

What is it that I have learnt?
 What have I understood about them and about myself?
 That the discontinuity of being upon which individuality is predicated, upon which our belief that we can isolate and alienate things from context and interdependence to understand them, is just one way of being. It reveals some of what we might consider to be truth, yet it masks so much else in its exclusive gaze, avoiding the tendrils of subtle forces – the relationships – that bind every thing to something else.

“Science fiction properly conceived, like all serious fiction, however funny, is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything else in this vast sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and to come of things that were, this unending story.”
 (UK Le Guin, *ibid*)

am in the midst of somewhere and something that is unmistakably human and familiar, yet so palpably alien at the same time. Just as science fiction can be used as a lens to interrogate our present, so the dislocation of journeying to a culture and society that is structured in such a radically different way to everything I had ever known is itself an opportunity to evaluate and scrutinise myself and everything I believe and trust in.

It is in how these relationships are constantly practiced, demonstrated, made and re-made through the vital life of the community that I have found a thread that helps me make sense of what we have been doing together. And in another process of making that somehow seems to me to reflect something of the interwoven relationship between people, what they ‘know’ and how it is relational rather than fixed. What we might think of as a piece of ‘knowledge’ or a fact is or, rather, *holds* a relational connection that flows as long as those within its net continue to foster and nourish the relationship. It can change shape, expand or contract, be added to or refined as those in the relationship determine. Just as Le Guin conceives of a novel as being like a bag or a sack that holds things in relation to one another, so I have begun to consider that the books that we have been making with Reite people share some of the significance of the *bilums* – traditional string bags – they use to hold and carry things.

What is a Bilum?

Bilums are the ubiquitous hand-woven bags that almost everyone, women and men, in Papua New Guinea use to carry things in: from store and market cargo, to the daily harvest of vegetables and fruits grown in their gardens, to everyday items and treasures: buai (betel nuts), pepper and lime powder, lighter, pen, torch, pieces of newspaper, twists of tobacco leaf, money, mobile phone – and babies.

It has been the great privilege of my life to have been invited to visit and to share my skills and knowledge with the people of Reite village in Madang Province, Papua New Guinea. I’ve charted the arc of this journey in a series of posts on the Proboscis website since it got going back in 2009 with a request from my friend, anthropologist James Leach, to help document the visit to London and the British Museum’s Ethnographic Department by two Reite Villagers, Porer Nombo and Pinbin Sisau. This was documented in an interview by Frédérik Lesage with James in 2010 and written up as a case study on the bookleteer website.

in The Wave in the Mind (2004)
 Ursula K. Le Guin, “A War without End”,
 unquestioned.”

“the important thing is not to offer any specific hope of alternate reality, to dislodge my mind, and so the reader’s mind, from the lazy, timorous habit of thinking that the way we live now is the only way people can live. It is that inertia that allows the institutions of injustice to continue

Tacit Knowledges, Living Archives



Tacit Knowledges, Living Archives

&

Book and Bilum

Tacit and experiential knowledges are known to be at risk of

- What values and valuables of human skill and knowledge are disappearing?
 - What kinds of experiential knowledges are at risk? How can the values of such knowledges be self-documented as a digital/physical resource for the future?
- disregarding?
- society in danger of losing, abandoning or simply “efficiency” over human skill and judgement, what is our values speed, automation and highly specific concepts of patience and perseverance. But in an age which increasingly machines and other life-forms are acquired over time, with harvest things and how to work with materials, tools, The tacit knowledges of how to make, shape, grow and
- Since 2016 I have also been slowly planning a parallel concept, “Tacit Knowledges, Living Archives” (or TKLA) that would be complementary to the TK Reite Notebooks (TKRN) project I’ve been working on in Papua New Guinea. It continues to be a slow-to-develop framework that does not seem suited to the existing systems of funding or support. I suspect it needs some sort of organic process to become an *emergence*, a possibility for others to engage in and with. So I’m going to share it and see if it strikes any chords...

A Concept in Development

way I choose to live and, in the work I do. As an artist they have always been present, a vital part of my critical and creative toolkit and way of life. But it is rare to have such an opportunity to experience ways of living that are diametrically different to our own. When an understanding of the true difference that exists becomes tangible within one’s own lived experience, it triggers a shift in both the centre and the orbits of one’s life. That re-orientation affects everything going forward – the sense of value and values, as well as rootedness in one’s own culture, purpose and activity. It has inspired my thinking with new revelations: providing me with a kind of double vision that offsets the familiar ever so slightly to suggest alternative perspectives and different priorities.

Elsewhere I have described this as helping me define a practice based on *reciprocal entanglement*: to create artworks and situations which enable people to have *empathic encounters*. In the future, once the TKRN project reaches its conclusion, I hope to write up a more in depth reflection on what I have learned – for now it remains a fluid process that continues to draw me along, as currents around me shift and I do my best to be an agent for positive, transformational change whilst treading as lightly on the Earth as needs must.

<https://gileslane.net/2019/06/29/marpunggae-singsing-video/>



<https://reitekrnlilibrary.wordpress.com/2015/09/12/designs-for-drums-and-plates/>

Notes & Links

London, March 2020

“Still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars.”
U.K. Le Guin (*ibid*)

What might readily appear as loss to us, so fond of our cultural heritage, provenance and history, might instead be resilience and adaptation without sentimentality.



proboscis

Tacit Knowledges, Living Archives & Book and Bilum

Giles Lane

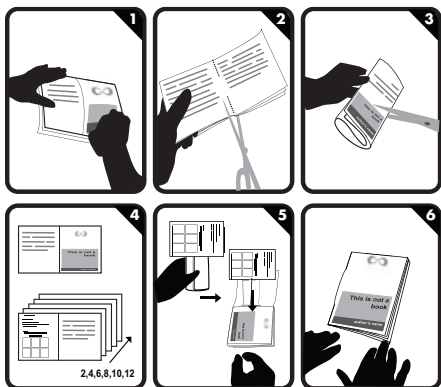
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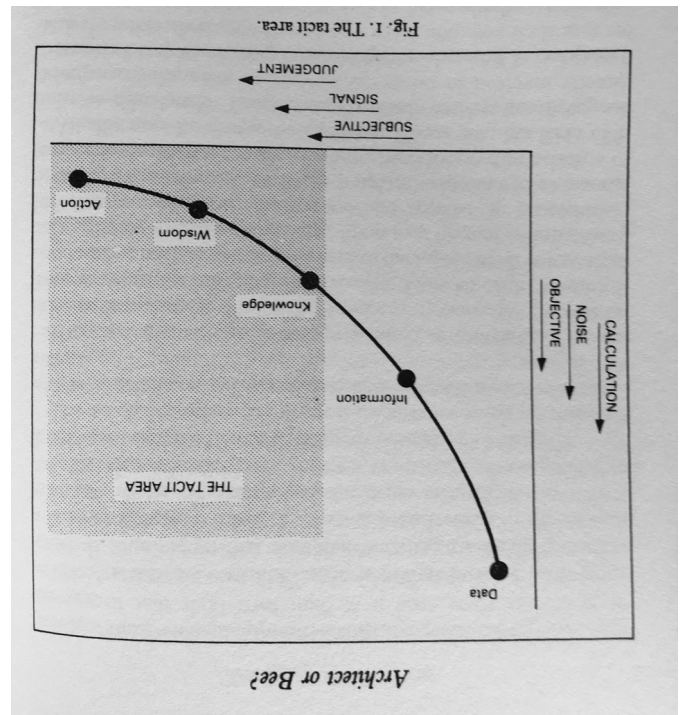
A few years ago at an informal dinner in Oxford, a distinguished scientist and master of a college there asked me to tell him the "three most important" pieces of Reite traditional knowledge that our project had "saved" for posterity. It was hard to counter the blithe assumption that their knowledge could be so easily alienated from the context of where and how they live. As someone who deals in scientific facts, in the certainties of binary logic, he struggled to make sense of my attempt to explain that our friends in Reite seemed to have no interest in cataloguing and transmitting what they know in such a way. Perhaps he disbelieved me, or thought that our work had failed in some empirical sense. In describing it, I suggested that what people in Reite appear to be interested in is the

relationships between people, places and things that are the actual fabric of what the 'knowledge' conveys. If the ways of life of peoples who live differently to us and the specific ecologies in which this is lived are not sustained, protected and supported, then what is the point of conserving their 'knowledge'? What purpose will it have if these peoples, their environments and ecologies disappear into the voracious maw of extractive capitalism and its hunger for natural resources at any cost? What, then, is this urge to preserve, other than the collection of objects, artefacts of curiosity to be archived or put on display in such a way as to convey the impression of the deep culture and humanity of its owner or benefactor?

making of the books, and that many of these books appear – as we might see it – to repeat or share the same or very similar information. However, the articulation of the content in the books, as well as who was involved in making them, suggests whole other layers of meaning and signification which may be unintelligible, and perhaps of no value in any case, to anyone outside of the village and its intricate tapestry of relationships.

So perhaps what James and I have been doing by making these books with our friends in Reite is to learn how to weave a different kind of bilum that holds and make tangible its own kind of relationships – and that conveys yet other meanings within it. Books which are not documents of knowledge or media containing information, but artefacts describing the relationships that make knowledge possible in particular places, between specific people.

I used to wonder if our project was somehow contributing to a revivification of a local culture that was in danger of being lost to the swell of consumerism and rampant exploitation of natural resources that are the contemporary forms of colonialism. Now I am more of the opinion that it is being incorporated into a kind of local cultural dynamism that remakes itself as it works with the materials at hand, that articulates new relationships by evolving different kinds of ritual and exchange.



In his 1980 book, *Architect or Bee?*, Mike Cooley defines tacit knowledge as informal knowledge "acquired through doing, 'attending to' things". He goes on to say, "Knowledge frequently applied in a domain may become wisdom, and wisdom is the basis for positive action." He also includes a diagram suggesting how he sees it operating on the axis of signal/noise and the path from data to action:

Tacit Knowledge

loss in the face of automation, digital communications and data-driven decision making:

- Why do people value these kinds of knowledges?
- In what ways are they being, or can they be, transmitted to future generations?
- Who are the inheritors of older traditions of experiential knowledge? and,
- Who is currently adapting and evolving new experiential practices?

I believe that the processes and methods we have co-devised for the TKRN project could be equally adopted and adapted in our own communities in places like the UK – functioning as the kind of *Tools for Conviviality* described by Ivan Illich in his eponymous book:

"People need new tools to work with rather than tools that "work" for them."

This conviviality – the making and sharing together of value through stories, descriptions and other forms of *practising* knowledge – has been a key feature of how we have seen the TKRN tools become woven into Reite village life. It is not so much their status as artefacts which has made them valuable or that has given them meaning, as the *social processes of making and sharing* – enacting knowledge within and among each other. The books act as waymarkers to the people, or *Living Archives*, within whom and through their relations with others, the knowledge actually resides.

When we – westerners from the industrial world – encounter things like a Reite book, is it like coming across a mint condition pencil or is it more like unearthing a pencil stub? How are we to know whether or not we are merely projecting our own preconceptions of what constitutes 'knowledge' or value onto artefacts produced by a different world – westerners from the industrial world – lie for its creator.

of the relationships that it implies, and where the value may the object as the thing of value, we can be blissfully unaware of the relationships that it implies, and where the value may be found. A lowly thing, it seems as artless as a string bag might appear to a treasure seeker, as a hand-made book by a subsistence gardener living in a tropical rainforest might seem, especially if, like so many others of its kind, it told a similar story of taro, yam, sago, vines or the small freshwater shrimp from the local streams. By focusing on the object as the thing of value, we can be blissfully unaware of the relationships that it implies, and where the value may be found.

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are trying to understand or interpret the use of. The very ordinary, humble and utilitarian pencil – an object which has been critical in writing and drawing, in the creation and flow of ideas, images and the expression of what it is to be human – could so easily be overlooked in its final, worn-down state. Its study seems devoid of the power of creativity that its use enabled. A lowly thing, it seems as artless as a string bag might appear to a treasure seeker, as a hand-made book by a subsistence gardener living in a tropical rainforest might seem, especially if, like so many others of its kind, it told a similar story of taro, yam, sago, vines or the small freshwater shrimp from the local streams. By focusing on the object as the thing of value, we can be blissfully unaware of the relationships that it implies, and where the value may be found.

accommodate into any assertion of knowledge that we might make. That the relational aspect of any device to its use must be contingent on how we *imagine* it – and that our imaginations are themselves bounded by our own experience, not those of the people whose artefacts we are trying to understand or interpret the use of. The very ordinary, humble and utilitarian pencil – an object which has been critical in writing and drawing, in the creation and flow of ideas, images and the expression of what it is to be human – could so easily be overlooked in its final, worn-down state. Its study seems devoid of the power of creativity that its use enabled. A lowly thing, it seems as artless as a string bag might appear to a treasure seeker, as a hand-made book by a subsistence gardener living in a tropical rainforest might seem, especially if, like so many others of its kind, it told a similar story of taro, yam, sago, vines or the small freshwater shrimp from the local streams. By focusing on the object as the thing of value, we can be blissfully unaware of the relationships that it implies, and where the value may be found.

culture? How are we so sure that we have the capabilities to ascertain what value or meaning it might have to someone who does not share our outlook, our experiences, our upbringing and acculturation?

And this brings me to consider the relational aspect of what might constitute knowledge in a place and community like Reite. Knowledge seems to be something that must always be sustained through intergenerational engagement and activity, rather than reified into a commodity that can be transacted, hoarded and controlled. It is the ongoing observation of and participation in the life and rituals of the community – attending to belonging – that lead to the acquisition of knowledge. Ritual payments to significant kin and elders of things which must be grown and harvested or collected and made from the local environment. Things which take time, effort and negotiation – that are in themselves, demonstrations of relationships. Constantly woven and re-woven. Being human, nested within an intricate matrix of connections.

I wonder if the “finished artefact fallacy” might be at the root of why the foundations of wealthy, cultured Westerners are so obsessed with “saving” things – like traditional knowledges – which they consider to be endangered. Significant sums of money are spent on documenting them and putting them into books, archives and museums, but not into sustaining the complex webs of

Such deliberate erasures of culture and creative or craft practices are now seen as tragedies, yet still counted as acceptable by those for whom the logic of 'progress' defaults to economic and monetary value over any other. A key aspect of resistance has been folk-culture and memory –

Battle of Culloden and the 1745 Jacobite Rising.

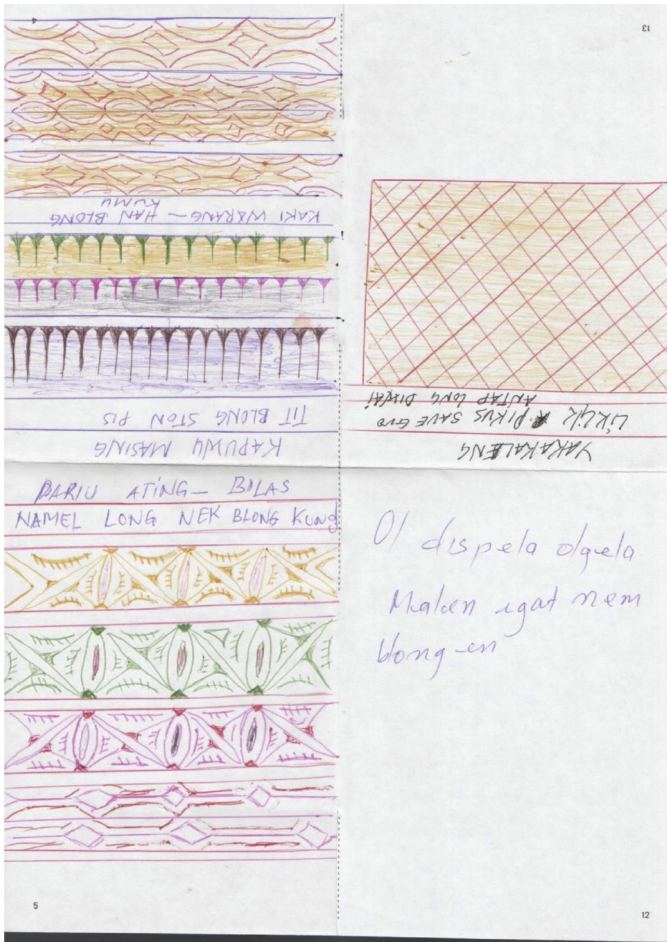
suppression of the Highland clans' way of life following the Clearances of the 19th Century followed a more direct (often relatives or dependents) in Parliament. In Scotland, individual Acts that removed common land from common ownership into the hands of the wealthy, by their agents stewardship, but increasingly it was circumvented by legal impediments to enclosure in England, and a model for The 1217 Charter of the Forest had been one of the great physical eviction of local people from their ancestral homes. sequester it for their own benefit – also leading to the their use of Acts of Parliament to enclose common land and factory towns (and squalor, disease, exploitation etc) and movement by the ruling classes of poorer human beings into technology. The parallel is also clear between the forcible practice. This is rather different to the way Luddites have impoverishment and the removal of their independent craft Luddites who sought to challenge their deliberate Industrial Revolution, resisted in its early period by the cheaply. This was, of course, the prime struggle of the

Consumer society is becoming ever more mediated in the relations people have with everyday skills and practices, for instance, through the easy purchase of ready-made things ('reified knowledge') that remove any need for learning skills or to take time to acquire tacit knowledge. It is visible in so many aspects of life, the vital to the trivial. From how computers can simulate the effects of what were previously distinct skills and expertise and make them manipulable by others; to the sophistication of ready meals at the supermarket, providing varieties of quick-cook cuisine that approximate culinary skills formerly acquired through time, trial and error – hard-won knowledge of materials, their interactions, chemistries and behaviours.

“It is easier to set in motion a galley or factory in which human beings are used to a minor part of their full capacity only, rather than create a world in which these human beings may fully develop. Those striving for power believe that a mechanised concept of human beings constitutes a simple way of realising their aspirations to power.”

Norbert Wiener, quoted in Architect or Bee? (M Cooley)

Automation has for centuries been used to exert power by one group of people over another. This has often taken the form of de-skilling artisans and skilled workers by capturing aspects of their craft and tacit knowledge and encoding it into machines – to replicate the work at scale and more



What relations is this book carrying within its matrix of paper sheets woven together in a bound form? Do we need to know such detail, or perhaps simply be appreciative that such a richness in their culture has been signalled to others in this way?

Anthropologist Tim Ingold's analogy of the pencil stub as a material artefact is also pertinent here. How would an archaeologist of the future interpret such a find, never having previously seen a new pencil?

"I would not myself throw away a newly bought pencil in mint condition. As I use it, however, it has periodically to be re-sharpened, and with every sharpening some of the pencil is shaved and its length is reduced, until eventually it is too short to hold. Only then do I throw it away. An archaeologist of the future who, having analysed the contents of early twenty-first century waste bins, came to the conclusion that things conventionally called 'pencils' could not actually have been made for drawing because they were too short (and perhaps had some ritual or symbolic function instead), would be committing what Davidson and Noble call the finished artefact fallacy."
 Tim Ingold, *Making* (2013)

What I love about his insight here is that the focus is not on what we think we know about something we might encounter (such as a pencil stub) outside of its original

"People need not only to obtain things, they need above all the freedom to make things among which they can live, to give shape to them according to their own tastes, and to put them to use in caring for and about others. ... I choose the term "conviviality" to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. I intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this

what we do, why and how we do it. which could contribute to a positive transformation in the kinds of tools for conviviality that Illitch speaks of, and bookleteer.com) I hope I have made some contribution to Tapestries, various Social Tapestries projects, and especially variety of projects, places and technologies (e.g. Urban concept of *Public Authoring* that I have evolved through an "anthropology of ourselves". In my own way, through the document and record their own lives and world – to create Observation movement encouraged ordinary people to standards. In the 1930s and 1940s the visionary Mass value that are outside of mere quantification and accounting valuing them and their skills, finding new articulations of – knowledge that people acquire over time and practice – I believe that one way is to celebrate and share the tacit

and wealthy? How can agency, good governance and equity be supported and promoted?

losses memorialised in poetry and song, in banners and murals, stories and books, music and films. A counter-heritage that is intertwined with other pragmatic and political efforts, such as unionisation, cooperativism, mutualism and the social contract of the post-war Welfare State.

"The great thing about people is that they are sometimes disobedient. Most human development, technical, cultural and political, has depended on those movements which questioned, challenged and, where necessary, disobeyed the established order."

Mike Cooley, *Architect or Bee?*

Automation is once again at the heart of the fears stoked by modern day fantasies of "Artificial Intelligence" automating away the 'white-collar' jobs of the middle class, who were protected from the job losses suffered by manual labourers and factory workers in the earlier stages of the machinic age and robotisation of manufacturing. 'AI', we are told by the frothy press and media, threatens to supplant all kinds of office jobs that were previously considered uniquely human and automation-proof. Conversely, a resurgence of interests in craft skills and practices over the past decade could be seen as a significant counterpoint to the growth of digital systems and simplicities and simulations of expertise that they offer. How can the benefits and drawbacks be balanced – to make sure that the benefits are more equitably distributed and not sequestered by the already powerful

These images below are from a book by Pinbin Sisau which describe a series of designs for drums and plates – work in Reite – which give a flavour of the extraordinary visual and stylistic range of just a single lineage in a village. Like the billums pictured above there is great artistry in the designs, and clearly far more meaning to them than he has indicated in the book. What are we to make of this compendium of designs that we do not have a key to interpret the meaning of? Why did he make it and for whom?

The books carry something less tangible but which also convey relationships to people and place. That they are hand-made items is, I think, a key factor in why they have come to be used. They are as much tangible demonstrations of relationships as they are receptacles for whatever maybe written or drawn within them. It is not so much that the books contain knowledge of any particular sort, but they are a part of, is not just what is written or drawn within them, but is carried across in the processes of making them. A book is like a trace or a vestige – an Ariadne's thread – weaving a path between those for whom it has been made and those by whom it was made. It ceases to be media in the sense that we use it in the West, as a neutral carrier for 'true content' – the knowledge' or information it 'contains' – and instead it expresses the relationship itself, or an aspect of it. Like so much of life in Reite, it is direct and unmediated – it becomes and is the thing it describes.



"Stories do not as a rule, come with their meanings already attached, nor do they mean the same for different people. What they mean is rather something that listeners have to discover for themselves, by placing them in the context of their own life histories." *Tim Ingold, "Stories Against Classification"*

I describe my practice as *storymaking* – not *storytelling* – because my role is not to be the storyteller, but the one who helps make the space for the story to be told. I see the potential for a cultural movement of enacting tacit

meaningful. A co-discovery made in each act of teaching and learning, a dynamic act of reciprocity rather than the simple transmission of a static state of knowing something or how to do something.

"To tell is not to represent the world but to trace a path through it that others can follow... It is in the art of storytelling, not in the power of classification, that the key to human knowledgeability – and therefore to culture – is ultimately resides." *Tim Ingold, "Stories Against Classification"*

in Kinship and Beyond (2009)

I've written elsewhere (in *Hiding in Plain Sight*) how I came to appreciate differences between Western and non-Western worldviews and conceptions of 'knowledge' – how for some cultures knowledge is always relational, not something which can be alienated from context.

in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment."
Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (1973)

Living Archives

Through my decade-long collaboration with James Leach I have been introduced to a trove of ideas, observations and learning from the world of anthropology. One of the most significant has been my exposure to the work and thought of Tim Ingold (one of James' teachers at Manchester University and, later, a colleague at Aberdeen University). Ingold writes of the 'practice of knowing' as opposed to the 'property of knowledge', and this has been like a pole star around which I have navigated my attention from the outputs we make using bookleeter (and other artefacts) to the processes that emerge around the making. As the TKRN project evolved, the discussions James and I had reflecting on the project became less concerned with understanding the individual value of the specific books that were being made by people in Reite and what was written in them, and more focused on how the books function as signposts, within wider social and cultural activities, to where knowledge might exist within persons and the relationships that connect them (to others, to places, to rituals and social conventions). Our conversations have continued to examine how it is in the co-creative acts of reciprocal exchange – the relationships – that any 'knowledge' is constantly made, re-made and made

In this regard, I am reminded not only of the physical performance required to make a Diffusion eBook, but also of the collaborative and collective nature of gathering the 'knowledge' that it is used to fill – the stories, drawings, photos, recipes, instructions and guides. These elements are all harvested from social engagements between or for the different generations of the community. They are purposeful in that they are often intended to reflect or mark out specific relationships between people – for instance between a parent and a child or grandchild; or as a way of creating or facilitating a connection between specific person and others who have come into the cosmos of the village's inter-connected relationships, but who are not directly associated with kin groups. People such as James and, latterly, to a small degree, myself.

patrilarchal societies tend to ignore or de-value. The kind of consistent, persistent, necessary everyday activities of caring, cleaning, cooking, rearing so often unsung, or referred to, belittlingly, as "women's work". I also think that she is deliberately making an equivalence between language itself and with receptacles such as bags and nets. Language as a mode in which the thoughts, feelings and experiences of a conscious entity are carried across – held by words – to others. It is a literary demonstration of metaphor in itself. Language is a carrier, a matrix too – in which ideas, thoughts, observations and feelings are given shape and brought into the world.

I re-read an essay James co-wrote with Lee Wilson in 2010 on creativity and innovation in the art, humanities and social sciences in universities. It reported on their findings from three workshops (in one of which I took part as a presenter) at CRASSH in Cambridge. It is full of brilliant insights into the nature of creativity and innovation, and the role of universities in fostering spaces and places that support it, as a responsive, civic process that is integral to the "project of citizenship". One section on evaluation has the following sentences which, it seems to me, could easily refer to the creation and purpose of the books in Reite:

"The value of the knowledge created is not in objects, but is realised over and again in relationships, in processes of investigation, argumentation and understanding. Value is then elicited in actual relations. Change occurs in and through relationships. The facilitation of these relations is vital."
James Leach & Lee Wilson, "Enabling innovation: creative investments in arts and humanities research", report for AHRC/Nesta 2010

Just as the bilums used in everyday life are intricately woven from locally-available materials and their designs convey information that can locate them to kin-groups or places, so I think something similar is happening with the books they are making. The bilums are practical devices for carrying tangible stuff, but are still made with an attention to detail that marks them out as more-than neutral receptacles.

pass on their knowledge. Methods would need to be devised for them to describe and share what they value about these skills, rather than just describing the skills themselves. Not to slavishly document skills in books that will gather dust on shelves, but to signpost these knowledge holders as "Living Archives" whom others can consult and learn from.

The format of the hybrid digital/physical books generated by bookleeter is highly adaptable to varying literacies (both linguistic and visual), allowing people to communicate in ways that are natural to them – whether in terms of words, drawings or pictures. They can also incorporate visual links to online sound or video files that can be played back on other devices. The books also underscore the importance of human relationships to knowledge – as distinct from treating it as an object that can be separated from context and meaning. The emphasis would be on documenting the value of each person's knowledge, rather than trying to isolate and extract the knowledge as separate from the person.

These are some of the kinds of activities that I believe would be an important part of developing TKLA as a project:

- Networking: researching and developing a network of knowledge holders covering a wide array of practices around the UK. Visiting people and places e.g.: craftspeople and artisans; artists; people who work with the land, sea, environment and animals;

knowledges through co-creative acts of making and sharing, as being a critical moment for us to reflect and re-assess what we value and why. At this turning point in human civilisation, when the speed of resource extraction, exploitation and consumption is poised to overwhelm nature and the ecologies that sustain our very existence, now is the moment to re-consider what *matters* to us.

There is an emerging field of studies that compare indigenous stories and traditions in different places and cultures with scientific evidence of environmental change (for instance Aboriginal stories of sea level changes linked below). Some studies have demonstrated a remarkable accuracy in the stories, for instance to within one generation of accuracy over a very long timespan (thousands of years) when describing phenomena such as sea level changes. Such studies underline the importance of storymaking and telling – as persistent modes of communicating knowledges that remain neither remote nor alienated from context – but instead proximate and directly relational to the people who live with and through them.

Where Next?

For TKLA to become manifest in our own time it would be necessary for a network of people to emerge who have such knowledges and are willing and able to communicate what it means to them to have acquired them, why they think they are valuable and to whom they are or would be willing to

Left: top: garden produce in bilum; bottom: a baby sleeping in a bilum
Above: Rikriki presenting me with a bilum & pig tusks (2012)



Book as Bilum: a metaphor

Le Guin refers to Elizabeth Fisher's "Carrier Bag Theory" of human evolution (in *Woman's Creation*, MacGraw-Hill 1979) and weaves an entire essay around the concept that,

"The first cultural device was probably a recipient... Many theorizers feel that the earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier"
Elizabeth Fisher, quoted by Ursula K. Le Guin, *ibid*

Le Guin contrasts this with the scene in Kubrick's movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* where an ape first uses a bone as an instrument, a weapon, to murder another ape – implicitly crossing some sort of cognitive threshold. This bone then becomes a figure for man's future conquest of space:

"...that wonderful, big, long, hard thing, a bone I believe, that the Ape Man first bashed somebody with in the movie and then, grunting with ecstasy at having achieved the first proper murder, flung up into the sky, and whirling there it became a space ship thrusting its way into the cosmos to fertilize it and produce at the end of the movie, a lovely fetus, a boy of course, drifting around the Milky Way without (oddly enough) any womb, any matrix at all" (UK Le Guin, *ibid*)

She is, of course, making a powerful argument for re-thinking and re-positioning what we recognise as being of value in our culture – bringing back into view those things which

Ursula Le Guin's essay has been whispering behind my ear for some time now, as I have striven to make sense of what it really is I have been doing with the villagers of Reite on Papua New Guinea's Rai Coast in Madang Province. Since 2012 I have been making books with them about their 'Traditional Knowledge' and slowly becoming a part of something quite different from my everyday life in London. This all began back in Summer 2009 when James Leach first asked me to help document the visit by two villagers, Forer Nombo and Pinbin Sisau, to the British Museum's Ethnographic Store. There they were asked, by Lissant Bolton and Liz Bonshok, to look at and discuss hundreds of objects originating from their part of Papua New Guinea that are in the BM's ethnographic collection. We made some books of this encounter and of their stay in the UK. Then, in 2012, I got the chance to visit PNG and Reite village myself, when James and I took part in the Saem Majnep Symposium

"I would go as far as to say that the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us."
Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" in *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (1986)

Book and Bilum

and to understand the context in which they practise their activities;

- Co-creativity: collaborative production of hybrid digital/physical book templates with participants to document and share what they value about the knowledge they have acquired; linking to other digital media resources (audio/video etc).
- Building a Library: developing an online library/resource of completed books for wider access and sharing of knowledge, values and skills;
- Exhibition: designing and producing a physical touring format for the library so that people can encounter them in multiple sites.

The true measure here would be to work *at depth*, not scale.

London, May 2019

Notes & Links

- <http://proboscis.org.uk/tag/tkrn/>
- <https://bookleteer.com/blog/2010/10/case-study-james-leach-and-the-melanesian-project-at-the-british-museum/>
- <https://gileslane.net/2017/09/21/sensing-climate-change-through-empathic-encounters/>
- <http://proboscis.org.uk/projects/tk-reite-notebooks/>
- <https://theconversation.com/ancient-aboriginal-stories-preserve-history-of-a-rise-in-sea-level-36010>

A bilum is both a functional thing, but it also conveys meaning – the decorative weave as well as the materials with which it is woven themselves convey information. This is not the same as branding or logos on bags in the industrialised world, but it does form a part of a complex visual language of signification that runs deep in the fabric of life in PNG. Bilums across PNG vary according to the materials they are made of, with wool being typical of bilums made in the Highlands, and string made from natural fibres being common on the coast. Other types of bilum include those made from woven grasses and reeds as well as man-made plastic strings and reconditioned plastic sacking.

Traditional bilums are intricately woven or netted, taking considerable time to make – which also depends on the size. The knowledge of how to make them is an important craft skill – and they are respected as both objects in themselves and for their significance as part of traditional dress in *kastom* and rituals like *singsings*. They are important items when given as part of bride gifts, or in other kinds of ceremony. The meaning conveyed by the design may have an additional significance to the gift of a bilum, beyond that of the skill, time and effort that had gone into making it. Using a bilum you have been given is always taken well, sealing a bond – a reciprocity between giver and recipient.



Something is conveyed by these processes of making and sharing, it is carried across from person to person, from generation to generation, across time and distance, but always of place and within a continuity of culture. The forms may be different and unique to particular communities, but there are echoes and hints of valence that enable a connection, the possibility of an understanding. I often think of Le Guin's writings when I am in the village or in similar places elsewhere in Melanesia – the feeling that I

(UK Le Guin, ibid)

“It is the story that makes the difference.” which are intrinsic to identity and community (*public goods*). which are outside of mainstream economic valuation, but making, inscribing and transmission of things (*public authoring*) participatory projects. Often these have involved direct communities at different levels of society on co-creative and and my own experiences of working closely with a variety of values. Added to this I bring my own experience as an artist past the usual tropes of our own cultural assumptions and from our ‘home’ culture means it is possible for him to see engagement with them. Such attunement to their difference insight into their ways, evolving over more than 25 years people of Reite gives him an extraordinary anthropological knotty issues. James’ long and deep connection with the midnight oil (and quaffed some considerable quantities of wine, including some from his own vines) in discussing these engage in? Over the years James and I have burnt much

on Traditional Knowledge at the University of Goroka, in Eastern Highlands Province, and followed this with a week’s stay in Reite village. Since then I have made three further trips to PNG and to Reite, as well as two trips to Vanuatu – an island nation in Melanesia not far from PNG – all as part of the *TK Reite Notebooks* project.

I have been trying to find my own ways to arrive at an understanding of, and to acknowledge, the particular relationships to ‘knowledge’ that Reite people have, and what making books of their knowledge actually might mean to them, and to me. It has been abundantly clear to us that they have made no attempt to either create a systematic Western-style encyclopaedia of everything they ‘know’ about where and how they live, what they grow and care for in the forest and in their gardens. Nor do they seem to use the books in anyway similar to how people in our own culture might – as canonical references or teaching aids to pass knowledge on in a linear way from one generation to the next. Nor do they use them to share practices and techniques with neighbouring communities or trading partners, although the practice of making the books is now definitely woven in at some level in how they conduct their relations with other villages and communities.

Something entirely else is going on – but what is it that they are doing, and why? How is it so different from the purposes of making that people in my own culture and community