

Pacific & Southeast Asian History

**ORAL TRADITION IN
MELANESIA**

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AND
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CHAPTER VIII

Oral and Written Sources

Bill Gammage

People who use writing to describe the past are sometimes suspicious of oral history. They point out that two eyewitness accounts of the same event, such as an accident, will always differ, because each account is affected by the emotions, inclination to remember, selection of detail, and prejudice of the eyewitness. If spoken accounts of the same small event disagree, critics argue, then oral history as a whole must be very inaccurate.

A second objection to oral history is that its version of any past event constantly changes. Time affects people's memories, stories change as they pass from mouth to mouth, and people consciously or unconsciously alter the details of a story, or even the main story itself, according to their present interests or needs. Because of this an oral account is not only partly inaccurate to begin with, it also becomes less and less reliable as time goes on. Critics of oral history claim that recording the past in writing avoids these problems, because researchers can base what they write on records unaffected by generations of oral storytelling.

An oral historian might reply that much early European history existed for centuries only as oral history before being written down, or that written accounts even of very recent events necessarily begin as spoken accounts, or that communities without writing learn to remember traditions and past events more accurately than communities accustomed to substitute writing for memory, or that the advantages of writing are irrelevant to communities which do not write. But in Papua New Guinea, where both writing and speech are being used to study history, criticisms of oral history might be worth considering.

Of course oral traditions can contain inaccuracies. For example, a story told in many parts of the Highlands between Goroka and Porgera is that the first *kiap* there, Jim Taylor, shot local villagers. Highlanders who were actually there tell these stories: they can name the villagers shot, and point out kinsmen of the dead. They are not seeking compensation or claiming that the shooting was unreasonable—indeed usually they say the shooting was justified. So usually historians can accept that someone was shot. But equally only a little thought and research can show that, except where he himself gives evidence to the contrary,

Jim Taylor was not the shooter. Apart from times when unknown to Taylor his police may have clashed with villagers,¹ stories that Taylor shot people come from villages up to sixty miles from the route of his early patrols, or are about people shot when Taylor was not in the Highlands, or have Taylor shooting villagers at different places at the same time!

How can such mistakes have occurred? We must first realise that during early clashes no villager could have known the name of a white man shooting at them. Indeed, since we are discussing people who had never or rarely seen white men, no villager could have known whether or not the white man they saw was a *kiap*—or even what a *kiap* was! Even when patrol posts were first set up it was hard for villagers to find out a *kiap*'s name, and many early *kiaps* were described by their appearance or behaviour—master red face, for example, or the tall master, or the angry master, and so on. So when villagers name a *kiap* who shot kinsmen, they must have learnt this name *after* the shooting, perhaps even twenty or thirty years after, and they learnt it directly or indirectly from another European. Now most Europeans know very little about the history of early contact in the Highlands, but most know that Taylor was the first *kiap* west of Goroka. So we might guess that when a villager told a European that the first white man in *his area* shot kinsmen, the European assumed that the villager was referring to the first white man in *the Highlands*. He would then wrongly name Taylor, and the villager would accept this as correct and thereafter say that Taylor shot his kinsmen.

Of course the mistake might have begun in other ways. For example, some villagers might credit Taylor with shootings simply in deference to his status as a big man in the Highlands, without checking whether or not he was responsible. In many societies the status of heroes is increased in this way, by crediting them with acts they may not have committed. But the point of this example is that the error seems entrenched in oral accounts, yet could easily be proved wrong by Taylor's written patrol reports, or by other patrol reports, from the Ialibu and Wabag areas for example, which name the European who actually did the shooting for which villagers credit or blame Taylor.

Oral traditions can be inaccurate in other ways. They may be deliberately distorted, to promote land claims for example: the so-called Kukukuku people are still losing border land because neighbours with better access to the government use oral tradition to claim land held by the Kukukuku as hunting ground, and

¹Kamuna Hura from Garaina, a former police constable with Taylor, stated that Taylor's police shot Highlanders and told Taylor afterwards (interview with Arenao Sesiguo, Port Moresby, August 1976), but Tapo from Manus, a former sergeant, stated that Taylor did not know of these shootings, and would have imprisoned the police responsible had he found out (interview, Lorengau, September 1976). Jim Taylor believes that his police could not have fired rifles without his hearing them (interview, Goroka, November 1976).

Highlanders have used oral traditions to take possession of valley ground too dangerous to occupy until Europeans came. Oral traditions may also omit details which no longer seem relevant, and may even omit entire traditions, for example about disease, fear, hunger, or sorcery, because they no longer seem important.

These examples support those critics who object that, consciously or unconsciously, oral traditions change the past to suit the present. What seems relevant is edited and distorted as it is passed on, anything else is not passed on at all, or at best survives as reminiscence or entertainment. We might note immediately that the critics assume that *accuracy* is the chief virtue of history, whereas village leaders might argue that above all history must be *useful*—it should justify land boundaries, for example, or strengthen group solidarity. But even if we accept that accuracy is important, it is doubtful whether the relative accuracy of written and oral history can be shown to differ significantly. Not only can both oral and written evidence be inaccurate from the moment it is recorded, as eyewitness and newspaper accounts show, but also each repetition of either can add to its probable inaccuracies. What matters is not whether a piece of evidence is written or oral, but how many repetitions—how many opportunities for adding to its original inaccuracies—it has undergone. By the critics' own standards, recent oral evidence should on the face of it be more reliable than written evidence often repeated from ancient sources. Of course in theory reference back to the original written source, if it still exists, can limit inaccuracies brought about by repetition, but in practice that is only sporadically done, whereas Papua New Guineans constantly took care to pass on accurately oral traditions that mattered, by training young men to recite them, by formalising their transmission with ceremony and ritual, and by giving status to historians.

More importantly, with any history the interpretation of evidence is *in practice* far more significant than its collection. Any good historian will try to eliminate errors, either by checking written records or by checking the memories or learnt traditions of others in the community. But also any good historian interprets his evidence according to the needs or interests of his audience. Very little is written or spoken which contradicts the prejudices of the writer or speaker, and very little is read or heard which does not interest an audience. We can show this in written history by noting how different are two popular versions of the same event written at different times. That such a thing offends theoretical notions of accuracy has never prevented it happening.

In other words the faults which critics use to condemn oral history can also condemn written history. Inaccuracies persist and multiply in written accounts despite theories that they need not, and in written history as in oral history evidence is in practice subordinate to interpretation. In fact the advantage of written history is not accuracy, but convenience. Writing avoids the need to

memorise, and so increases how much information can be passed on. Indeed perhaps it is because writing preserves more detail about more events that writers assume written evidence to be more accurate, whereas really a relative lack of detail does not bear at all on the accuracy of what is preserved orally, although it may make the interpretation of oral traditions more difficult for historians seeking accuracy.

Examples of error and prejudice are easily found in Papua New Guinea's written records. Written sources can simply be wrong: some patrol reports, for example, wrongly claim never to have shot people,² or claim to have conducted thorough censuses when (as the writers will tell you orally) only estimates of population were made, or claim to have spent money in one way when in fact it was spent in another. Written sources can also be edited and distorted to suit the present interests or prejudices of a historian or a community. Despite contrary evidence, for example, some historians will state or imply that Papua New Guineans never traditionally alienated land, or that all *kiaps* were bad (or good), or that missionaries never (or always) destroyed artefacts. Writing is a valuable skill, but written sources are more often the servants than the masters of contemporary prejudices.

Perhaps the best working rule for Papua New Guinea historians might be to ignore comparison between oral and written sources, and accept that good history should prize *any* evidence which tells about the past.

In Papua New Guinea an obvious fact is that written sources mainly reflect European concerns, while oral sources mainly reflect Papua New Guinea concerns. To neglect either would entrench errors or omissions or bias which a true historian should strive to eradicate. Oral and written sources are allies: each strengthens the other. The remainder of this chapter is meant to illustrate the partnership of oral and written history. It tells how historians investigated the Rabaul strike of 1929. Such an account might be interesting in itself, as it is not often given, but it is meant mainly to show how inaccuracies can exist even in accepted and seemingly reliable sources, both written and oral; how much might be learnt by seeking out any evidence and by checking and re-checking one detail against another; how despite determined searches much valuable evidence can remain undiscovered; and how in the end evidence is subordinated to the prejudices of the historian. The article about the Strike and an outline of most of the evidence used to write it is in *Oral History*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (1975) pp. 2-43 and, amended, in the *Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 10, no. 3, (1975) pp. 3-29.

²See D. Mendano, 'Early Contact with White Men', UPNG History Essay, August 1976. Other examples are not cited in deference to patrol officers still living. With a few exceptions I do not think these officers should be condemned, for their actions are difficult to assess without experience in a like situation, but I do fear that publicity would subject them to ill-considered criticism. Perhaps this footnote might illustrate how readily a historian's prejudices can override his evidence.

In 1972 Hank Nelson and I agreed that someone should learn more about the Rabaul Strike. It seemed an early use of a European custom for Papua New Guinean purposes, we believed it (wrongly) to be the first strike of any kind in Papua New Guinea, and we thought that its organisation might help counter doubts about Papua New Guinean ability which some Europeans and Papua New Guineans had in 1972. Obviously some prejudices evident in the final article existed even before serious research into it had begun. This is often so in history.

In 1972 little was known about the Strike. What was known came from written European sources: Griffith's Royal Commission findings of March 1929, *Rabaul Times* reports between January and March 1929, articles by Ian Willis and J.K. McCarthy, and a handful of brief references in other books. Nothing was certain about why and how Papua New Guineans had planned the Strike, nor what they felt about it, nor what happened to them afterwards. Only two leaders could be named — Sumasuma from either New Ireland or Madang, and Rami from somewhere on Manus. We knew nothing about any other Papua New Guinean involved — it seemed urgent to learn their story of the Strike.

Written sources might help, but obviously the best information would come from asking people who were there — from oral sources. Hank made two important discoveries — in 1972 he learnt that Sumasuma's son, Blaise Mem, would soon come to the University, and late in 1973 he found in Canberra a detailed transcript of evidence given by the Strike leaders at their trial. Hank left Papua New Guinea at the end of 1972, but his place was taken in 1973 by Rabbie Namaliu, after his return from studying in Canada.

Rabbie and I planned to visit the New Guinea islands in September 1973, to interview people who remembered the Strike. I prepared for this in Port Moresby by reading anything which might tell us about the Strike or about conditions in Rabaul in 1929 — the better prepared researchers are in this way, the more detailed will be the questions they can ask in interviews, and the more detailed the information gathered. The annual volumes of the *Laws of the Territory of New Guinea* in the Supreme Court Library laid down the minimum pay, contract terms, and living conditions of police, seamen and labourers in Rabaul, and also gave hints about the organisation of the police force. *New Guinea Annual Reports* indicated living conditions and crime rates in Rabaul, and replies to letters from Europeans who knew about the Strike, especially from Keith McCarthy, explained various incidents and details.

By September Rabbie and I had learnt that New Guineans who remembered the Strike were living in Rabaul, on New Ireland, and on Manus. We began in Rabaul, asking why so few Tolais had taken part in the Strike, then went to Namatanai on New Ireland, then to Sumasuma's *ples* on Boang Island, Tanga, then up the New Ireland coast to Kavieng, and finally to Manus. We tape

recorded eleven interviews mainly involving nineteen people, and afterwards took three months to translate these recordings from Kuanua or *tok pisin* and have an English transcript typed.

In all interviews our method was similar. We had two portable cassette recorders (two in case one broke down), and after writing details about the interview in a notebook (names, place, date, language used, tape number), everything said was recorded on a cassette. We had to be careful that background noises such as the surf or people talking did not drown out an interview.

We began each talk by explaining who we were, and that we hoped to write an article about the Strike so that Papua New Guinean students could learn about it. Next we outlined what we knew already, to avoid repetition. Sometimes to test a speaker's memory we asked a few questions to which we knew the answer, and we asked some questions we thought essential — for example, why did you strike? How early did planning for the Strike begin (or, when did you first hear about the Strike)? Were you happy with your pay?, and so on. Otherwise we tried to let each speaker tell his own story, partly to show respect to older and more knowledgeable men, and partly because people may talk more freely and with more detail once they warm to their story. Always we concluded by asking whether the speaker could tell us of others who might help. We did not pay informants, who after all were helping preserve the history of their country, but during interviews we made small gifts of cigarettes, tinned meat, sugar, and the like.

Usually we could not warn anyone that we were coming, but everyone we met freely gave time to help us, and patiently answered our questions. Their courtesy and consideration were exceptional. When we stopped at Mangai village on New Ireland to talk to Baa Sabau, for example, he was not at home, so we went on to Kavieng, thirty miles away. Mr. Sabau had been in Kavieng, but when he returned home that night and learnt that two strangers had called, he caught a PMV back to Kavieng, found us, and told us his story until late into the night. Then, refusing to stay, he went out into pouring rain to find his way home to Mangai.

Some speakers exaggerated details of the Strike, or invented what they had forgotten, but most wanted to tell their story accurately, to benefit future generations of Papua New Guineans. If they could not remember a detail they said so and apologised. If they were unsure of their information, they asked for time to think or to seek a second opinion. Several times, especially on Tanga, a question was debated at length among all the men present, and only after they agreed did they answer. Once or twice they answered that no villager present could help us and that we should ask another man nearby — and we would all go off and find him. This might illustrate how village history — oral history — on the one hand adapts to contemporary opinion, but on the other tries to remove inaccuracies from accounts of the past. In general the men we

spoke to were at least as concerned to get the story right as are historians trained in the written traditions of truth and accuracy — indeed their care and concern set standards which some both in Papua New Guinea and Australia might well imitate.

The oral interviews provided information unobtainable anywhere else, and at last what happened before, during, and after the Strike began to come to life. We discovered that Sumasuma and Rami were only names in *tok pisin* — the leaders were Sumsuma and N'Dramei, and about Sumsuma especially we were told a great deal. Former strikers also described when, how and why the Strike was planned, what New Guineans at the time thought about living in a European town, what relations were between different groups of New Guineans in Rabaul in 1929, and what happened to the strikers afterwards. As they spoke a clearer picture of the Strike took shape, confirming some early impressions, changing others, and adding completely new and unexpected elements. For example, while as we had hoped we learnt the names of such Strike leaders as Bohun, Gok and Ralau, we also learned that a second police sergeant-major had been involved in the Strike. This was a thing which no written record then available had hinted at. Who was this man? Where did he come from? What did he do during the Strike? Why did written records not mention him?

The search for the other sergeant-major was only one of the tasks we had when we returned to Port Moresby. The oral interviews gave us many answers, but also raised many questions. We were led to write letters or talk to more Europeans who remembered the Strike: Jim Taylor helped us particularly. We were also led to read Australian Parliamentary Papers on labour conditions in New Guinea, to ask about strikes in Papua before 1929 and in German New Guinea before 1914, to read of the early days at Salamaua and the Wau-Bulolo goldfields where many strikers were sent. After much searching the other sergeant-major proved to be Kateo, who still lived on Wallis Island off Wewak. On Tanga William Taki had told us this, but others had disagreed, so Kateo's identity was uncertain until police pension records were checked.

So the oral interviews of September 1973 not only outlined what Papua New Guineans did during the Strike, they also uncovered more written and oral sources, and improved our understanding of the written sources we had. Although students and others constantly added new details, the Rabaul Strike article was based on the 1973 interviews and on the written trial transcript Hank Nelson had found.

Yet many puzzles remain. We know little about N'Dramei — not even his grave has been located certainly. Perhaps one day a student from Pitylu will tell us more about him. We are not sure why Tolais kept out of the Strike (if they did), or whether most workers were happy with their pay, or where leaders like Bohun came from and what happened to them, or who led the strikers at the Catholic Mission, or what Kateo's role in the Strike was, and so on.

As well I now doubt some fundamental assumptions in the Rabaul Strike article. In 1976 I read an extract from an article about Tanga by the anthropologist F.L.S. Bell,³ who lived on Tanga in 1933, the year after Sumsuma returned from prison. The article was partly about Sumsuma, and described him using traditional conventions in new ways to gain status. It showed that he was resourceful, willing to innovate, and determined to lead. Most importantly, it suggested that it might be wrong to treat the Strike simply as an example of skilful New Guinean use of a European custom. Striking for higher pay was certainly European, but were the Strike leaders seeking more than higher pay? On the face of it they stood to lose much by striking — perhaps they risked what they had to improve their traditional standing? That might explain why Sumsuma wanted to take full responsibility for the Strike at his trial, and perhaps why Kateo opposed the Strike — was he N'Dramei's rival for traditional reasons?

These suggestions imply that traditional attitudes towards leadership were applied to a non-traditional situation. They imply that those who were willing followers during the Strike could regard leaders who were not *wantoks* as traditional big men. Could this have been so? Did New Guineans consider a sergeant-major or a boss boy a big man, or was he shown respect only because Europeans had given him power? Did men like Sumsuma and N'Dramei gain permanent traditional status because temporarily they were important in the European world? If they did, which mattered more before the Strike, their rank among Europeans, or their traditional status?

In these and other ways traditional values and attitudes clearly deserved closer consideration than the article had given them. The meetings the police held before the Strike, for example, were more like village councils than European meetings — the leaders did not give orders as did police N.C.O.s, they spoke last and most decisively as did village leaders. Again, if we imagine New Guineans working in Rabaul to be a single community, accepting those most prominent among them as big men in place of their traditional leaders at home, then the exclusion of the Tolai becomes more easily understood (they alone in Rabaul had a traditional structure relatively intact), and the readiness of men to be led by 'foreigners' becomes more reasonable.

The role of tradition in the Strike remains to be properly researched, but research may force not only a drastic reconsideration of what really was going on during the Strike, but also a review of the entire subject of relations between Papua New Guineans and Europeans. If that happens, when that happens, then a 1975 article on the Rabaul Strike might well be seen as typifying what it had hoped to advance beyond — European colonial history.

³F.L.S. Bell, 'The Place of Food in the Social Life of the Tanga', *Oceania*, Vol. 18, no. 1, (1947) pp. 36-59. Pages 50-8 of this article are reprinted in Whittaker, J.L. et al., *Documents and Readings in New Guinea History*, Brisbane 1975, pp. 65-8.

PART III

ORAL SOURCES AND HISTORY IN MELANESIA