

# COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

Vol 2 | No 1 | 2019

## The Order of the Magic Lantern Slides Stories, Colonial Medicine, and Power

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**ABSTRACT** | Dr Sylvester Lambert, an American public health doctor who worked for the International Health Board of the Rockefeller Foundation, created a magic lantern slide presentation to retell the arrest of a sorcerer that he had witnessed in 1925 on the island of Malakula in Vanuatu. In this article, I use creative non-fiction to envision other audiences and narrators of this storied event to present an expanded picture of life for Pacific Islanders at that time. I also reflect on how particular events make for good stories because they are contests about belief and incredulity. Reimagining medical stories of sorcery reminds us that medicine is part of larger contests over the nature of reality. This is an imaginative ethnographic experiment with decolonizing intentions which combines archival research, ethnographic research, colonial images and creative non-fiction. It aspires to untie the images from a single fixed colonial narrative and to revisit the images in ways that are open to multiple interpretations, audiences, and narrators.

**Keywords:** colonialism; medicine; ethnographic experiments; Vanuatu; photo-essay



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ISSN 2537-9879 | DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26686/ce.v2i1.5269>

Published online 19 December 2019

“You’ll never believe what happened”, is always a great way to start.

*The Truth about Stories*, Thomas King (2003: 1)


In the Geisel Library at the University of California at San Diego, I sat mesmerized by a box of glass magic lantern slides<sup>1</sup> that depict the arrests of two accused sorcerers in Malua Bay on the island of Malakula<sup>2</sup> in the southwestern Pacific. From photos taken and curated with captions by Sylvester Lambert, an American public health doctor who worked for the International Health Board of the Rockefeller Foundation, this series contains some uncommon photographic images of colonial encounters in 1920s New Hebrides<sup>3</sup> (now Vanuatu). Lambert was in the New Hebrides on a stop on the Rockefeller Foundation-funded campaign he led against hookworm, yaws, and other infectious diseases that spanned present day Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tonga, Samoa, American Samoa, and the Cook Islands.<sup>4</sup> In the early 20th century, the New Hebrides was a newly formed polity and outpost of the British and French Empires with a small administrative capital town, Port Vila. The over 80-island archipelago was then the home of about 65,000 indigenous people (Speiser 1996: 33) speaking over 110 languages, and a destination of Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, and Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) missionaries, anthropologists like W.H.R. Rivers, a handful of European settlers, and Vietnamese labourers. Lambert’s visit to Malakula took place at a moment that Bedford indicates ‘marked a period of relative calm’ (Bedford 2017) in relations between colonial authorities and Malakulans, that followed on the heels of more than four decades of punitive expeditions and indigenous retaliations. In my retelling of the arrest story twice here, I imagine other narrators, audiences, and uses of the story than Dr Lambert’s intended American publics who might have gathered at his lectures to hear ‘The Man with a Million Patients’ and see his magic lantern slides. His lecture series were to be organized by W. Colston Leigh Inc., a speakers’ bureau that is still around today, for the likes of Malcolm Gladwell and Paul Krugman to tell their stories. This medical doctor’s images of people on Malakula would have joined other visual narratives framed for Euro-American consumption at that time. For example, Martin and Osa Johnson produced adventure-travelogues (Lindstrom 2006) that represented Malakulans as exotic isolated people of the South Seas, while SDA missionary narratives showed Malakulans in relation to European Christian presence (Ramage 2015).

W. COLSTON LEIGH PRESENTS

## DR. S. M. LAMBERT

"THE MAN WITH A MILLION PATIENTS"

Director: South Pacific Area — International Division — Rockefeller Foundation




DR. VICTOR G. HEISER, Author of "AN AMERICAN DOCTOR'S ODYSSEY," Says:

"Dr. Lambert's work in the South Seas has been invaluable. Everyone in the islands knew him and admired him as physician and friend. He has a larger fund of experiences and stories about these people and their customs than anyone I know and he tells them with humor and real understanding. I have heard him keep groups of people entertained for hours. Dr. Lambert brought medicine to the South Seas and with the help of the Rockefeller Foundation, he instituted a plan for teaching medicine to the natives which will long perpetuate his good work among them."

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A group of islanders go fishing.

### Lecture Subjects

- THE MAN WITH A MILLION PATIENTS**  
 From his twenty years experience in the South Seas Dr. Lambert here distills those experiences that seem to him personally to have been the most significant. In it he tells how he went out to Papeete, which to him then was little more than a speck on the map; how he remained throughout those two decades working for the betterment of brown and black and white alike. He goes on to make some startling predictions as to what the South Seas may eventually mean to the entire human race in the light of repeated mass murder in European wars.
- MAGIC IN THE SOUTH SEAS**  
 By erie campfires Dr. Lambert has watched witch doctors appear to extract snakes—the embodiment of sickness and evil—from the bodies of their patients. He has seen many weird ritual ceremonies andoodoo tricks, and then, as a modern medicine man, evolved a few of his own. During his twenty years in the South Seas he collected what is probably the most astounding collection of stories of witchcraft and magic ever to come from those beautiful isles and in this lecture he presents his choicest items.
- WHO ARE THE SOUTH SEA ISLANDERS?**  
 One of the things that most fascinated Dr. Lambert during his years in the Southern Pacific was the variety of racial types to be found there. Light-skinned, highly intelligent Polynesians, black Melanesians, wild Fijians, and many others. In this lecture he discusses the many racial types to be found there, tells of their curious and distinctive customs, and discusses their possible origins. One group has strongly Semitic features and he advances the oft-discussed theory that they may be remnants of the lost Ten Tribes of Israel.
- BRINGING MEDICINE TO THE SOUTH SEAS**  
 Here Dr. Lambert tells of the marvelous achievements that modern medical science has accomplished in the South Seas. He tells how the Rockefeller Foundation is cooperating with the various governmental agencies and of the founding of his famed Medical School in Suva for training native doctors. There are many amusing anecdotes of the natives' reactions, of modern medical practices and the many stratagems to which he resorted to get across his ideas.
- RENNELL ISLAND: A LIVING PAGE FROM THE STONE AGE**  
 This mysterious island which geologically is like Conan Doyle's "Lost World" is inhabited by a strange neo-Greek type—stately bearded patriarchs with topknots. Their complexion is light and some have chestnut hair and gray eyes. Their civilization dates back 20,000 years to the Stone Age and Dr. Lambert believes that they are the most primitive people to be found anywhere in the world, and he tells you why their mode of life is important to scientists and sociologists.

(Lambert n.d. A)

Dr Lambert was not alone in his recognition that sorcerers' arrests made for a good story. Stories about sorcery held a particularly charged place in colonial and missionary narrations of people living the New Hebrides, standing for beliefs that were at once exotic, sinister, and ignorant.<sup>5</sup> Sorcery was a threat to health for ni-Vanuatu, as illness was the result of relationships gone so awry that sorcery would be sent to cause harm. Physical retaliation could result. Sorcery was thus, from a colonial vantage point, a threat to law and order, and western medicine an antidote to not only ill health, but to violence and traditional beliefs. In ni-Vanuatu ontologies, sorcery is also a storied terrain, leading to speculations about conflicts and transgressions to be ameliorated. Sorcery stories, therefore, get to the nub of what constitutes subjectivity, materiality, and credulity. In short, they are contests about the nature of reality.

The 'order of the magic lantern slides' part of my title, calls attention to the power of stories and images in at least two dimensions. One is that the story told in the lantern slides is part of attempts to instill new political and cosmological orders associated with colonialism, Christianity, and biomedicine. A second dimension refers to the ordering of the lantern slides as the result of Lambert's story-telling craft. The images and events do not tell a story by themselves, for Lambert has to guide the reader through the order of the slides. The images of the lantern slides needed to have meanings attached to them, to have order placed on them.

In my first retelling, I imagine a young woman from Malua Bay on Malakula as a narrator; in the second, I imagine a man from the New Hebrides studying medicine watching the slides in a class with Dr Lambert at the Central Medical School in Suva, Fiji. During the 1920s, Lambert contributed to expanding this medical school into an important pan-Pacific institution where Pacific Islanders trained as physicians. He would work there from 1929 until his

retirement in 1939. These imagined narrator and audience members explore two aspects (among others) of how ni-Vanuatu<sup>6</sup> reacted to colonial knowledge and practice, also diverse and multifaceted, during this time. Some communities elected to refuse, while others chose to selectively engage or to take knowledge and make use of it for what they thought could benefit their communities or families. The written sources about life in Vanuatu from this time include anthropologists' texts which focused on salvaging cultures they thought to be dying, missionaries' texts about conversion work, the expansion of schools, and medical work, and colonial administrators' correspondence concerning law and order.

My retellings are informed by over seventeen years of fieldwork in archives of colonial officials, doctors, missionaries, and anthropologists who spent time in the New Hebrides, and ethnographic fieldwork in Vanuatu.<sup>7</sup> To imagine a young woman living in Northwest Malakula,<sup>8</sup> I draw particularly from Arthur Bernard Deacon's 1926 fieldwork published in his book, *Malekula: A Vanishing People in the New Hebrides* (1934). The book is itself an act of imaginative reconstruction by Camilla Wedgewood from Deacon's detailed field notes as the Cambridge graduate student died of black-water fever during his field work. This time, as the book's title indicates, marked a period of enormous mortality and low birth rates for people living on Malakula. The area where the arrest took place was the land of people referred to as 'Big Nambas,' who were known for strenuously resisting colonial presence, and about whom little anthropological detail was available. As Malakula was (and remains) a diverse place, specific details about Malua Bay and the arrest cannot necessarily be inferred from areas in southern Malakula where Deacon spent more time. The portion about a student at the Central Medical school in Fiji is informed by my archival research in the New Hebrides British Service files held in the Western Pacific Archives at the University of Auckland. In association with the images of the arrest, shown with my second retelling, I include Dr Lambert's words in italics, excerpted from his actual captions, and have my imaginings of how his student's reactions might interrupt them. Because *waetman* [plural = *ol waetman*] is a common word for European and *man ples* is a word for someone from Vanuatu in contemporary Bislama, the lingua franca in Vanuatu, I use these terms throughout.

This is an experiment with imaginative ethnography (Elliott and Culhane 2016) that explores various attempts at world making in encounters over medicine, sickness, and power. Imaginative methods are valuable because written sources about indigenous people living at this time and particular place are scarce.<sup>9</sup> Another reason to engage with the role of imagination is the place it held in the story Lambert was trying to tell. His combination of realist photos and captions themselves combine for a persuasive narrative that would have funneled his American audience's imagination about that which cannot be seen and their preconceived knowledge about far-off places.

How to handle the recirculation of colonial images is a vexed concern that postcolonial scholars, anthropologists of colonialism, and visual anthropologists have long discussed. My central concern here is to untie the images from a single fixed colonial narrative and to revisit the images in ways that are open to multiple



interpretations, audiences, and narrators. The images and narratives of Lambert's magic lantern slides are an example of the power of a compelling story about a remarkable event. Such stories and events had meanings and importance beyond their colonial narrator and colonial audience, and that is what I try to call attention to here through creative non-fiction. I imagined and wrote the stories to interrupt the colonial narrative of Lambert's story in an attempt to recirculate the colonial images in a decentred way.

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### Malua Bay, Malakula, New Hebrides 1925

'I was at the water,' Nele said quietly to the other women gathered at the shelter. So many conversations began this way, by telling others where you had just been. This was not because there was really anywhere unusual to go, nor because there was actually a story to tell. She might have been at the gardens, the water, or at the women and children's house at one end of the village. No, conversations began this way so that stories could not be told about where one may or may not have been. And besides, if she did not give them that information, they would direct the conversation back again and again, until they found out where she was coming from.

Nele took some split and dried pandanus fronds and organized them on the ground to make a mat. She kneeled with the others who were also weaving. No one looked up. No one asked her more and the women were unusually quiet, showing just how curious they really were. Today she really did have a story to tell about what she had seen. She knew that these women who did not go down to the water had still heard the shouts and noises of struggle. Nele recognized that her kinswomen knew that much of the village had all been down at the water. Nele took a moment to appreciate the fact that she had a story that the women were keen to know. Then she launched in.

'The *waetman* came from Vila to talk. The SDA missionary was there and some other men from Vila, with the white hats. They brought four black police from Vila. And a brown man, and one *man ples*. The big white man from Vila had invited everyone to come to down and listen to their laws about leaving on ships and working on plantations. They came to the next village and waited.'

Nele paused, and then whispered the names of two men who were experts with magic for causing death or illness.<sup>10</sup> 'These men also eventually joined the group. They all went down to the beach, and, like all the others gathered to watch, I heard and saw a conversation between a Chief and *ol waetman* from Vila about the troubles with sickness. They all sat on the beach and talked.'

Taking a breath, Nele continued. 'Soon, just as our Chiefs had hoped, the black police from Vila grabbed the two men. They dragged them along the sand. One cried. He cried like a baby. He wanted to stay, he begged the *waetman* to let him stay. The black policemen pulled him across the beach and pinned his arms behind his back. The launch they had come in from their bigger boat was weighed down. The black policeman rowed him and the big man from Vila.'

No one spoke for a while. Nele suspected she knew what the others were thinking. We have all been afraid of these men and their knowledge, especially since the most recent group of deaths. We had all been so careful. Cautious with *tabu* places, prudent not to make trouble, vigilant not to eat the coconuts or other foods when they had *tabus* laid on them. The men were wary not to cut the wild taro when the time was wrong. We had been careful to hide the things we did that could be talked about as trouble. Careful not to cause someone to go to one of these men and ask for help in using his private knowledge to make us weak with fevers or boils or cause sudden death.

‘So, they are really gone?’ someone asked, tentatively. Nele replied: ‘For some time. *Ol waetman* told him they would bring him back before the yams are planted.’ Then a rush of questions Nele could not answer. ‘But bring them back? What would the two men do then? What would we do then?’ *Ol waetman* had seldom punished men for this before.<sup>11</sup> We don’t know. We do not know whether they would come back angry, or whether *ol waetman* could be trusted to bring them back at all. Or whether their departure would make life any more peaceful for us. Or whether the deaths would stop.

So many questions. The women returned their focus to their weaving for a while.

Nele cautiously resumed her story. ‘The *man ples* who now lives with the missionary at Atchin was also talking between the Chiefs and *ol waetman* from Vila.’ Though no one outwardly reacted, the women all knew that people would talk about this *man ples*. Indeed, the talk now turned to this man and what exactly he was doing at the mission station. Would he be coming back to try and convince the Chiefs that families needed fewer pigs and less money at the time of marriage? Would he be part of the new courts as on Pentecost Island? Nele had heard that on Pentecost, *ol waetman* held courts where husbands or wives could go to convince their families to end their marriage and return the pigs.<sup>12</sup> Why would they do this? She had seen more than one female relative being successful in convincing her family to return the pigs so she could start a new marriage.

And so now the talk was about the *man ples* from the mission station.<sup>13</sup> Nele could be silent. She was cautiously optimistic that her story about the men who knew magic being taken to Vila would stop them from talking about her. Her story might then indeed do its work.

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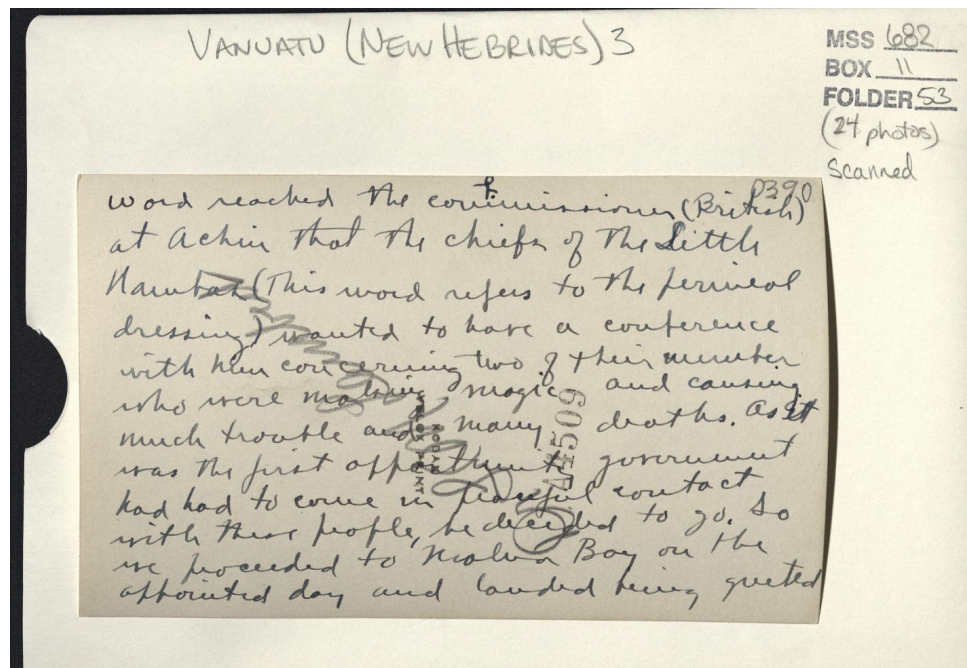
## Central Medical School, Suva, Fiji 1938



(Lambert n.d. B)

After his course in human anatomy, Isaac<sup>14</sup> was quite sure he now could classify the bones and muscles of the human body. He knew what would make sores fester, he could identify the layout of a healthy village with brush cut back and latrines dug out at an acceptable distance. Now he sat listening again in Dr Sylvester Lambert's class, surrounded by other Pacific Islanders who had come to Suva, Fiji, to learn to be physicians. This was to be the lecture about sorcery, as Dr Lambert called it, and Isaac was anxious to hear about what Dr Lambert would have to say about magic and medicine. During his years working as a dresser<sup>15</sup> throughout the New Hebrides before coming here to Suva, Isaac had encountered many kinds of magic, some the same and also different ones than in his home village. There was magic for love, for fertility, for sickness. Isaac knew that when he treated people, his small mobile clinic was never people's first attempt to get well. He knew that first efforts would have been made by the *kleva* who could discern the social origin of the illness. The next steps to be taken would be according to the clear vision of the *kleva*.

Dr Lambert began: '*This is the lesson I devote to the foolishness of sorcery*' (1941: 149). '*In 1925, Malakai, Dr Buxton and I were in the New Hebrides, we witnessed the arrest of two rascally sorcerers, while on a patrol to the Northern islands.*' Isaac had heard about this arrest and a handful of others like it before leaving his island and coming to Suva but never thought he would see photographs with the story.



(Lambert 1925 A<sup>16</sup>)

Word reached the commissioner (British) at Atchin that the chiefs of the Little Nambas (...) wanted to have a conference with him concerning two of their number who were making magic and causing much trouble and many deaths. As it was the first opportunity government had had to come in peaceful contact with these people, he decided to go. So we proceeded to Malua Bay on the appointed day and landed being greeted on the beach by some of the Nambas men and women. After some talk we learned that the meeting place was about one mile inland.





*We crossed the narrow beach and climbed a precipitous cliff for three hundred feet then back to a small village shown here to wait for them. Meanwhile the commissioner was getting information from the people at hand. After a long wait we could see the chiefs coming over a ridge at a distance and each carrying a rifle and it gave one to think knowing their reputation as we were entirely unarmed save for walking sticks, the commissioner, a missionary, four police, my Fijian assistant and myself.*

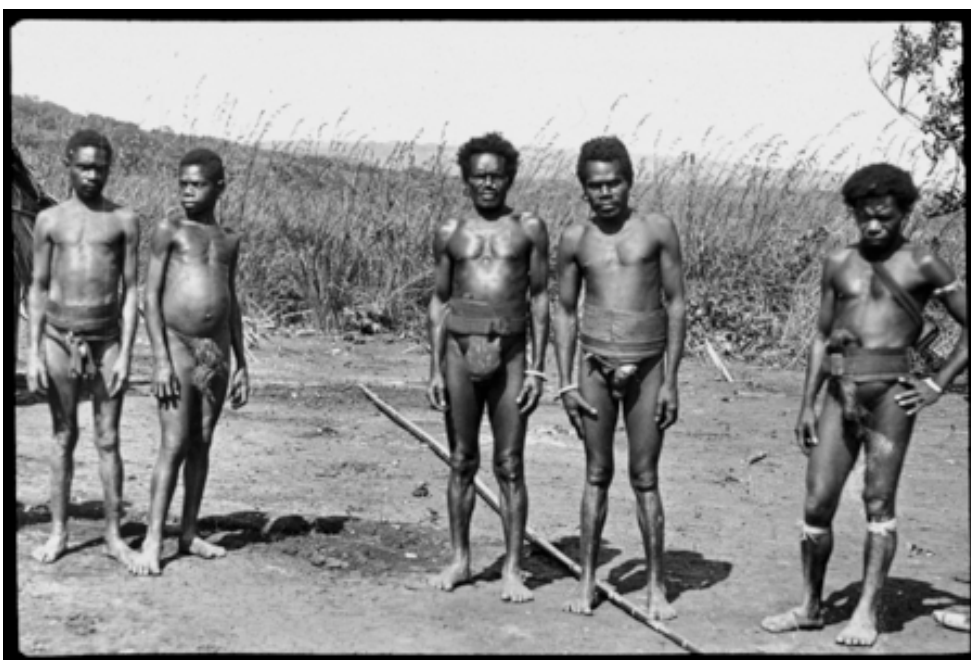


*Gradually these chiefs sidled out of the bushes and slowly approached our group two or three at a time and showing by their nervous movements and the turning of their heads and rolling of their eyes how watchful they were for any sign of treachery on our part for the treatment of natives by whites in the New Hebrides has never been characterized by the highest motives. As the first three stood talking to the missionary I snapped them and one close up here*



*and he didn't enjoy it a bit (...).*

Isaac looked intently at the image projected on the wall. He had heard this story from one of the policemen. They were from different villages on the same island and had spent time together in Vila when Isaac was first beginning to be a dresser for the New Hebrides British Service. As Isaac would be travelling throughout the group of islands and working with British, French, and people from many villages and islands, the policeman took Isaac aside and offered some advice. The policeman told him what Isaac would hear from islanders who worked for the British: 'Magic does not work on *waetman*.' This fact did not completely eliminate Isaac's fear of the experts he might encounter. He focused on Dr Lambert's story again:





*Finally a few more came in.*



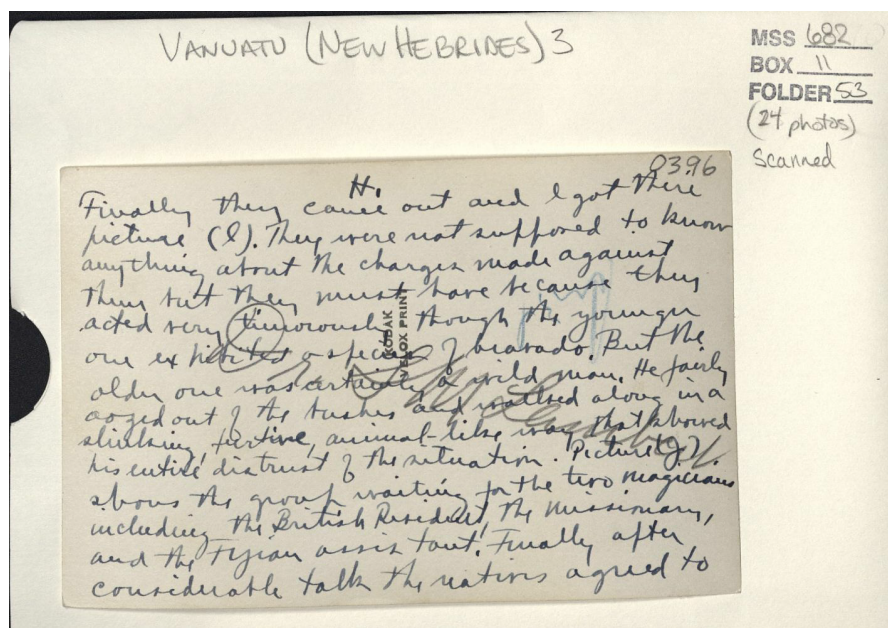
*I got a close up of two and they all exhibited the same reluctance to the camera as all these Malekula people who live in the interior and are unacquainted with whites except at gunshot. (...)*

*We were left waiting a long time because the two chiefs, the brothers, who were accused of being magicians did not appear.*



*This picture shows the group waiting for the two magicians including the British Resident, the missionary, and the Fijian assistant!*

Seeing the Fijian, Malakai, in the photo made Isaac contemplate his own future. Isaac had heard about Malakai before. Dr Malakai became the first Pacific Islander assistant physician to work in the New Hebrides. When the opportunity came to train as a dresser, Isaac did not hesitate to leave his village and island. He was glad to leave the sweaty work of the gardens, for clean hands and for the chance to learn knowledge about human bodies that was in books, on charts, and could be demonstrated on plaster models. He loved the spotless lab tables with their cool counter tops. As a dresser he had seen that some people in the islands appreciated some of the work he had done, like bandaging their sores. Now that he would be able to do more, like give malaria tablets<sup>17</sup> and *stick meresin*, show people how to cut bush to keep the mosquitos away, perhaps they would value his new skills too.



*Finally they came out and I got their picture. They were not supposed to know anything about the charges made against them but they must have found out the way they acted.*

Isaac scrutinized the two men who claimed to know how to use poison. It was poison that could sometimes be seen and poison that could sometimes be felt and not seen. Such men kept the remedies to the poison to themselves or traded them at a high price.



*Finally after considerable talk the natives agreed to come down on the beach for the conference, and we started. (...) I think all three of the whites were under a nervous strain. I'm sure I was. On the beach we all squatted about on the sand, the commissioner sitting on a piece of stone as the throne of justice as seen in picture. He conversed directly with the natives in 'pidgin English' (...). The trial was a recital by these chiefs of the trouble caused by these men eliciting others to kill and keeping all the 'Small Nambas' tribes in an uproar, also they feared they would be embroiled by the magicians in trouble with the 'Big Nambas' who were a short way below. They were unanimous that the removal of these men for six months would work wonders. So finally the commissioner made up his mind, gave the signal to his four native police who can be seen standing at the rear of the picture and close to the two magicians who can be seen just in front and to the left of the three white men. The two magicians had looked anxiously from side to side during the procedure rolling their eyes and apparently seeking the best mode of escape if necessary. The commissioner said 'Well, these men had better go to Vila for six months.' And with that our policemen clamped on each wrist of a prisoner and they were*



*rushed down to the boat struggling as they went.*







*This picture shows the group near the boat. It was hurriedly taken and partly out of focus but one can see the horror in the older fellow's face as he realized that he had to go with us – and he begged and pleaded with his friends not to permit us to take him away and promised anything if he could only stay. It was moving to see his mental agony at the idea – not withstanding that one knew he was a treacherous rascal – according to savage ideas ...*



*and had caused much needless suffering and death among his own people. (...)*

Isaac had stopped listening to Dr Lambert and was instead fixated on the black policemen who would then travel all the way from Malakula to Vila in the same boat as the men. He contemplated the unpleasantness of being on a boat with these men that the policeman had endured.

*The authorities in Vila sentenced him long enough to untwist his imagination. When I saw him in the jail yard he was very docile. He even allowed me to treat him for hookworm. That was something of a triumph for modern medicine.*

Lambert's story ended, Isaac could not quite agree with Dr Lambert's certainty that medicine and incarceration would end sorcery. The prisoner might be docile for a while but this would not change people's beliefs about sorcery. He thought about the possibilities of microscopes such as the ones that Malakai had travelled with around the islands, working to show everyone the hookworms that caused illness and that blood could be tested to see the cause of malaria. These new objects and understandings certainly offered him new possibilities. When he sailed back to Port Vila, he would not be in steerage. Maybe now that he would be handling dangerous medications, he would be able to drink alcohol in Port Vila, or be allowed in town after dark unlike those he had grown up with. He would sleep in a house with a bed and concrete floor, and not sleep on a mat. Listening to Dr Lambert talk about sorcery gave Isaac another view of how sorcery could be perceived. Isaac was getting a new glimpse of what it was like to see sorcery at a distance. It reminded him of what his father and the white missionaries had taught him in school. Still, seeing it like this did not fully eliminate his fear. Nobody likes sorcery.

But now, what Isaac saw and what Dr Lambert did not, was that disliking something is not the same as choosing to believe it to be untrue. And now Isaac had more knowledge he knew to be true, but not necessarily more knowledge that was untrue.

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### **Conclusion**

When I first saw Dr Lambert's photos presented above (and they are part of a large collection of more than one thousand from the south-western Pacific), I had already been writing about biomedicine in colonial Vanuatu for some years. Kathy Creely, then the librarian at the Tuzin Archive for Melanesian Anthropology, had acquired the collection of reports, letters and photos from Dr Lambert's daughter, Sara Davis, in 2007 and digitized some of the photos by 2010. Dr Lambert's photos were the first I had seen of the colonial medical practices that I had already written about from archival research. When I saw these photos, I realized how much I had relied on my experiences in Vanuatu and my imagination for the narratives and analyses I had generated from Lambert's books, reports, Malakai's handwritten colonial reports, and lists of equipment requests he sent to the British authorities. I had even written about Malakai's use of microscope as a tool through which he was attempting to inculcate social and medical change before I found this photo in the Lambert collection.<sup>18</sup>





(Lambert 1925b)

It was an odd feeling to see images of what I had imagined for so long. Having the reaction of ‘so that’s how it really looked when Malakai worked’ was confirmation that my imagination had been both correct and lacking. What masqueraded as a spark of insight was also a ‘truth effect’<sup>19</sup> of photography.

My imagination anticipated facts in another aspect of this creative experiment that further demonstrate the direct generational connections between Christianity and biomedicine as possible vectors of indigenous modernities. I began preparing this piece by imagining how the first ni-Vanuatu at medical school would view this arrest sequence. I later wrote about the ni-Vanuatu missionary teacher coming to Malua Bay in Nele’s retelling because I knew there were ni-Vanuatu from other islands who worked as educators in non-Christian areas. While the missionary and ni-Vanuatu convert (whose village/island is not identified in Lambert’s book) that cooperated with Lambert was SDA, I was also curious about Presbyterians who might have been nearby. When I went to fact check which Presbyterian mission station was closest to Malua Bay, I learned it was at Wala and was staffed from 1902-1948 (Miller 1989: 515) by a ni-Vanuatu Christian teacher from Ifira Island near Efate. As it turns out, he was the father of the first ni-Vanuatu to go to medical school in Suva (Miller 1989: 411), just as I had imagined that the medical student might have had a father who was a mission teacher.

Images and events such as this arrest of a sorcerer, make for good stories as they are contests about belief and incredulity. After all, as writer Thomas King tells us, “‘You’ll never believe what happened’, is always a great way to start’ (2003: 1). Lambert’s narrative and series of images are saturated with familiar colonial themes of encounters between ‘savage’ and ‘civilized’ cultures. But that he would have to provide captions to influence their meaning conveys but one example of colonial attempts to enforce meanings on what might be easily misunderstood for lack of interpretation. To trouble further the truths of colonial narratives, I have imagined other narrators and audiences of this arrest story, people who were also struggling with belief, knowledge and uncertainty. I hope

that the imagined retellings point to a method for decolonizing readings of colonial narratives. To continually see those narratives as partial and to actively consider what voices and retellings are not present in colonial archival documents and narratives, allows us to revisit colonization and lay bare the logics it applied to achieve and reinforce hegemony.

And now I have told the stories to you, to believe and not to believe, but more importantly to imagine more retellings.

### **Author's Note**

Why convey Lambert's images and narrative text in an experimental way rather than a conventional piece of scholarship?

Above all, this piece is intended as an experiment in imaginative historical ethnography. With standard scholarly tools, I have researched ni-Vanuatu presence in colonial archives, books, oral histories to write about processes of change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This approach has been in the footsteps of those scholars who have read against (e.g. Douglas 1998; Rodman 2003) and along the archival grain (e.g. Stoler 2009). As anyone who has done archival research knows, we find sources in the logic of their authors and filing practices of the archives (Stoler 2002). Sources do not allow us to ask direct questions to people whose stories we might most want to hear. Creative non-fiction is a way of presenting stories absent from the archives due to colonialism and the vicissitudes of history. My stories are intended to be, and not to the exclusion of others, ways of conveying material where the reader is not told exactly what to think, but rather to expected to engage in an interpretation process. My intent has been to use stories to, as Kaulingfreks and Marlous van den Akker argue, 'enable us to understand alterity or to empathize with others in unexpected ways' (2018: 10). As such, I have also been influenced by the creativity of Pacific scholars and writers who have long sidestepped and interrupted European narratives about the Pacific (e.g. Figiel 2016; Teaiwa 2010).

In imagining others who were watching the event, I aim to show multiple visions and versions of modernity. Imagining other ways that these stories might circulate and other individuals in the story (i.e. the ni-Vanuatu policeman, the Fijian doctor, the ni-Vanuatu SDA convert) who could have been more important to the imagined ni-Vanuatu narrator than the Europeans, is to decentre Lambert's representations of whiteness and to complicate the exotic blackness of Lambert's story and the meaning he attached to the event more broadly.

Including creative non-fiction was a means of situating Lambert's text and images as his effort of storytelling, rather than evaluating the facts about this colonial event or sorcery that may or may not be depicted. In presenting his colonial images in a piece that is both about story making, and my own act of crafting stories, I explicitly participate in narrative making. To use imagined narratives is to call attention to the fact that we, both myself and the people I am writing about and with, are all using narrative to construct reality albeit on politically uneven terrain and authority (e.g. Stoller 2018; Bruner 1991). Creative non-fiction can sidestep conventional critiques of colonial tropes, as important as

these critiques are, by using another communicative practice to flag that the colonial tropes themselves were contests over knowledge and power. This experiment thus takes up Stoller's challenge to anthropologists 'to take more representational risks.... That path is one that leads to personal and institutional change....' (2018: 111).

I see more conventional scholarly documentary and interpretive practices as central to producing this experimental piece of situated knowledge (Haraway 1988). To the extent I have successfully written imaginatively about this material, it comes from sustained engagement with ni-Vanuatu pasts and presents through ethnographic fieldwork and archival sources. Imaginative ethnography, as situated knowledge, presents worlds that are resolutely positioned and plural, but not infinitely so. The post-truth politics of this era rankle, and compel us to pay even more attention to Thomas King's insights about the truth of stories.

### Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Sara Davis for permission to reprint Lambert's images, and would like to thank Kathy Creely, Cristela Spitz-Garcia, and Heather Smedberg of the Geisel Library at UCSD for their phenomenal assistance. Thanks as well to Denielle Elliot for organizing the CASCA panel that inspired this paper and to Sarah Blacker, Margaret Critchlow, Lamont Lindstrom, Lynda Mannik and Jean Mitchell for their comments at various stages. I extend a whole hearted thank you to the editors at *Commoning Ethnography* for their intellectual labour and vision. All shortcomings are my own.

### Notes

1. Magic lanterns could project images from glass slides from the 18<sup>th</sup>-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.
2. This is the current spelling; in Deacon's day, the spelling was Malekula.
3. For fascinating accounts of exceptional images of Malakula by anthropologist John Layard and anthropologist Arthur Deacon's fieldwork drawings from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century see (Geismar and Herle 2013 and Geismar 2010).
4. For more on Sylvester Lambert's work see Stuart (2002).
5. Cannibalism is another prominent narrative trope of people and practices in Malakula at this time. In the slides and in his book (1941: 237), Lambert mentions the fear of anthropophagy on both sides (the sorcerer was reportedly worried he would be eaten upon arrival in Port Vila). I deliberately did not include anthropophagy in my creative retellings, so as to interrupt this common exoticized framing of events.
6. Ni-Vanuatu are indigenous citizens of Vanuatu.
7. My ethnographic fieldwork has been in Port Vila and Pango village.

8. I use the current preferred spelling of Malakula except where the original historical text is quoted.
9. There are written sources about other parts of Malakula from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and these have important resonances in the present (Geismar 2009).
10. Privately held magic causing death or illness was called *nimesian* in a South Malakulan language. Deacon does not include Big Nambas' terms (1934: 221).
11. For more on colonial policing, see (Rodman 1998).
12. During the 1920s, the Condominium began touring courts as dispute mechanism fora which wound up mainly hearing cases of marriage disputes.
13. According to Lambert (1941: 237), this SDA convert, Harry, was shot nine days later by friends of the arrestees. Harry had gone to assure the women that the men would indeed come back.
14. The first ni-Vanuatu to attend medical school in Suva was Daniel Kalorib. Because this is a work of creative non-fiction, I have named this ni-Vanuatu man Isaac.
15. The term for a man who did similar labour to nurses except for assisting with labour and delivery.
16. All images from Lambert's story are from this reference.
17. NMP Malakai had requested 1,000 quinine tablets from the Condominium authorities in 1925. Quinine was also prescribed by W.J. Tully of the Western Pacific Health services from 1929-31. For more see Widmer (2007: 210-256). Undoubtedly, there was never enough quinine supplies, but it would have a goal of a medical student to distribute them.
18. The chapter was subsequently published as Widmer (2013).
19. There was a perception of a close relationship between photographic image and reality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This 'truth effect' was produced from 'accepted fit between the world of things and the signs used to represent them' (Murphie and Potts 2003: 75).

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