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*Working Together in Vanuatu: Research Histories,
Collaborations, Projects and Reflections* by ed. John Taylor
and Nick Thieberger (review)

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Book Reviews

John Taylor and Nick Thieberger, eds. *Working Together in Vanuatu: Research Histories, Collaborations, Projects and Reflections*.

Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2011. 278 pp. Paper, \$28.00 AUD. Ebook version, free.

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The Melanesian archipelago of Vanuatu is a fascinating case study for those interested in collaborative anthropological research. Known as the New Hebrides and ruled jointly by the UK and France under a “condominium” agreement until 1980, the young nation placed a moratorium on foreign social science research in 1985. By the time the moratorium was lifted in 1994, collaboration and local involvement in research were the norm rather than the exception, and as much as was possible, national researchers (called *fiwoka* in Bislama) were to be equal partners and gatekeepers in any anthropological undertaking. Easier said than done. Nonetheless, collaborative anthropological research in Vanuatu has yielded some remarkable successes. This edited volume, based on the conference titled *Afta 26 Yia* held in 2006 at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC), is a tribute to some of the many projects on which ni-Vanuatu and foreign researchers have worked together to explore indigenous culture, *kastom*, history, and experience. All the contributors share a commitment to decolonizing the practice of research and its dissemination, marshaling Melanesian modes of oratory, codes of respectful recognition, and ways of understanding collaborative praxis to create a book that speaks to the future of research in Vanuatu as well as to its past.

The book begins auspiciously with the conference’s welcome speeches (in Bislama, the lingua franca of the archipelago, and in English transla-

tion) given by Chief Kalkot Murmur and Chief Paul Tahī. Indeed, eleven of the volume's twenty-three substantive chapters are Bislama speeches, in which the *filwoka* and honored guests artfully present the origins, aims, and findings of their research in vernacular terms. It is difficult to overstate the significance of speechmaking in Melanesia, where oratory and politics are conjoined in very important ways. The incorporation of these speeches—which more traditional academic publications might omit as extraneous to the research—shows the editors' dedication to including the voices of ni-Vanuatu collaborators and gatekeepers.

A section on "Histories" demonstrates that indigenous hosts have always been active participants in anthropological research, even if they were not always recognized as such. Senior anthropologists Michael Allen, Ellen Facey, and Robert Tonkinson provide personal reflections on their pre-Independence fieldwork in the New Hebrides, highlighting how local communities asserted agency in a complicated colonial situation where it was often unclear who had the authority to grant permission to would-be ethnographers. Facey's recollections of her first trip in 1978–80, at the cusp of Independence, vividly shows the transition from colonial to postcolonial political structures, as in a vignette where a British Residency officer quietly tells her to seek permission for her research from the Vanua'aku Pati, the socialist political party that would soon lead the country's first independent government. All three authors describe how they negotiated the sometimes conflicting agendas of colonial agents, modernist church leaders, neo-traditionalist village councils, plantation owners, and thesis advisors—discovering, to their surprise, just how "political" anthropological fieldwork could be.

Among the "Collaborations" are Lamont Lindstrom's work with *vcc filwoka*s collecting stories about World War II from elders throughout the archipelago. The chapter includes his and collaborator James Gwero's reflections on war stories as performance genre, the collective ownership of history, and the importance of sharing knowledge about Vanuatu's role in the war. Janet Dixon Keller and Takaronga Kuautonga similarly explore the nature of oral narratives and myths in the contemporary context. *Filwoka*s Phillip Tepahae and Jean Tarisesei each provide a speech about the value of their work in strengthening *kastom*—Tarisesei with thoughtful comments on how the participation of women fieldworkers can help to make *kastom* "full and balanced." This concern with the gendered aspects of research is explored further in two bilingual and multiply authored chapters, the

first by Mary Patterson, Koran Wilfred, and Ileen Vira, the second by Margaret Rodman, Leisara Kalotiti, and Numalin Mahana. In different ways these two pieces demonstrate the centrality of gendered kinship practices in facilitating research relationships—particularly, perhaps, for women anthropologists, whose adoption into local families is usually a prerequisite for fieldwork in Melanesia. Patterson’s status as Wilfred’s “Aunty” (his grandfather’s “daughter”) is just as essential to the success of their collaboration as grant funding, research objectives, and interview questions—if not more so. Likewise, Kalotiti and Mahana’s discussions of their past work as house-girls for expatriates use a language of kinship and relationality rather than exploitation or inequality—reframing the often disparaged position of domestic worker in an indigenous idiom that accepts differences as long as they are accompanied by mutual respect.

The “Projects” section, opening with a welcome speech from former VCC director and current Minister of Lands and Natural Resources Ralph Regenvanu, describes seven applied anthropology and archaeology projects undertaken as VCC collaborations. All these projects are applied in the sense that they seek to strengthen national cultural institutions or advance human development—law, education, film, archives and libraries, disaster response, local industry, and heritage preservation are each tackled in a series of thoughtful reports, four of which are in Bislama.

Finally, the five “Reflections” chapters consider some of the epistemological challenges of collaboration between foreign and indigenous researchers—whether such collaboration is formalized as “training,” as in the chapter by Bedford and colleagues on the development of ni-Vanuatu archaeology *filwoka*s, or is more complex and ambiguous, as in Sabine Hess’s chapter on her fictive father-daughter relationship with informant and *filwoka* Eli Field. A question that runs through most of these pieces is that of how to balance successfully the “insider” and “outsider” perspectives on *kastom*. Ni-Vanuatu themselves hold differing views on the value of *kastom* (often depending on religious affiliation), which in turn are often irreconcilable with the more detached or critical understandings of foreign anthropologists. Short speeches by *filwoka*s Elsy Tilon and Martha Alick hint at how investigating *kastom* can present personal challenges for ni-Vanuatu with strong Christian identities. The last essay, by Benedicta Rousseau, provides a concise history of the category of *kastom* in Vanuatu (particularly as it has been engaged and advanced

by the VCC) while highlighting the dialectical relationship between these “national” definitions and the interpretations of foreign anthropologists.

The book’s epilogue, by Margaret Jolly, emphasizes that the 1985–94 research moratorium, while possibly upsetting to foreign graduate students and other scholars looking forward to fieldwork in Vanuatu, was ultimately a good thing: it resulted in the production of research guidelines that have since been used as a model of best practices by UNESCO, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), and others. Seven years following Afta 26 Yia, in 2013 the Vanuatu National Cultural Council approved a second moratorium, in effect until 2014, in order to re-think current guidelines and ensure that future researchers comply with national policies on collaboration. For those concerned by this act of research sovereignty, this book is a helpful reminder that collaboration and compromise have helped, not hindered, the production of anthropological knowledge about Vanuatu and its people.

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Innocent Pikirayi. *Tradition, Archaeological Heritage Protection and Communities in the Limpopo Province of South Africa*. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA), 2011. 128 pp. Paper, \$24.95.

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Archaeologists and African communities increasingly seek more collaborative approaches to heritage conservation. While material finds offer important historical sources and a potential foil against intellectual colonialism, archaeology as a discipline continues to struggle to articulate its relevance to multiple audiences, often including the people linked, in a historical or cultural sense, to archaeological sites. In this volume Innocent Pikirayi—a professor at the University of Pretoria and a specialist on the later archaeology of southern Africa—addresses contemporary traditions and heritage challenges on the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Throughout his