exotic and primitive, the savage and uncivilized (Price 1989, Torgovnick 1991); used as tools of legitimation for colonial policy and rule, and to produce colonial categories, most especially those that were authorized visually such as

race and gender (see Poole 2005). Visual anthropology in the Pacific, and no less in Vanuatu, generally takes as a fundamental starting point that the history of film and photography, and visual arts more broadly, is simultaneously a history of colonialism (see Bell 2010, Thomas 1999).

In the contemporary Pacific, visual culture has also become a vital ground for postcolonial or decolonial critique, as well as an emergent field for indigenous cultural production, not solely defined in relation to relations with the Global North. Resistance has been read back into the archival and documentary record (e.g. Douglas 1998, 1999), whilst indigenous artists and practitioners have grasped the colonial image bank, and re-claimed it in their own vernacular across a range of visual media from performance and installation art to photography and film (e.g. Raymond and Salmond 2008). Seemingly despite this intensification of creativity, film, both documentary and fictional, remains one of the most popular and the most contested representational domains for Pacific islanders, with a remarkable persistence of stereotypes and representational genres across a range of different media. Wittersheim and De Lary Healy speak of the dual issues of both “representation and re-appropriation” that underpins filmmaking in the Pacific today (2019:1), drawing on a legacy in which film has been deeply implicated in the production of a “Hollywood” identity for Pacific islanders. The visual legacy of internationally popular films, from Marlon Brando in *Mutiny on the Bounty* to Elvis Presley’s Hawaiian adventures, and more recently the Disney film *Moana*, continues to portray Pacific Islanders as sexually free, innocently close to nature, and connected as ritual practitioners to their local gods: the cultural foundation that modernity and Christianity arrives to de-authenticate or corrupt.

De Lary Healy and Wittersheim’s volume on filming in Oceania surveys the complex entanglement of film within broader imaginaries

about Pacific Islanders, moving from the savage and primitive other towards an exploration of the experience of modernity in the Pacific. In this way, film is presented as a technique that separates the viewer from those filmed as well as a technology which both indexes and produces political and economic inequality and cultural incommensurability. Yet film is also a space in which world-views may meet, and in which diverse constituents may participate on shared projects. Ginsburg (1993) and Otto (2011) have tracked the emergence of intercultural and collaborative aspects of filmmaking in which film becomes a site for the co-production of knowledge and identity. For instance, in the Pacific context: *Ten Canoes* re-inhabits the colonial visual record in collaboration with Aboriginal communities, to co-produce visual stories that speak back to the colonial image base. *Whale Rider* brings mythic stories from Māori culture into a full-colour present day, performed by local, untrained actors. Finally, *Tanna*, is a ni-Vanuatu and Australian co-production taking a Tannese world view and story as a starting point to rewrite the story of Romeo and Juliet, complete with wry commentaries on Christian missionaries and troublesome outsiders (even from other parts of Tanna, see Jolly 2019). All three of these films highlight how high-quality global cinema linking indigenous and other narratives together, and conjoining (sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly) indigenous visual conventions to those of Euro-American cinema. At the same, time all of these cinematic images also highlight the enduring power of colonial imagery and romantic stereotypes of Indigenous Pacific islanders.

The trajectory of “decolonizing ethnographic film” (Lansing 1989), has gained increasing traction drawing on the insights into reflexivity and practice that had emerged in relation to other forms of ethnography, inspired by the critique raised by the volume *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) as well as decolonizing projects across the global south leading to what Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay (2005) has described as fourth cinema (see e.g. Knopf 2008, Ginsburg 2018). A

large body of visual production has emerged in which film, and also photography and now digital media, has been used as a methodology to uncover power relations, as a form of collaboration, as participatory practice, as a site of political negotiation and advocacy, and as a platform for alternative forms of storytelling (see for example Turner 2002, Deger 2006, 2013).

This complexity has long preoccupied anthropology, in which the stakes of representational authority, and relation between the local and the global, have been vital themes. In the 1990s, for example, this played out in Pacific anthropology within debates between a ‘New Melanesian History’ that “situate[d] Melanesian discourses and practices as creative responses to confrontation with an external other” (Scott 2007: 5) and ‘New Melanesian Ethnography’ which attempted to discuss Melanesian life-worlds in their own terms, not always reducible to categories or conceptions defined from the vantage point of Euro-America (see Hirsch 2014). Today, the debates that have arisen in anthropology around the “ontological turn” continue to ask the same questions: how important is it to recognize the global entanglements and long arm of ‘Western’ modernity as fundamentally constitutive of cultural and social forms? How important is it to create spaces for alternative forms and perspectives? What is the scope and scale of commensurability between “Euro-American” and “Indigenous” worlds or world views and what is the underlying politics of these forms of recognition? (see Henare et al 2007, drawing on Viveiros de Castro 1998, and Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; and see Bessire and Bond 2014, and Graeber 2015 for some critical perspectives).

It is striking that most of these conversations focus on fundamental anthropological categories: from ritual, to kinship and exchange. The anthropology of media, and indeed of technology more broadly has long explored the entangled cultural fields within media and other representational fields (see Ginsburg et al 2002). For instance, Lissant

Bolton (1999) observes how integral radio is to the production of *kastom* in Vanuatu, and I have made similar arguments about photography (Geismar and Herle 2010) and contemporary art (Geismar 2004, 2015). From this vantage point I have often found myself asking why there is such a large space between the anthropology of representation (from media anthropology, through to visual anthropology, the anthropology of art) and broader theoretical currents discussing cultural difference and incommensurability?

In Vanuatu, multiple “media worlds” (Ginsburg et al 2002) exist: The country is a popular location for filming by a wide range of media producers making both documentary and fictional film. Nationally, film is produced by the National Film and Sound Unit run out of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, by Vanuatu’s national television station, and by a privately owned TV station (Kam TV), owned by Mark Lowen, and currently broadcasting from the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. Locally, there is also a proliferation of documentation produced by ni-Vanuatu across digital channels such as Facebook and Youtube. New genres of indigenous media are emerging, especially in the form of music videos to accompany local string bands, reggae groups and hiphop artists (see Stern 2007). The grass-roots theatre company and youth centre, *Wan Smol Bag*, has also produced a wide range of different media, largely focused on contemporary life from gambling, to HIV, youth and gender, and including Vanuatu’s only soap opera *Love Patrol*, all devised and acted by local people.

In this chapter I explore the representational complexities that emerge through some contemporary processes of documentary filmmaking, critiquing both anthropological and filmic essentialisms by asking what perspectives may be displayed, and conjoined within the documentary project from the vantage point of rural Vanuatu. It is impossible to give an account of the entire history of visual representation in Vanuatu, nor to account for a totally global history of documentary film. By focusing

on my experience participating in the production of a science and nature documentary for the BBC in 2014, I explore the persistence of imaginaries about culture and nature in the form of visual genres, the political dynamics of documentary filmmaking, and the underlying implications these have for our understanding of difference in Vanuatu. Here I extend arguments I have made about the perspectives that are contained in museum display, and within cultural and intellectual property protocols, to the world of documentary production film-making (Geismar 2013, Geismar 2018: chapter 5) and I explore these visual images in the context of the ongoing, often ambiguous, legacies of colonial image production in Vanuatu. These are linked to broader questions about the containment and representation of different world views in the specific context of place-making in Vanuatu.

A partial history of documentary in Vanuatu

One of the earliest documentary films made in Vanuatu was by Martin Johnson, who visited Malakula in 1917. He visited the islands in 1907-1909 as a passenger on board Jack London's yacht, the *Snark*, and subsequently returned determined to find and film the last remaining "cannibals" on the island (see Geismar 2006: 551). The film, *Cannibals of the South Seas/Captured by Cannibals* (1918) reflected all of the primitivist tropes that would come to underline a century of documentary production. Although Johnson was never able to show it, he claimed to have filmed the remains of a cannibal hearth (Johnson 1922, see also Ahrens, Lindstrom and Paisley 2013). Lured by the promise of this primitive authenticity successive waves of film-makers visited the archipelago. Tom Harrison was an extra and director in a failed Douglas Fairbanks Snr film about cannibals on Malakula in 1935 (Heimann 1997: 97-102) in which he was charged to find footage of women breastfeeding piglets (Harrison 1937: 424):

“We spent most of our time coming up against tabus, because he always wanted people to do what were to them impossible things; the Hollywood idea of savage. No person in Hollywood ever having seen a cannibal, far less his “feast”, they had their own cannibal dogmas. These include stone altars; cracked dances; spears about fifteen feet long; quite unthrowable – but easy to see on film I suppose. He [Fairbanks] taught those cannibals what they ought to be. They took it well, too” (Harrison 1937: 428-429)

This fascination with the perceived exoticism of traditional culture in Vanuatu underscored the production of documentary throughout the rest of the twentieth century. In 1960, the BBC broadcast five documentaries, presented by David Attenborough, under the heading *Peoples of Paradise*. Two of these were shot in Vanuatu focusing on the Pentecost Land Dive, and on “a strange, pagan, rather frightening religion called a cargo cult”: the John Frum movement on Tanna. Both films set up a series of technical tropes that have endured into the present, and which in turn are underscored by a particular colonial world view: the presenter moving swiftly across the landscape, communicating in pidgin English with local people and commenting on the wondrous sights of the island through an omniscient voice-over. Attenborough’s investigation into the John Frum Cult on Tanna gives no substantive background to the history and culture of the region – failing for instance to mention the experience of American wealth on the island in WWII, and barely touching on the complex history of Christianity in Vanuatu. This narrative feels out of place given the orderly roads and plantations that Attenborough drives through, which suggest not a primitive idyll but rather a sleepy colonial outpost, complete with Australian plantation owners weighing on the activities of the natives from the comfort of their verandas.

As Attenborough travels across Tanna, there is an inevitable interlude to drive across the ash plain to visit Mount Yasur, the volcano, climb to the top and film the lava bombs spewing from the nine vents.

[Still image of Nambas talking from Cargo Cult]

“Attenborough [voice over]: And then on the last day of our visit, Nambas [the Tannese head of the John Frum group] said something which showed quite clearly that he was either a rogue or a madman. Attenborough: I see you’ve put a cross on the volcano. Why do you put a cross on in there?

Nambas: Because there is a man inside the volcano.

Attenborough: There’s a man inside the volcano?

Nambas: yes.

Attenborough: One man or many man

Nambas: many men.

Attenborough: what kind of man?

Nambas: He’s like white people but some are different colours.

Attenborough: What colour? White? Dark or Yellow?

Nambas: Red and Black.

...

Attenborough voice over: And that was the nearest that I got to my questions about John Frum. Perhaps Nambas was deluded. But if he was, then the whole population of Tanna is deluded. And anyway, deluded is a rather odd word to use when you are talking about religion.” (Transcribed from Cargo Cult, at 28”11)



David Attenborough inspects a cross at the top of Mount Yasur, Tanna. Still from Peoples of Paradise: Episode Two Cargo Cult. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p00y20ky/the-people-of-paradise-2-cargo-cult>, 20: 43)

The Attenborough documentaries exemplify a canon of filmic tropes that have underpinned documentary forms in the South Pacific for many years: a fascination with the radically different traditional life; the excising of modernity from the frame, and the embedding the cultural lives of local people in a dramatic natural environment; supported by “presenter-led” narrative. These forms have become ubiquitous so that they seem to exemplify a form of documentary objectivity, masking the cultural judgements that are built into them, for instance in the racial stereotyping that is in fact presented to the people of Tanna by Attenborough who divides people into White, Black and Yellow (a

colonial racial typology) when the Tannese are thinking of people as Red and Black.

Alongside the emergence of locally, and collaboratively produced documentary, telling the stories of ni-Vanuatu in their own words, a body of documentary has emerged that highlights the situated quality of these visual representations, turning the tables by making the traditions and customs of Euro-Americans seem strange – a position Attenborough himself alludes to in his comment above in *Cargo Cult*. The use of documentary and ethnographic work to hold up a lens to cultures and traditions in Euro-America has in fact long been a part of the anthropological tradition. The memoir of anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon, who undertook two major stints of fieldwork in the Pacific from 1888 onwards, was entitled *Headhunters Black, White and Brown* (Haddon 1978). In Vanuatu, Tom Harrisson drew on his experiences as an ornithologist, civil servant, and movie maker on Malakula to criticize the savagery of Western civilization in the popular Left Book Club publication¹ *Savage Civilization* (1937), which was a searing indictment of colonialists and missionaries as well as the savagery of Europeans on the brink of a second world war.

More recently, in the popular television series, *Meet the Natives* a group of men from Tanna travelled to the UK to experience the customs and practices of the local people there. They experienced the hierarchical intricacies of the British class system, exploring how British people keep their pigs, and learned the etiquette of middle-class dinner parties. In reverse, contemporary photographer Jon Tonks has spent time documenting the world of white people who have developed interests in Vanuatu, from the French man who claims to be the King of Tanna

¹ The Left Book Club was a subscription-based reading group run by the publisher Victor Gollancz with a strong commitment to Left-wing policies that ran in the 1930s with a peak membership of more than 50,000 people. It folded after the Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed in 1939.

through to the Scandinavian tourist who relinquished all his property in an attempt to “go native” before being evicted by the local community. His images highlight the complex mimetic entanglement through which Europeans have appropriated the identities of ni-Vanuatu, complementing the tradition of exploring how ni-Vanuatu have appropriated the aesthetics of American soldiers and capitalists from within the John Frum movement. Indeed, the broader anthropological literature on cargo cults highlights the representational interdependencies between Euro-American and Melanesian experiences of modernity as they emerge in both cargo cult activities and their visual representations (see Lindstrom 1993, Tabani 2019). As Lindstrom comments in regards to the filming of the popular survival show “Survivor” in Vanuatu:

“the show's principal audience is in the United States and its producers stage and edit “reality” in large part to speak to American cultural themes and social fissions. These include tensions between individual and society, self and family, authority and democracy, loyalty and honor, self-discovery and self-transformation, public service and laziness, and—cutting through all these—the American identity politics of race, class, age, disability, and gender.” (2007: 162).



The King of Tanna. Jon Tonks. 2014. Permission requested from artist. (source: <https://www.jontonks.com/work/blong-ongoing-work/>)

Into the Volcano

In the rest of this essay, I situate my discussion in the messy space of collaboration that is a documentary production and explore the positions that are currently being articulated within this space. In order to do this, I emplace my case study, starting and finishing on Mount Marum, one of two active volcanoes on the Island of Ambrym. Here, I use the volcano as a frame to understand the ways in which diverse perspectives and technologies of representation are entangled within competing discourses of property and propriety. This is more than a representational conceit: indeed, I aim to both challenge the representational projects that have encircled the volcano and shift these perspectives away from the usual discussion of meaning as it is framed by the camera, and subjects as they are produced by the filmic gaze. Here I turn this question on its head, positing how the camera and the

narratives and images it produces looks from the vantage point of the volcano.


I start with three moments in which Mount Marum is brought into being through representational practices, not all of which entered the final cut of the documentary “Into the Volcano” when it was aired in the UK in January 2015.²

Moment 1: It is August 2014, and a BBC documentary film crew is arriving on Ambrym. I am a part of the crew, making a two-part series, provisionally entitled “Journey to Fire Island” (later broadcast on BBC2 as *Into the Volcano*). Presented by the well-known British science and nature presenter, Kate Humble, the programme brought anthropologists, linguists and volcanologists to two volcanically active islands in Vanuatu – Tanna and Ambrym. The aim of the documentary was to explore how scientific research could enable us to predict whether or not an eruption was imminent, against a backdrop that focused on the resilience of the local people who live alongside the volcano. A good deal of the filming focused on the taking of various measurements and recordings under the auspices of Volcanologist Shane Cronin of the University of Auckland to demonstrate volcanic activity on each island. Many of these readings were performative or demonstrative rather than research based, showing for the camera the kinds of things scientists do, rather than recording live scientific experimentation. For instance, during a visit to a sulphur vent in a cave by the sea at the foot of Mount Marum in Bououma Bay, locally famous for killing any animal or bird that goes inside. Humble and Cronin took a number of readings that proved there were toxic levels of sulphur in the cave, a fact already well established not just by existing scientific research which had identified Mount Marum as, at times, the single largest source of sulphur dioxide on the planet (Bani et al 2012) but also by the hundreds of bird

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04xwylv>

skeletons within the cave, well known as a death trap to local people. The apex of the episode filmed in Ambrym was a daring abseil undertaken by Humble into the crater of the volcano with a measuring device strapped to her back. Again – this was performative, adding little new data or information to the “scientific” knowledge of the volcano but allowing for the capture of some spectacular footage of one of the world’s most accessible lava lakes (which by the time of writing this essay had been swallowed up by a fissure eruption). This performativity of scientific activity masked a representational politics in which non-local scientists were presented as both making and interpreting knowledge about the volcano. As is typical of documentary style, the infrastructures of local fixers, as well as those in the broader documentary team, are invisible to the viewer who is presented with a clear view of the ‘scientist’ at work.

Home Episodes Clips




Abseiling into a volcano

Kate Humble descends into the crater of Marum - one of the planet's most active volcanoes - to investigate the fiery lava lake and poisonous gas plumes at its heart.

05 January 2015
⌚ 2 minutes

This clip is from



Kate Humble: Into the Volcano
Episode 2

Still from Into the Volcano,
source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02gbxfd>

Moment 2: One of the invisible members of the team was a New Zealander called Geoff Mackley (famous for another television series, *Dangerman* made for the Discovery Channel in 2004) who by the time of our visit had created a semi-permanent camp at the top of the volcano. Equipped with showers, toilets, a dining tent and enough food rations to last out a tropical storm, Mackley was the broker for numerous film crews prepared to brave the toxic gases and film less

than 30 meters away from the bubbling lava lake.³ Mackley, who started his career listening into emergency services in order to get to the sites of disasters and accidents in order to capture footage, prides himself on his ability to weather, and document extreme situations (<https://www.geoffmackley.com>). By the time the BBC arrived, he had already facilitated visits from national television crews from Australia, Korea, and Japan. In 2017, he was recorded abseiling into the Volcano by the team from *Google Street View*.

When we visited in 2014, Mackley had created what seemed to be a semi-permanent settlement on the crater, and a new economy for the island, with many of his visitors flying by helicopter directly to the summit, often bypassing the coastal areas where most people on Ambrym live. The barren volcanic plateau surrounding the crater was peppered with energy bar wrappers and water bottles, dissonant with Vanuatu's national policy to ban single-use plastics. From the perspective of local islanders, many were unsure about what was going on at the top of the volcano – they heard rumours and occasionally saw discarded ration packets when they entered the ash plain to hunt wild pig and cattle.

Without helicopters, Mackley used one particular route (one of the easiest walks) across the ash plain to the summit, working closely with villagers from the same village we were based in, Ranvetlam, in the North of the island. This gave the people from that village a privileged vantage to see what was happening on the plateau. On Ambrym, as in many parts of Vanuatu, discourses of rights and entitlements structure access to both the natural and cultural environment (see Geismar 2013, Huffman 1996, Rio 2011). In 2014, the profits being received by the North Ambrymese, and specifically by villagers from Ranvetlam were provoking concern in other parts of the island, and within Ambrymese

³ Intensive activity in December 2018 resulted in the lava lakes on Ambrym being both drained to other parts of Ambrym and buried in slurry as a result of seismic activity resulting in the loss of both lakes.

communities living in Port Vila, Vanuatu's capital. Just before our arrival, the airport at Craig Cove on the west of the island was the scene of a violent face-off between islanders and Mackley, who, along with the Japanese film crew he had taken to the crater, were held hostage by local men armed with machetes until they paid compensation to the people of that area. They were fined 100,000 vatu by local customary authorities because they did not arrange the permissions with the different land owners who control the paths to the volcano and the summit of the crater. After this incident the airport remained closed for many months as there was also a land dispute over the rights of, and compensation paid by, Air Vanuatu to use the airstrip. By the time we arrived, landing in the South East of the island and helicoptering over to the north, it had been decided, by the local council of chiefs on Ambrym, with support from the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, that the money charged to film crews would be paid into a disaster relief bank account in Port Vila to be used for the benefit of the entire island should there be a destructive eruption. At the same time, there were rumours that Geoff Mackley had brought in 24-hour security guards to watch his small settlement of abseiling equipment and camp. It was also at this time that he started to arrange helicopters to drop visitors directly at the summit bypassing engagement with any local community. It should be emphasized here that Mackley was not the broker for our documentary project, and that all the correct permissions to film and to access the volcano, were arranged with the support of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, who supports the National Cultural Council in the implementation of Vanuatu's national filming policy.⁴ It is therefore perhaps no surprise to the reader that Mackley is invisible in the documentary, even though his presence was crucial for attaining the spectacular shots were achieved during our short time on the island.

⁴ The policy (from 2018) is archived here: <https://web.archive.org/save/https://vanuatuculturalcentre.gov.vu/research/film-permits/filming-policy>

Moment 3. As the representative anthropologist, I was expected to focus on people and culture, rather than nature. I did not accompany the film crew to the summit but spent most of my time in Ranvetlam and the neighbouring villages. On one of these days we spent a full day with people from Hawor village recording a lengthy re-enactment of the origin story of the volcano which highlighted how people on Ambrym understand it as a resource to be not only managed but controlled and owned by specific family groups. Recalling the conversation that Attenborough had with his interlocutors on Tanna, Ambrym islanders do not simply think of the volcano as a geological entity that predates their presence, nor do they think of it as unpredictable and uncontrollable: as raw nature. Rather their origin stories for the volcano describe how it was planted in its place by their ancestors, and many of their ritual traditions focus on mechanisms for controlling the eruptions and fiery activity of the two craters, Marum and Benbow.

Our day recording this story, enacted out in situ moving from site to site on the side of the volcano, was curated and narrated by Salia Atul from Hawor. Hawor is considered by people from North Ambrym to be the birth-place of the volcano. The name Hawor derives from the call of an ancestor to his son “Where is the stone? [Ha-wor].” Hawor was an ancient village, its descendants now dispersed into other settlements. The people of this place claim that they are the people who have to right to talk about the volcano, and that they can control the fire and power of the volcano. Salia told us during filming:

When the creator spirit Parkulkul who placed the first men in every village on Ambrym, came to Hawor he found that there were already people there: a man and a woman. One day the people of Hawor found a banana tree with a glowing flower made of fire – the volcano. It was too close to the village so they dug it up and moved it. As their settlement grew they moved the fire several more times and each time it

grew bigger and bigger until it gradually turned into the fire of the volcano into stone (the mountain of the volcano). and became the lava lake of Mount Marum.

We walked along the “kastom road” with Salia as this story was narrated. First, we passed down an overgrown path in the bush that led us to where the fiery flower first emerged and marked its pathway up the mountain. Stones along the route marked the gradual growth of the fire and its transformation into the mountain. Such stones are secret, sacred and also mark special points of access to the powers of the volcano. High up at the summit is a lookout, the place from which the people of Hawor talk to the volcano. We were told that the last time they talked to the volcano was in 1968, when there was a massive series of eruptions. At that time some of the local people brought a Christian prayer group from America to clear the place of its power and it is now a coconut plantation, overwriting the *kastom* road and stories.

From a local perspective, nature is not something that exists outside of the human world, acting on human beings in ways out of our control. Rather, the volcano is presented as *a priori* cultural, emerging hand in hand with the people of the place. A complex balance has been forged between the communities surrounding the two craters by negotiating access to the volcano as a mythic charter. Some groups hold the rights to talk to and about the volcano, others hold rights to the trails that lead to the summit. Because of volcanic activity there has been much internal movement around Ambrym and beyond, with a permanent community of West Ambrymese established in Mele Maat on the outskirts of Port Vila after a massive eruption made part of the island uninhabitable in 1913. Displacement from both East and West Ambrym have merged communities and this has required a complex, and ongoing, negotiation of land rights through interlinked genealogies. Until Mackley’s arrival there was a general consensus that the summit belonged to everyone. With gossip emerging that Mackley was planning

to build a small runway for light airplane to land directly at the summit a bitter ownership dispute has started to emerge.

Perspective(s) on film

It is easy to read these three stories as clashes of world views in which we can track Euro-American and ni-Vanuatu perspectives on the volcano.

Moreau and Aurora (2020) discuss the contrast between missionary and ni-Vanuatu interpretations of the 1913 eruption, detailing what they describe as “crossed semiosis” of the different worldviews that explained the cause of the eruption. However, the vision of the Volcano as a distinctly Ambrymese cultural artefact sits in the middle, inflecting local people’s understanding of science and nature. Ambrymese understand the continued eruption not as nature acting on them, but as part of an ongoing dialogue about being-in-place and a complex power that they hold over the environment (as much as the environment holds power over them).

In earlier work on intellectual property regimes in Vanuatu, also focused on Ambrym island (Geismar 2013: chapter five), I criticised the ways in which anthropology is often drawn upon to present local or indigenous tradition (described in Vanuatu as *kastom*) as radically alternative to so-called Western systems of ownership. I advocated for a historically located perspective that recognized that these systems are as much entangled as distinct. For instance, through fieldwork in Vanuatu, on Ambrym, and through extensive research in the colonial archive – it became clear that a category of Indigenous Copyright (which I refer to using the Bislama, *kopiraet*) had been developed over more than 100 years as a way to bring these supposedly incommensurable discourses together. Incommensurability therefore played a social role of distinction in what in fact was a much more complex and entangled landscape.

These tensions in perspectives are even more complicated within filmic narratives which elide or render implicit the epistemologies that construct such positionings in the first place. Our day of filming with Salia Atul produced an alternative documentary narrative to the one that ended up broadcast to millions of viewers on BBC2. Not even thirty seconds of this segment was broadcast, the entire day's filming ending up on the cutting-room floor. The editing process pushed the narrative back to the story that had been drafted at BBC headquarters in London by people who had never been to Vanuatu: filming to include a "volcano chief", a sulphurous cave, a customary dance, children in the village, the scientists at work, and of course the daring and risky abseil into the crater.⁵ These predetermined episodes were punctuated by a representational convention known as "presenter-led", following in the footsteps of Attenborough, in which we see and learn through the experiences of the presenter. Throughout the broadcast Kate Humble describes how she sees, feels, and fears the volcano. It is striking to see how in the final cut, there is no other point of view. The rich narratives of local people are disabled from answering the rhetorical question posed in the trailer about "how it effects the lives of the islanders?" (clip 1, BBC website: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02gbtnt>).

⁵ The term "volcano chief" was used from the start, in London, by the assistant producer, co-produced with the Australian fixer, and adhered to throughout the organization of the shoot, even though it was not a term used by the people from Ambrym who participated in the making of the film. It is mentioned by people from West Ambrym in Soraya Hosni's film *Lon Marum* (@12 minutes) but this is the only mention I can find anywhere of this term. As Bolton (1998) discusses, focusing on the career of notable North Ambrymese leader, Chief Willie Bongmatur, the concept of "chief" is a hybrid category in Vanuatu, used strategically to link local leadership to colonial structures of authority, and creating a new kind of power broker in the archipelago, one that has been drawn upon by both colonial government and local people to mediate between different knowledge systems and political structures.

The antics of Mackley and his team and the rich conversation that was emerging about the volcano as a form of cultural property, which determined access to both researchers and tourists alike created a visual environment surrounding the crater (makeshift tents, helicopters flying in and out, abseiling lines permanently bolted into stone, rubbish from tourists and so on) that had to be carefully excised or filmed around. Similarly, the powerful perspective on the volcano that was constructed by Salia Atul was also edited out. Rather, the images of ni-Vanuatu were of innocent people living with the volcano, replete with shots of smiling children and dancing villagers, wearing traditional clothing. Their agency, either as traditional custodians, or indeed, as educated people some of whom are employed by the National Meteorology and Geohazards Department, which has developed its own national disaster and evacuation plan in the event of a large-scale eruption, was not part of the narrative.

During our first day at Ranvetlam village we walked around the village filming the houses, pigs, and gardens, talking to some of the local men and women, with me as translator/mediator. The film crew were impressed by the tranquil nature of the village. I was a little confused: “where is everyone?” I asked our guide in Bislama. “Don’t tell the film crew this,” he answered. “They have all gone to Ranon village – there is a sorcery trial taking place in the local court which has been going on all week. Several people from Ranvetlam have died in recent months and we know this is a result of sorcery – everyone in the village is at the accused trial. They won’t be back for a few days.”

Ranvetlam villagers, who due to their prime coastal position have long brokered the access of others to North Ambrym recognized the complexity that sorcery posed for those producing representations of their island. Their own complex engagement with their customary past is also heavily mediated though their Christian practice which they implement through a range of denominations – Presbyterian, Seventh

Day Adventist, and so on (see Moreau and Aurora 2020). Salia Atul told the same story he narrated to the BBC to anthropologists Knut Rio and Annelin Eriksen who have described Ambrym islanders as working with “pluralist cosmologies” able to work between multiple categories of being, and link them directly to people and place thus legitimating a dynamic social order (2014: 60). Rio and Eriksen also draw on intensive discussions with Salia to describe the lengthy history of how Ambrymese have struggled with the fraught legacy of the Volcano as a power both destructive and generative.

What kind of perspective is the volcano?

As one of the most volcanically active places in the world, the people of Vanuatu have long had to develop strategies to live with volcanos, and volcanic activity has been generative of much cultural transformation, as people have had to move around the archipelago, developing relations with other cultural groups, intermarrying, sharing traditions from basket weaving to song. The documentary traditions that have emerged within global (read Western) media make little effort to understand the complex cosmological, conceptual, religious, and political structures that have emerged in the archipelago, preferring to continue to feed us images of wild nature and ritual culture, existing side by side, linked by the experiences of the European presenter or visitor. True stories: of commercial exploitation, or of larger than life personalities, of sorcery and of contestations about ownership and access are excised from the visual record, purifying and maintaining a sharp divide between nature and culture. The “image” of nature produced within the documentary could look quite different if it was curated by ni-Vanuatu. Ritual and Christian performance are not just performances that take place within landscapes, they perform and explicate mythic charters of entitlement that legitimate access and define nature as a resource that is part of this wider cultural complex. West (2006) makes a similar argument about the

politics of nature in Papua New Guinea) and ethnographic studies of volcanoes across the Pacific region show how natural forces are implicated within local sociality, for instance in Wood et al's account of how "specific social relations" involving both the dead and the living cause Uluwan in PNG to erupt, whereby "volcanic events are not necessarily surprising disruptive events, but a future already incorporated into the past and present" (2020: 33-34).

I have moved away from dominant trajectory of visual anthropology which focus on understanding films and other visual forms in terms of their representational capacities. Here, documentary film is a space in which meanings are produced, images negotiated, and identity and value situated. *Into the Volcano* does not simply represent static images of Vanuatu and its people, produced elsewhere. In the documentary film tradition, nature is often rendered as *apriori*, with culture contained within. This sleight of hand, here made explicit through the convention of "presenter-led", makes the cultural context of viewing invisible. In Ambrym, nature is *apriori* cultural, and our relation to it is taken for granted as a matter of perspective. Following the Ambrym perspective, we might turn our documentary tradition on its head, and understand it to be powerfully framed by a cultural theory which renders people subservient to nature, their cultural practices defined by their environment, and renders the power of the volcano as overwhelming any kind of cultural authority. This is the perspective that starts to emerge in the film, *Lon Marum: People of the Volcano* which takes the origin story of the Volcano as its starting point to privilege the Ambrymese understandings and experiences of the volcano, and presents scientific research from the perspective of ni-Vanuatu. At times, Ambrymese discuss their discontent with work of scientists, challenging whether it is necessary or adds to their existing knowledge base. In turn, the French scientists who are filmed undertaking work on both Ambrym and Tanna openly admit that they know very little either

of the local cultural context in which they are working (or even more surprisingly of previous scientific research undertaken on the islands). Science here is presented as a partial and performative endeavour reaffirming existing assumptions rather than opening up new ground.

Our current moment, within the climate emergency, is opening up a new space for indigenous peoples, who are often literally at the “coal-face” of the impact of global warming: experiencing rising sea levels, drought and flooding, and as is the case in Vanuatu, greater and more frequent cyclones alongside the longstanding experience of regular seismic and volcanic activity across the archipelago. As we start to develop new forms of social theory in this global context, we are also challenging some of the mythic charters of so-called “Western civilization”. As Latour explores in his work on Gaia, we (Euro-American researchers) are starting to question our long-standing preconceptions of the environment, beginning with the acknowledgment that

“living things do not reside in an environment, they fashion it. What we call the environment is the result of living things’ extensions; their successful inventions and apprenticeships. This is not proof that the Earth is “living,” but rather that everything we experience on Earth is the unforeseen, secondary, and involuntary effect of the action of living organisms.” (Latour 2018, see also Latour 2017)

Recent developments to afford “human” rights to rivers and trees in different places, from New Zealand to the Amazon, have opened a space to upend the divide even further between nature and culture (see e.g. Muru Lanning 2017). Detractors argue that this can never be more than a representational sleight of hand, but in fact, these moves, across legal and moral zones, ask us to re-evaluate what makes us human, as much as how we co-create regimes of sovereignty and entitlement with the world around us. This perspective would provide us with a very

different telos for images of the volcano and would produce a very different kind of film.

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