In ‘A Poetic for Histories’, Greg Dening tells us that we all make histories endlessly. It is part of the human condition, he tells us, to make histories—to make sense of the present as past as soon as it has gone, to tell stories about it, to interpret it. But histories are not just the content of the story or interpretation of the past. They are also the mode of the story’s expression, the occasion of its telling. One of Greg’s great regrets was that he did not hear the stories of Te Henua (The Land we know as the Marquesas) directly from Enata (the Men of The Land)—that he never came to know the living as he knew the dead. What I found when I went to the southern Vanuatu island of Tanna in 1975 as one of Greg’s PhD students was that talking with the living was one of the ways of coming to know the dead. In the forty years since then, what I have learnt is that talking with the dead is also one of the ways of coming to know the living.

We all make histories endlessly, writes Greg Dening in ‘A Poetic for Histories’. Few will need to be persuaded to Greg’s claim that it is part of the human condition to make histories—to make sense of the present as past as soon as it is gone, to tell stories about it, to interpret the meanings of gestures made, of words spoken, of actions done. Some here tonight do this as part of their job. Some do it for the sheer joy of making sense of what is gone. Perhaps we all do it because it is part of the human condition to keep meaninglessness at bay.

A central claim of ‘A Poetic for Histories’ is that ‘transformations of the past into expressions, clothe, constitute, are a present social reality. Histories always have this double entendre’, writes Dening. ‘They refer to a past in making a present. The knowledge of the past that re-presents the past in story

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1 ‘Talking with the Dead’ was the annual Greg Dening Memorial Lecture for 2015, presented on 7 October 2015.
2 Victoria University.
3 Greg Dening, ‘A Poetic for Histories’, in Performances (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 35–63. ‘Poetics’ from the ancient Greek poïesis, ‘to make’. Like Heidegger’s explanation of poïesis as the blooming of the blossom, the emergence of the butterfly from the cocoon, Dening uses the term to capture how the past is transformed into history through the occasion and the circumstances of its telling.
Ron Adams

or account makes the structures of the present—such as class or identity—in the expressing.’ So histories in Dening’s poetic are ‘not just the stream of consciousness about the past but that knowledge made dramaturgical in its form of expression’.

A few pages on, Dening expands on what ‘knowledge made dramaturgical in its form of expression’ means. Historical consciousness, he writes, finds expression in different forms of dramatic unity, which have their own conventionalities in terms of their textual nature and in terms of how they are received and heard. Simply put, histories are not just a message—the content of a story or an interpretation of the past. They are also the mode of the story’s expression, the occasion of its telling. Tonight I describe how this insight applies to what I do on Tanna, where for forty years I have become part of the social circumstances framing the transformation of the past into history—just as we are all part of the social circumstances that transform the past into history every time we present at a conference, write a journal article, give a lecture.

But I also argue that my enmeshment in the structures of the present that are expressed in re-presenting the past in Tanna—my involvement in the public occasions of a story’s telling on the island—is not the same as the social circumstances I am part of when I present at a conference, write an article, give a lecture. The words for a conference, an article, a lecture, are written. They are no less sincere or authentic for that—but they are not the spontaneous spoken words of conversation. Writing them on paper or typing them on a computer makes them different. They can always be crossed out or deleted in a way that spoken words once uttered cannot be. As writers we might aspire to capture the immediate sentiments that words exist to convey. But that effort itself points to the absence of the immediacy and spontaneity of the spoken word uttered in conversation, a conversation situated in the existential reality in which it the word is uttered. There is an audience for the written word, as there is for the spoken. But the context is different. And in what linguists refer to as a ‘conversational society’ like Tanna, words acquire their meanings—as Walter Ong has noted:

only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs.

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4 My emphasis.
5 Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), 47.
In both cases, spoken and written, histories are what Dening calls fiction, something made of the past—‘but fictions whose forms are metonymies of the present’. Histories are metaphors of the past, he writes, translating sets of events into sets of symbols. But histories are also metonymies of the present: the present has existence in and through their expression. The present—social reality, the structures of our living—has being through representations of the past in coded public forms. We read or hear histories in this double way. We know in them both a present and a past.

Histories’ double entendre is really a double-double entendre. There is the dramaturgical transformation that occurs when the past is re-presented in the stories or the accounts of the authors of our so-called ‘primary sources’, which express the writer’s social reality at the moment of their re-presentation. Then there is the transformation that occurs when later historians re-present the primary source representations in coded public forms expressive of their particular social reality at a different point in time.

In truth it is more complicated. Greg never tired of reminding us that we are not the final arbiters of the meaning of the histories we write or tell. That is the prerogative of our readers or listeners, who attach meaning to what they read or hear according to their particular social reality. A double-double-double entendre.

Tonight I identify some of the structures of the present expressed in the various re-presentations of Tanna’s past that I have observed, written about and been part of over the last forty years. I reflect on the ways in which these expressions of the past constitute present social realities, and how the social realities I observe and write about are at the same time social realities in which I am intimately implicated. And, in terms of the logic of the double-double-double entendre, tonight you in turn become implicated in my attempts to make sense of Tanna’s past.

The flyer for tonight’s lecture referred to a fundamental difference between my experiences in Tanna and Greg’s experiences in the Marquesas, to do with the silence that he found in *Te Henua* (The Land, or the Marquesas). The silence, he tells us, is not in the everyday sounds of generators, of cocks, of falling coconuts, of rolling pebbles on the beach, of children in the morning, of wind.
It’s at that deeper, meaning-making, existential level, which Aoe, outsiders, largely destroyed and whose muted remnants they cannot plumb.\(^6\)

I cannot read the final paragraph of ‘Remarks on a Silent Land’—Greg’s final reflection in *Islands and Beaches*—without feeling the sadness and mourning in the words. The regret is personal, revealing—the words brutally honest. They are also classically Dening: beautifully crafted and expressed, connecting us with emotions beyond the words themselves. Those final words are simultaneously a closing and an opening—an example of that final double entendre where it is the reader who is final arbiter of what the text is about. In these closing words Greg invites the reader to share a reflection, to engage with ambiguity and contradiction and limitation. ‘I should have known’, he confesses,

that the dead are easier to talk to than the living. I should have known the cost of hearing somebody through the silence. On the beach one is so deaf to words, so blind to gestures: on the beach one knows oneself in caricature because of the differences, but others hardly at all. That is my regret, then, that I do not know the living Men as I know the dead; and I have this half-suspicion that Aoe bring their silence with them.

In the flyer I suggested that the southern Vanuatu island of Tanna is at the other end of the world when it comes to the kind of silence that confronted Dening in the Marquesas. Despite the best—or worst—efforts of Church and State, the Tannese were never completely silenced. Talk was never totally lost. Where there was silence, it was not brought by outsiders as much as imposed by the Tannese themselves: a discursive strategy to control what was spoken and heard, a means of evading unwelcome talk. Especially talk initiated and controlled by outsiders. And if Tanna is any kind of guide, it might be that the silence encountered by Greg in *Te Henua* was not just something that Aoe bring with them, but also an expression of *Enata* (Marquesan) agency, a means of protecting what the Outsider has not already taken away. This I read as part of Greg’s regret: that he was denied the opportunity—the experience—to be more than Outsider. Denied the chance of sharing with the living Men today’s beach—that liminal, transformative space between here and there and us and them and now and then—where meaning-making surely always continues in one form or another.

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I first crossed the beach I call Tanna in May 1975, when the island was part of the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides and the site of my fieldwork as one of Greg Dening’s and Bronwen Douglas’s PhD students. Since then I have returned to the island on average every eighteen months. In that time Tanna has changed from colonial backwater to modern tourist destination: with asphalt airfield complete with navigation aids; websites for choosing accommodation; restaurants serving flying fox and pigeon; taxis to transport you to the volcano or a custom village where you will be welcomed with a well-rehearsed dance and pressed to buy a carving or grass skirt or pretend penis-wrapper; the ability to share exotic experiences 24/7 with family at home courtesy of the ubiquitous mobile phone towers; and any number of film crews making travel documentaries, survivor reality shows, now even feature films, in the most far-flung of villages.

There have been many changes in Tanna in forty years—just as there have been many changes in me. But, when it comes to the metaphors of the past and the metonymies of the present that frame histories’ poetic, what is striking is how little has changed at that deeper, meaning-making, existential level.

It was my good fortune to go to Tanna in the 1970s. There was talk in the air of independence. Anglophones and francophones were positioning against each other, but cutting across the language divide and the political debate was a quickening sense, shared by all, of the need to clarify and resolve where *kastom*, custom or traditional ways, fitted into whatever the future would bring. I carried out my fieldwork in the former Presbyterian stronghold on the east side of the island, where many of the Tannese telling me their stories had experienced firsthand the mission-based Tanna Law repression of *kastom*—which they were now intent on resurrecting. Everyone, even Presbyterian elders, wanted to talk about *kastom*, wanted to talk about the past. My presence presented them with an opportunity to articulate and test their ideas and beliefs as a means of rediscovering and reinventing the ways of the past, the ways of their ancestors. I was keen to listen to their stories. They were keen to listen to what this young researcher had to tell them about what he had read in the records in Canberra, London and Paris. We were equally keen to set the record straight.

We see this in the episode that I am about to recount: the execution of the Tannese youth Nokwai in 1877 for the killing of a British trader in the island. In the months and years following the execution, hundreds of thousands of words were written about the event. Opinions ranged from acceptance
and celebration of the hanging through to regret and condemnation. But all were premised on the myth of the right, the responsibility even, of the European to control the non-European world, and to this extent they shared a common understanding of the meaning of history. The Tannese have a different understanding, in terms of which it is they who have the right and responsibility to resist the characteristic European attempt to control them. For a historian, the European perspective has been easy enough to access—there is a long paper trail. Accessing the Tannese perspective has been more problematic. Not only does it rely on memory being passed down, but also on identifying and then locating the individual who ‘owns’ the knowledge and, with that ownership, the prerogative to pass it on or withhold it. And without being accepted into what Ong called the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word occurs, those words will surely be withheld.

I am part of both narratives. As with the Europeans who wrote about the event at the time, and the Tannese who spoke and sang about it later, my own involvement highlights how what we uncover about the past, and the meaning we attach to what we uncover, cannot be disentangled from concerns of the present. How, as Dening noted, histories are metaphors of the past, translating sets of events into sets of symbols, but also metonymies of the present, existing in and through how the past is expressed, how it is re-presented in coded public forms that reflect the social realities of the present.

Back in 1992 I gave a paper on the death of Nokwai at a seminar to mark Greg’s retirement from the University of Melbourne. I called it ‘Nokwai: Sacrifice to Empire’. Based on the documentary evidence, it described how a chief, Nakapok, engaged his kinsman Yumanga to shoot the British trader Easterbrook for having a relationship with the chief’s wife. The documents tell of how suspicion shifted from Nakapok to Yumanga, who admitted his guilt, according to Thomas Neilson, the local missionary. But it was the youth Nokwai who was delivered up, in order to secure the release of thirteen local dignitaries held hostage aboard one of the two naval vessels anchored in the harbour. It was Nokwai, a young unmarried man without rank, without powerful friends, who was hanged on board HMS Beagle the following day.

I still feel the grief I felt then for Nokwai. Not so much now the anger: I have come to see all the actors as victims. But at the time my anger was palpable,

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especially towards the missionary Neilson and the way that he permitted himself to conspire with the commander of the Beagle, Lieutenant James Caffin, in the sham trial that found Nokwai guilty and sentenced him to death.

The officers at least were following orders, and Lieutenant Caffin’s report on the course of events gives no indication that the orders were anything other than routine. ‘On Tuesday morning the 25th instant, at 10 a.m.’, he wrote, ‘the sentence of death passed on Nokwai was carried out, he being hung from the fore yard arm of this ship; large numbers of natives being assembled on Missionary Point and elsewhere to witness it. Before the execution Mr Neilson attended the prisoner, who admitted his guilt.’

Just fifty-six words. Fifty-six words that beg so many questions. Words that do not tell, for instance, if the grisly spectacle of the boy swinging at the end of the rope on board his ship touched Caffin in some way. Whether the crew who hoisted the body aloft had competed to take part, or drawn lots, or were simply assigned to the task. Whether the noose tightened smoothly and dug deeply, making death mercifully quick with a sudden snapping of the neck. Or did the hessian catch and refuse to tighten, prolonging the inevitable? Afterwards, did the crew avoid each other’s looks? Did any have nightmares? Back in Sydney did they boast about their exploit? Or did they hold onto their silence, drowning an unfamiliar sorrow alone in a tavern in The Rocks? And what of the large numbers of natives watching from shore? With his phrase ‘being assembled...to witness it’, is Caffin suggesting that they were simply there—or that they were rounded up and forced to watch? In which case, did a shore party of sailors round them up? Or was it the Tannese hostages who had saved their own necks by delivering up a culprit? In his final moments, would Nokwai have seen them looking on? Would he have recognised a familiar face? Or was he wearing a hood, able only to imagine his surroundings?

We do not—cannot—have answers to any of these questions. I like to think that some of them may have troubled Caffin as he drafted his report to Commodore Hoskins. Perhaps they troubled the sailors—some, boys as young as Nokwai. Perhaps they were questions Hopkins reflected on as he penned his official report for the Admiralty. We do not know.

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And what questions should we ask of the missionary Neilson? According to the records, he had gone on board HMS Beagle at 9am in order to spend the last hour with the condemned man, in what he called ‘mingled exhortation and entreaty and earnest prayer’. Given that Nokwai was from a village in the Whitesands district to the north and that Neilson spoke a different Tanna language (Kwamera), it is not surprising that for most of the hour very little of what the missionary termed satisfactory in nature could be obtained from the youth, whom he described as in almost a state of ‘stupor and suppressed excitement’. Finally, in the last minutes, the condemned man is reported to have given way to the missionary’s exhortations, entreaties and prayers, and cried out, ‘I have done wrong; my heart is hard.’ It was not really, as Caffin was to claim, an admission of guilt—but, for Neilson, perhaps those few words wrung from the victim in his last moments of life transformed the imminent execution from an act of judicial punishment to one of religious expiation. Perhaps it was with the weight thus lifted from his own shoulders that Neilson left the young man to his fate at two minutes to ten, taking with him a lock of hair for the boy’s mother.

When the men-of-war finally weighed anchor, Neilson was left alone to his thoughts, and I continue to wonder what words of consolation he could possibly have given to Nokwai’s mother along with her dead boy’s lock of hair.

Why, you may ask, pose questions for which we can never know the answers? I suspect it is my way of acknowledging Nokwai as a person—a person caught in the full existential complexity that is life. A person coping with life’s ambiguities and contradictions, its betrayals and regrets. A person—like the rest of us—acting in good faith as well as bad, struggling to make sense of the circumstances that had dealt him such a cruel blow.

In the ensuing controversy, the fate of Nokwai was soon lost sight of—as newspaper editors, politicians and bureaucrats contrived to turn the affair to their own advantage. So too it seemed on Tanna, where for years I fruitlessly searched for any memory of Nokwai. It distressed me that he should have faded from historical consciousness. Until I read in the anthropologist Lamont Lindstrom’s Knowledge and Power in a South Pacific Society how the Tannese, in

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9 Neilson to Robert Steel, enclosed in Steel to Editor, 26 November 1877, Sydney Morning Herald, 27 November 1877.
neither producing nor consuming certain bodies of knowledge, stand outside their power.\textsuperscript{10} I stopped asking about Nokwai.

All that changed in 2008, and it was at another celebration of the life and work of Greg Dening—a memorial conference organised by University of Melbourne’s School of Historical Studies in December 2008 to mark Greg’s passing—that I spoke again of Nokwai: this time not of his ‘sacrifice’, but of his ‘resurrection’.

It was only months before that I had become aware that Nokwai had not been completely forgotten on Tanna. In August I had walked up from the village of Iarkei to Yanamwakel with Charlie Koukari, eldest son of David Koukari, with whom I had collaborated in my research from 1975 until his death in 2005. Charlie was taking me to talk with Nakou Yaukilipi, an important local chief that he had arranged for me to meet, in order to test whether the anthropologist Jean Guiart’s 1951 inventory of the rights and privileges associated with particular lineages still applied today.\textsuperscript{11} I was interviewing leading men at a sample of villages in the Whitesands district. Yaukilipi was my authority for Yanamwakel. We sat together in the shade of a tree, surrounded by a gaggle of younger spectators, and went through Guiart’s list: Who was the \textit{yani nengoo}, or voice of the canoe for Yanamwakel? Who could wear the long \textit{kweriya}?\textsuperscript{12} The short \textit{kweriya}? Who had the right to cook the hairless pig? Who held the magic for making the sun rise? For fattening pigs? Who was master of the \textit{nekawa topunga}?\textsuperscript{13} And so on. Ticking and annotating as we went.

We got to the end of Guiart’s return for Yanamwakel. I was ready to move on to nearby Ipekangien, where I would go through the same process with Chief Richard Nakomaha. I turned to the next page of Guiart.

My attention was held by the name at the top of the page: the person who could wear the long \textit{kweriya} for the Lounatemwi kava ground—Nekepak. Almost Nakapok, I mused aloud, the original suspect for killing the trader. Yaukilipi grabbed my arm. ‘\textit{Yu first man i save samting blong Nekepak},’\textsuperscript{14} he beamed, dismissing with a wave of his other hand the young men sitting around watching the two old men talking. \textit{Olgeta rubbis man—ol i save nating,}\textsuperscript{15}
he complained: young men who—unlike us—do not understand the important things.

You can imagine my excitement—how anxious I was, after so many years of asking, to learn all that I could. But Yaukilipi wouldn’t tell me then and there. In two days, he announced—to the assembled onlookers as much as to me—he would meet me at Charlie’s *yimwayim*, the kava-drinking ground at Iarkei, where he would tell me the *tru stori blong Nokwai*.

The story he told me speaks of Yumanga—a *yeremwanu*, master of the land, Yaukilipi explained, with the right to wear the long *kweriya*—and Nokwai, his young follower who would take the turtle to Yaukilipi to cook, who in turn would take it to the next person entitled to receive it along some ancient ceremonial route. The story speaks of the place where the trader Easterbrook stored his coconuts—the *tabu* place, the sacred place holding the magic stones controlling the weather, desecrated by the white man’s business, and the reason for which he was shot when he refused to move. Yaukilipi confirmed that the one who shot him was indeed Nokwai, a young man with no children. After his death, a woman was chosen to have a boy to replace him and take his name and inherit his land. It was a group decision, involving Yumanga, just as it had been a group decision to give Nokwai up to the British. In time, the boy born of the woman was given his name. Today’s Nokwai is a taxi driver—albeit not a very good one!

Yaukilipi added that they have a *kastom* song about Nokwai. He, Yaukilipi, is the song’s custodian. But he is a *yani negoo*, voice of the canoe, not a singer—and his singing chief (Nelson Nabat) was absent in the capital Port Vila and would not be returning in the two days that I had left on the island.

At the end of November I was back on Tanna, with a video camera to record the song about Nokwai. In the video we see Nelson Nabat sitting in Charlie’s *yimwayim*, flanked by Nakou Yaukilipi on his right and Ipekangien chief (Richard Nakomaha) on his left. Both are mouthing the words—more verifying and validating than singing. The song is in *Bislama*:

- *Mi ting one stori blong long taim* (I know one story of a long time ago)
- *Taim whitey man i cam down* (When the white men came here)
- *Olgeta ol i go down long Port Resolution* (They all went down to Port Resolution)
- *Lukim boat i cam shore* (They saw a boat come ashore)
Ol i ting debil debil blong sol wara (Everyone thought they were devils from the sea)
Ol i frait long em (Everyone was frightened of them)
I putim name i callim Tanna Island (They gave the island the name of Tanna)
I strikim matches, i smokim pipe blong (They struck matches, and they smoked their pipe)
Man Tanna i luk luk em, i frait tumas (When the Tannese saw this they were very frightened)
I never luk bifo (They’d never seen anything like this before)
Samting ya i power blong whitey man (The white men have some power)
I savim ol man Tanna (They saved all the Tannese)
He signem island (They signed the island)
Save go everywhere (So that people could go everywhere)

I was bitterly disappointed. I felt let down, cheated. I had been expecting a song about Nokwai, and Nokwai was not even mentioned. But, as I reflected on the words, disappointment gave way to understanding. The scales fell from my eyes and I saw how, in focussing on a particular individual, I was transforming a crest on a wave into something akin to a tsunami. I was profoundly distorting the history, which did not revolve around the individual I had been looking for all these years, but around the threat posed by the powerful and knowledgeable Europeans to Tanna’s magic stones, the kapiel—the bedrock of the magical and cosmic powers that were eventually to reside with the men of Tanna. In trying to raise Nokwai from anonymity, I had made him, rather than the stones and all they stand for, the centre of the story. I had been blind to the transcendent story connected with the kapiel that gave meaning to life and death—including Nokwai’s—and transformed the past into history.

But why the wait until 2008 to be told Nokwai’s story? It was common knowledge that the man blong Australia asking all the questions about Nokwai had been coming to Tanna every year or so since 1975. That he always stayed at Iarkei with David Koukari and, after David died, with his son, Charlie—to the extent that he was known as the brata blong David, and in turn the papa blong Charlie, who would name his first-born son Ron Adams Koukari to keep the connection alive. Was it just that I had asked people who did not have the

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right to tell Nokwai’s story? Was it simply the luck of talking with Yaukilipi that particular day? Was he merely repaying my gift of a kangaroo skin hat? Was it the chance turning of the page in Guiart to reveal the name Nekepak?

There is a clue in the choice of Charlie Koukari’s yimwayim as the location for telling the kastom story and singing the kastom song. Serious talk is always conducted at a yimwayim, the kava-drinking spaces found everywhere on the island but which are largely invisible to Europeans, who can make out the villages and hamlets and connecting manmade roads, but whose colonial cartography makes them blind to the yimwayim and the unmarked ceremonial routes linking them. It was only in the 1970s—a couple of years before my first fieldwork on Tanna—that the Iarkei villagers had reclaimed their own yimwayim and reconnected with its more ancient social and symbolic imaginary. Until then, the resident European missionary had opposed the drinking of kava as pagan custom, and where Iarkei’s yimwayim used to be in pre-mission times was known simply as Ekasukei—referring to the aerial roots of the banyan tree that the boys would climb and swing from—a natural feature rather than a social and symbolic space. Any village men wanting to drink kava as part of the island-wide reinvention of kastom that started from about the time of the Second World War were forced to do so at others’ yimwayim, such as Itou at the neighbouring village of Ipekangien. The kava-drinkers at Itou included not only young men from Iarkei, like Johnnie Iawia, Kaso, and Kalip, but also Presbyterians from other parts of Tanna coming to worship each weekend at Iarkei. They would come on the Saturday, the men would drink kava, stay overnight, and go with their wives to church on the Sunday. Making their way back through the bush from Ipekangien, inebriated and in the dark, some would stumble, injuring themselves, and the senior Presbyterian elder Semu—not himself a kava-drinker but ever the pragmatist—declared that it would be better to have their own yimwayim at Iarkei. So they cleared Ekasukei and renamed it Exzuki, the name of the tribe on west Tanna whence the founding Koukari had fled a century before. In choosing to tell his story at Exzuki yimwayim, Yaukilipi was acknowledging Charlie as the rot (road) through which this knowledge would pass. He was publicly expressing his confidence in Charlie, the young but energetic leader of the Presbyterians, experienced in the ways of the whites but respectful and knowledgeable about kastom, arguably the best driver on an island where every downpour would see the tracks melt into the surrounding bush, a former champion boxer with an infectious laugh who could play the ukulele and sing like an angel, yet still make serious talk.
It was part of the rehabilitation of the Koukari name, long associated with the hated Tanna Law period and the Presbyterian mission’s crusade to smash *kastom*. It was Charlie’s ancestor, the famous chief Koukari, who had spearheaded the campaign, and the enmity he engendered outlived him and persisted long after the decline of the mission. And it was Charlie’s father David Koukari, a teacher within the British school system and a National Party organiser at Whitesands, who following the 1975 elections for the Representative Assembly had drawn a poster of a man with a pig’s head, representing *kastom* and specifically Ringiau—with Yaukilipi one of the two *yani nengoo* at Yanamwakel. David Koukari’s ‘insult to the chiefs’ was neither forgotten nor—despite his sustained efforts in the 1980s and ‘90s to marry *kastom* and Christianity—quickly forgiven. Meeting at Charlie’s *yimwayim* was a moment of public reconciliation.

It was also a way of acknowledging the ancient debt owed by Yaukilipi to the Koukari line. The second half of the nineteenth century had been a time of widespread civil war on Tanna, more deadly than in the past because of the firearms that were traded for copra or brought back from Queensland. There were mass movements of people seeking refuge with traditional allies, or with groups that belonged to the same *Numrikwen* or *Koyomera* moiety. Koukari’s fleeing west Tanna was part of the upheaval. In the east he joined forces with Yaukilipi and Ringiau, the two *yani nengoo* or ‘voices of the canoe’ for Yanemwakel, to fight against the enemies who were trying to wipe them out. He saved them. In return they gave him land at Whitesands so that he would stay on. Koukari not only stayed. Attaching his star to the rising Presbyterian ascendancy, he positioned himself as the key leader on the east side of the island in the mission-inspired Tanna Law regime.

There is another possible motive. The day before cyclone Pam ripped through Vanuatu in March 2015, I had a chance conversation in Port Vila with Pascal Ringiau—through his father a descendant of Ringiau and through his mother of Yaukilipi, the two nineteenth-century *yani nengoo* who had enlisted the support of Koukari. Pascal was also a rival claimant to the name and title of the present-day Yaukilipi—the one who had told me the story of Nokwai in 2008. With the name went control over access to the volcano—Tanna’s major tourist attraction and a lucrative source of income. Pascal’s claim had recently been upheld in the national court, with its non-Tannese judges who well understood the concept of bloodline but had little empathy with names and titles passing

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to the best person—on Tanna, as in Yaukilipi’s case, through the widespread practice of adoption. In the context of local rumblings over his right to the chiefly title, Yaukilipi’s telling of the ‘true stori blong Nokwai’ in 2008 may have been a pre-emptive move to assert his authority—a positioning of himself as Yanamwakel’s most authoritative spokesman for *kastom*. In Dening’s terms, a classic case of knowledge made dramaturgical in its form of expression: the storyteller choosing the venue (Charlie’s *yimwayim*), selecting the audience (the western researcher and local leaders), and ensuring that the listeners received and heard a story conventional enough to be convincing but different enough to be memorable.

The importance of this last point—observing the textual conventionalities in terms of the content of a story or an interpretation of the past as well as the conventionalities of the telling—was brought home to me by Pascal Ringiau when we met in March this year. In the course of our conversation, Ringiau cast doubt on Yaukilipi’s authority to have even told me the *stori blong Nokwai*. That story, he said, was only Miaki’s story to tell.

I was intrigued by the reference to Miaki. It was Jackson Miaki, father of the current Miaki at Port Resolution, with whom I had stayed when I first went to Tanna to do fieldwork forty years before. After the conversation with Ringiau I went back to my fieldnotes. There I read of Miaki telling me about a European killed during the 1800s at Waisisi, on the east coast. Of a warship that came to investigate, of chiefs being seized, and of a man, Kariwok, who was produced as the culprit. He was quite innocent. But still he was executed, taken ashore at the head of harbour, and buried there by the Europeans.

When I had written about Nokwai to mark Greg’s retirement in 1992, I had overlooked the conversation with Miaki—I think put off by the reference to Kariwok rather than Nokwai. In Kwamera language, as I have recently discovered, the word *kariwok* (or *kaliwok* in Whitesands language), means ‘walkabout’. I did not know it at the time, but what Miaki was telling me in 1975 was that the name of the man executed is not the important thing: all I needed to know was that he was a person without significant connections with place and people. The critical point is that he was innocent. We have seen how this detail would later be disputed by Yaukilipi, when he said that Nokwai was indeed the one who had fired the shot that killed the trader. With that change, Yaukilipi was distinguishing his version of what happened from competing versions, without stretching the credulity of his audience. But it is not this detail—intriguing as it is—that I want to focus on here. The point
I want to finish on is the lesson Miaki drew from the episode. The execution, Miaki told me—and here I quote from my fieldnotes—was ‘another example of the wrongs of the Europeans against the Tannese, and yet it is the Melanesians who are pictured as brutal and the wrongdoer—committing outrages for no apparent reason.’

In the same breath that he recounted this example of the wrongs of the Europeans against the Tannese, Miaki recalled with deep emotion his personal experience of the wrong done to him by a European thirty-five years before. It was the beginning of the island-wide rediscovery of kastom after half a century of harsh mission repression of so-called heathenism, including total prohibition of kava—which had become the touchstone for church adherence. In 1940, Miaki, a Presbyterian elder and teacher of twenty years standing, took his first tentative steps towards reconciling Christianity with kastom, by going to church after drinking kava the night before. The missionary Charles Bell stood in the doorway barring his entry, dismissing Miaki with the sneer that he ‘smelt worse than a pig’. The public humiliation was the end of Miaki’s association with the mission. He toyed with John Frum and the Seventh Day Adventists for some years, but it did not last. An old man living a lonely life when our paths crossed, looking after his two orphaned granddaughters and waiting for nature to reclaim his dead son’s closed-up hut, he would sit in his hut and read his Bible. Close to tears, he talked about how he still follows God and Jesus—how he is ready for Judgement when it comes. But he could never forgive Bell. He told me how alone he now felt, and how ‘uplifting’—his word—it was to have company and the opportunity to talk to someone. Perhaps for the first time, Miaki was telling a European about how Europeans treat the Tannese—and how one in particular had treated him. Not with any bitterness towards me—more a gift to a young outsider struggling to understand the meaning that European encounters held for the Tannese.

That was forty years ago. I am no longer the same young outsider. But the endeavour to understand the meaning of Tannese-European encounters continues. My understanding is challenged nearly every time I return to Tanna, new stories overturning what I might have just published in an article or presented at a conference. But I choose to return.

The choice reflects one of the great lessons I learnt from Greg Dening. Histories are not just a message—the content of a story or an interpretation of the past. They are also the mode of the story’s expression, the public occasion of its telling. That lesson prepared me not only to observe and document those occasions on Tanna, but also to recognise and acknowledge that I am part
of them—part of the poetic of histories on Tanna, part of the Tannese social reality through which the past is made into history.

The lesson intersects, and is in some respects in tension, with another important lesson I learnt from Greg Dening. The historian’s duty is to return the past to itself, to its own present, free from hindsight. When we empower the past by returning it to itself, Greg has written, ‘we empower our imagination to see ourselves.’ Hindsight, knowing what the future holds, blinds us to what the past was when it was still its own present, when it had all the possibilities of the future still in it, with all the uncertainties and unknowns. Hindsight leaches out the uncertainty and closes down our imagination, with the result that ‘we do not see the past as it actually was, only as it would have been if all its uncertainties were taken away’. And, here, historians have an advantage of seeing things insiders never do. We are neither insider nor outsider, as Greg noted, but the interplay of both.

At this point I return to the silence that Greg confronted in Te Henua, and his regret that he did not know the living as he knew the dead. And I return to Tanna—at the other end of the world, in my experience, when it comes to silence and to knowing the living. Greg was right when he wrote that as historians we are neither insider nor outsider, that we are the interplay of both. But the interplay was different for me in Tanna than it was for Greg in Te Henua. Listening to Miaki telling me his kastom story, to Yaukilipi recounting his version of the story, to Nelson Nabat singing the song about Nokwai that failed to mention Nokwai, listening to my friend David Koukari’s thirty years of stories, I shared in the existential moments of the telling, as meaning was given to the past. In those moments of shared imagination, boundaries between past and present are dissolved. The past remains a foreign country where they do things differently. But, in sharing the moments of telling, the borders become more porous. Greg would say that a similar process is at work when the records are written rather than spoken, where it is the historian’s imagination that enables the reader to cross the borders and enter the foreign country that is the past. Similar—but also different, because when we read a document we cannot hear the author’s voice and gauge the inflection, or heed the pauses; we cannot see the writer’s face and catch the slight lifting of the brow, or the hint of a smile. In both cases, as historians we are talking with the dead. But unlike what Greg found in Te Henua, coming to know the dead in Tanna is very much through talking with the living.

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