

The Legacy of Bernard Narokobi and the Melanesian Way

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ABSTRACT

This special issue on the life and legacy of Bernard Narokobi documents and contextualizes Narokobi's life and thought. A central figure in Papua New Guinea's transition from Australian territory to independent nation, Narokobi was a jurist, philosopher, and poet who is best remembered for making 'the Melanesian Way' an important theme – if not the guiding ideological principle – in the discourse of independence in Papua New Guinea. In looking closely at Narokobi's biography, the collection also contributes to a growing body of work on political life writing in the Pacific. The collection speaks to Narokobi's role as a theorist of Oceanic modernity more broadly, one who deserves a place alongside two other important philosophers of Pacific independence, Epeli Hau'ofa and Jean-Marie Tjibaou, as one of the main visionaries of Pacific decolonization and Oceanic modernity of the post-war period.

Key words: Narokobi, Melanesia, decolonization, biography, the Melanesian Way, Papua New Guinea, independence, Hau'ofa, Tjibaou, indigenism

INTRODUCTION

In their introduction to the 2013 *Journal of Pacific History* special issue on the topic of decolonization in Melanesia, Helen Gardner and Christopher Waters argue that it is time 'to begin the task of drilling down into the history of decolonization in Melanesia using detailed case studies'.¹ Their point is not to directly query the success

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¹ Helen Gardner and Christopher Waters, 'Decolonisation in Melanesia', *Journal of Pacific History* (hereafter *JPH*) 48, no. 2 (2013): 114. We also note the excellent new history by Tracey Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific: Indigenous Globalisation and the Ends of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

of decolonization from a presentist perspective given the cynicism we might feel in light of decolonization's incompleteness (as in New Caledonia or West Papua), nor to express dissatisfaction with the governance and economy of independent Melanesian countries. Rather, Gardner and Waters call for historians to focus anew on what decolonization meant to those who were making it happen by seriously exploring 'the excitement generated for the new nations of Melanesia and their citizens' as a result of the decolonization process that was actively underway in the 1970s.²

This special issue on the life and legacy of Bernard Mully Narokobi answers Gardner's and Waters's call for a history of decolonization in Melanesia in three ways. First, it documents and contextualizes Narokobi's life and thought in detail. A central figure in Papua New Guinea's transition from Australian territory to independent nation, Narokobi was a jurist, philosopher, and poet who is best remembered for making 'the Melanesian Way' an important theme – if not *the* guiding ideological principle – in the discourse of independence in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Second, in looking closely at Narokobi's biography, the collection also contributes to a growing body of work on political life writing in the Pacific, part of a long tradition of biographies and biographical essays on historically significant Pacific Islander leaders.³ Third, the collection answers Tarcisius Kabutaulaka's call for the elaboration of a new discourse of 'Melanesianism' which builds a positive cultural identity for Melanesians by moving beyond racist tropes of savagery and darkness.⁴ Kabutaulaka argues that features like shared music and shared language (that is, closely related varieties of Melanesian Pidgin) unite Melanesians. Bernard Narokobi's work on decolonization gave Melanesians a philosophy that is still highly relevant today. Narokobi was not just a political actor in the decolonization moment, but a theorist of Melanesianism and Melanesian modernity more broadly. By 'drilling down' into his biography, we hope to show that he deserves a place alongside two other great theorists of Melanesian identity: Epeli Hau'ofa, the peripatetic trickster-theorist of Oceanic modernity, and Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the main theorist of New Caledonia's struggle for Kanak independence.

In what follows we give a brief summary of Bernard Narokobi's biography and say a few words about his style of thought. We then compare him to Tjibaou and Hau'ofa, concluding with an introduction to the essays that follow.

² Gardner and Waters, 'Decolonisation', 119.

³ See Jack Corbett and Brij V. Lal, eds, *Political Life Writing in the Pacific: Reflections on Practice* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015). For a review of this writing on PNG, see Jonathan Ritchie, 'Political Life Writing in Papua New Guinea: What, Who, Why?', in *ibid.*, 13–31. Ritchie's article includes a thorough list of previous biographies of Papua New Guineans, such as Albert Maori Kiki and Michael Somare, on pp. 29–31. One of the rarer works in this vein to specifically cover Micronesia is David Hanlon, *Making Micronesia: A Political Biography of Tosiwo Nakayama* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).

⁴ Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, 'Re-Presenting Melanesia: Ignoble Savages and Melanesian Alter-Natives', *The Contemporary Pacific* 27, no. 1 (2015): 110–46.

BERNARD NAROKOBI: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

The most thorough overview of Narokobi's life and work remains Greg Bablis's biographical article on Narokobi as 'A Melanesian Icon'.⁵ Here we present a highly synoptic version of his biography in order to provide the reader with some basic orientation.

Bernard Narokobi was born c. 1943 in the Arapesh village of Wautogik in the Prince Alexander Mountains of what is now East Sepik Province, PNG.⁶ While the exact date of his birth is not certain, we know he was born during World War II.⁷ Narokobi estimates that he started primary school at the age of 12 and finished university when he was 28.⁸ Growing up in Wautogik, he attended primary school at the Dagua Mission Station and later went to Brandi High School in Wewak where Michael Somare, who was to become the first prime minister of PNG, was his teacher in 1959.⁹ Because he began primary school relatively late and was able to attend school near his village, Narokobi grew up immersed in his home culture and traditions at the same time that he was receiving a Western education. As a result, his childhood was not characterized by the traumatic separation and excruciating longing experienced by other Pacific intellectuals such as Albert Wendt and Epeli Hau'ofa who were sent away at a young age to boarding school.¹⁰ Narokobi also took his religious training seriously, following his father in becoming a devout Catholic (Figure 1).

In 1960 Narokobi left home to attend Kerevat School in New Britain. Kerevat was founded in the late 1950s as one of the first government-run schools in the territory that educated Papua New Guineans at high levels. Narokobi attended the school between 1960 and 1965, during which time he crossed paths with many future leaders of PNG, including Rabbie Namaliu, another future prime minister. At Kerevat, Narokobi followed the curriculum of New South Wales schools as it stood prior to reforms made in 1962, and obtained a New South Wales leaving certificate in 1965.

Narokobi's interest in law dates back to his time at Kerevat. During the Christmas season of 1964 Narokobi took his first trip to Australia, where he went

⁵ Greg Bablis, 'A Melanesian Icon – Professor Bernard Mulu Narokobi (ca 1940–2010)', *Catalyst: Social and Pastoral Journal for Melanesia* 40, no. 2 (2010): 236–57.

⁶ The map at http://www.arapesh.org/map_of_region.php displays the current location of Wautogik village at the far eastern edge of the Coastal Arapesh language boundary.

⁷ Bablis, 'A Melanesian Icon', 237–8.

⁸ Bernard Narokobi, 'The Constitutional Planning Committee, Nationalism and Vision', in *Twenty Years of the Papua New Guinea Constitution*, ed. Anthony J. Regan, Owen Jessep, and Eric Kwa (Sydney: Lawbook Co., 2001), 25.

⁹ Somare taught at Brandi in 1959–60. Michael Somare, *Sana: An Autobiography of Michael Somare* (Port Moresby: Niugini Press, 1975), 40–1.

¹⁰ Hau'ofa is discussed later in the introduction. For themes of alienation in Wendt's early life, see Albert Wendt, 'Discovering *The Outsider*', in *Camus's L'Etranger: Fifty Years On*, ed. Adele King (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 48–50.

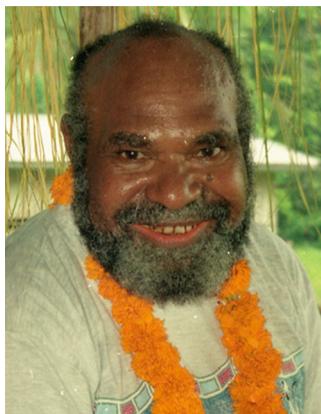


FIGURE 1: Bernard Narokobi in 1998.

Source: Lise M. Dobrin.

to ‘see the Law Courts and attend conferences in procedure’.¹¹ Already at that time, one teacher remembered, Narokobi expressed interest in becoming a lawyer.¹² He was encouraged in his professional ambitions by the Australian Judge William Prentice, who supported his efforts to attend university in Australia. Narokobi was granted a scholarship to study law at the University of Sydney, and he moved to Australia around 1966, eventually receiving his LLB and becoming a barrister in 1972, having been taken under Prentice’s wing.

Upon graduation, Narokobi returned to PNG, where he joined the Public Solicitor’s Office or ‘pubsol’. In this capacity he travelled throughout the country with the Supreme Court defending accused parties, often in capital cases involving serious crimes such as homicide and sorcery. As a judge later on, Narokobi would often hear similar cases. This was a period of intense intellectual excitement as it was becoming clear that PNG was moving towards independence. Yet Narokobi was somewhat peripheral to this movement, having spent his university years in Sydney and not at the recently established University of Papua New Guinea. Even after returning to PNG following law school, his time was spent travelling with the court instead of being settled in Port Moresby. As a result, Narokobi became involved with the move towards independence relatively late in the process.

Around 1974 Narokobi was appointed to serve as a consultant to the Constitutional Planning Committee (CPC), which was tasked with writing the new country’s constitution. As Sam Kari has demonstrated, much of the work of composing the constitution was done by non-Papua New Guinean experts and was influenced by the independence experiences of new nations in Africa.¹³ But Narokobi and a small

¹¹ Barbara Short, *Tuum Est: The Early History of Keravat National High School and Its Students: 1947–1986* (Epping, NSW: Barbara Short, 2009), 64.

¹² *Ibid.*, 84.

¹³ Sam Sirox Kari, ‘The Origin and Setting of the National Goals and Directive Principles in the Process of Writing the Constitution of Papua New Guinea’ (PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2005).

group of other Papua New Guineans – mostly Catholics from New Guinea, like himself, such as the Bougainvillean politician and Catholic priest John Momis and the political activist and MP John Kaputin – were responsible for writing the Preamble of the *Constitution of Papua New Guinea* (henceforth the Preamble). Narokobi once joked that he did not have a hand in writing the constitution, but that he did have a finger. That may be right, but Narokobi's finger is important. The Preamble is the most distinctive, aspirational, and widely known section of the document. In his work with the CPC Narokobi again travelled throughout the country conducting research for the constitution writing process and raising awareness about the forthcoming political changes. He said that at that time people had so little conception of what was transpiring that some understood themselves to be preparing not for self-government but for self-*kambang* (Tok Pisin for 'lime powder'), and that others thought they would soon be receiving not *independence* but *underpants*.¹⁴ During this period, Narokobi became a lay leader in the Catholic Church, a role he inhabited more or less actively for the rest of his life.

After independence, between 1975 and 1978, Narokobi served as the first chair of the Papua New Guinea Law Reform Commission (LRC), the body empowered by the constitution to provide draft legislation to PNG's parliament. The goal was to continue the independence process by purging the law of racist colonial legislation and undertake the sort of progressive legislative reform projects happening across the world at that time. Narokobi saw the work of the LRC as the principal means for replacing the British common law that PNG inherited from its colonial past with a distinctly Papua New Guinean body of law.

But what would it mean for the law – or anything else – to be distinctly Papua New Guinean? Throughout this period Narokobi wrote newspaper columns exploring this question which were later compiled into his best-known book, *The Melanesian Way*.¹⁵ In addition to addressing PNG's public sphere in this way, Narokobi also published regularly in *Point* and *Catalyst*, journals of the non-denominational Christian think tank The Melanesian Institute. There, in articles such as 'What Is Religious Experience for a Melanesian?', Narokobi pursued the religious dimension of his overarching question about what being a citizen of a Papua New Guinean nation might mean.¹⁶ Along the way Narokobi also wrote books addressing the contemporary political climate, such as *Foundations for Nationhood* (1975) and *Life and Leadership in Melanesia* (1983).¹⁷ The other key work in his

¹⁴ Narokobi's jokes about perceptions of independence can be found in Regan, Jessep, and Kwa, *Twenty Years*, 349.

¹⁵ Bernard Narokobi, *The Melanesian Way*, rev. ed. (Boroko, PNG: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies; Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1983).

¹⁶ Bernard Narokobi, 'What is Religious Experience for a Melanesian?', in *Living Theology in Melanesia: A Reader*, ed. John D'Arcy May, Point series no. 8 (Goroka: Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service, 1985), 69–77.

¹⁷ Bernard Narokobi, *Foundations for Nationhood* (Waigani, PNG: UPNG Press and Bookshop, 2010 [1975]); Bernard Narokobi, *Life and Leadership in Melanesia* (Suva, Fiji: The Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific; Port Moresby: University of Papua New Guinea, 1983).

corpus besides *The Melanesian Way* is *Lo Bilong Yumi Yet* [Our Own Law]: *Law and Custom in Melanesia* (1989), which attempts to answer many of the questions regarding the distinctiveness of Melanesian culture that he was criticized for evading in *The Melanesian Way*.¹⁸

In 1980 Narokobi served for a year as an acting judge and used the opportunity to produce judicial opinions that demonstrated how the bench could shape the common law to be more appropriate for Papua New Guineans. Ultimately, many of his more innovative decisions were overturned, but scrutinizing his decisions during this period is key for understanding his thought. After this short period as an interim judge and practising lawyer, Narokobi became a parliamentarian, being elected to the Wewak Open Seat in 1987. He was returned by Wewak in 1992 and again in 1997.

During his time in parliament, Narokobi served as minister for justice among other positions, including parliamentary speaker and acting governor general, and he played an active role in the diplomacy around the Bougainville conflict. When he eventually lost his seat in 2002, he was serving as leader of the opposition. Narokobi's greatest achievement of this period, in terms of disseminating his philosophy, was the passage of the *Underlying Law Act* (2000), which finally made official the policy he had pursued earlier as a member of the LRC and as a judge. The last official position Narokobi held after stepping down from politics was high commissioner to New Zealand (2005–08). Although no longer a member of parliament, he remained active in public life, organizing peace talks in Bougainville and helping to establish a Melanesian Studies centre at the University of Goroka. But after his wife died in 2006 his verve for life waned, and he died in 2010 of complications from diabetes.

'MELANESIA CANNOT BE AUSTRALIA'

In his writings on the Melanesian Way, Narokobi returned repeatedly to the need for people in the emerging nations of Melanesia to actively hone a new, culturally self-aware postcolonial subjectivity to help guide their approach to economic development, governance, and social change.¹⁹ Narokobi addressed many topics from the

¹⁸ Bernard Narokobi, *Lo Bilong Yumi Yet* [Our Own Law]: *Law and Custom in Melanesia* (Goroka, PNG: Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service, 1989). This book was initially published under the title *Law and Custom in Melanesia* (Goroka, PNG: Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service, 1989).

¹⁹ Ton Otto, 'After the "Tidal Wave": Bernard Narokobi and the Creation of a Melanesian Way', in *Narratives of Nation in the South Pacific*, ed. Ton Otto and Nicholas Thomas (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), 33, 64; Narokobi, *The Melanesian Way*. On the meaning of 'Melanesia' in Narokobi's work, see also Stephanie Lawson, "'Melanesia": The History and Politics of an Idea', *JPH* 48, no. 1 (2013): 12–14. While Narokobi's most immediate concern was with PNG, his image of Melanesians encompassed the native inhabitants of Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and Fiji. Narokobi, *The Melanesian Way*, 2, 4. He also included West Papuans in the Melanesian family, and given their cultural and ethnic distinctness from the Javanese Indonesians in control

standpoint of this synthetic, ancient, yet forward-looking Melanesian Way. Among them were development; race relations; women's rights; the involvement of the state in local conflict resolution; the rise of individualism and its tensions with communitarian values; land use policy and food security; the need to protect the natural environment; the emergence of social class divisions; international relations and foreign aid; and the social role of modern institutions like churches, media, and the civil service.

Narokobi writes about these matters of culture and development in a remarkable stylistic voice. The awareness that he was living through times of profound historical transformation evoked deep feelings in him that one often can find reflected in the literary quality of his writing:

Some Melanesians hold to the view that the only way to be acknowledged as a person with worth is to negate his or her ancestral past and adopt the Western life style externally as well as internally. In effect they deny a significant part of their identity. They live in a world of fantasy, without a link to the past and a foggy connection with the future ... It is disappointing that the people of Papua New Guinea have not realised what tremendous heritage they possess ... We have not taken control of our lives and are being swept into events by a tide whose origin is not the same as ours and whose ending quite probably will be destructive. We inherit and perpetuate many laws, institutions and narrow logics of the West but we are not obliged to accommodate external forces, rather they have to fit into our systems and institutions. The church, the Government and business practices must fit into our culture so that we can fashion and refashion these as we grow.²⁰

Unless our [traditional Melanesian] values are adopted into the modern world we face a serious challenge of disintegration. A nation can remain free, united and progressive in every way, but unless it builds on the solid foundations of its ethical values, it is likely to be a soul-less entity ... Most people will readily admit that the values of brotherhood known as the wantok system, family cohesion and interdependence are as valuable now in a modern Papua New Guinea as they were in the ancient times. However, many narrow-minded individuals link these values with a static past of their imagination ... and assert that the only way to sustain unity and nationhood is through the so-called Western ways ... [But] Melanesia cannot be Australia, America or England ... No matter how healthy a coconut seedling might be, if the soil and the climatic

of their territory, he sympathized with their plight. A photo of 'West Papuan freedom fighters' is included in his book *Life and Leadership in Melanesia* in a section titled, 'Our people are not yet free' (see pp. 29–30). Although Narokobi travelled widely throughout his career, he never visited Indonesia, a silent protest against the Indonesian occupation of West Papua, which he considered illegal. Vergil Narokobi, pers. comm., 26 Oct. 2019.

²⁰ Narokobi, *Life and Leadership in Melanesia*, 22–4.

conditions are not right, that coconut seedling will not grow into a full bearing tree.²¹

Here Narokobi draws upon metaphorical images grounded in Melanesian rural experience, likening modernity's force to a 'tide' that comes in on its own and alters the world in uncontrollable ways; elsewhere he describes colonization even more dramatically as a 'tidal wave', a catastrophic event that crashed down upon Melanesians and left them to sort through the wreckage.²² The metaphor of a 'coconut seedling' at the end of the passage similarly takes its meaning from Melanesian rural experience, where the planting of slow-growing coconut and sago palms is done in thoughtful preparation for the future, whether to make sure that one's descendants will have food or to create for them an enduring reminder of a past moment of special significance. The point, which we develop further below, is that Narokobi writes not only *about* the Melanesian Way, he writes *in* a Melanesian way.

TOWARD A CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE MELANESIAN WAY

At the time that Narokobi was publishing on the Melanesian Way, a major scholarly literature was developing on the contemporary mobilization of tradition or *kastom* in the Pacific.²³ Among the focal concerns of this literature are questions of authenticity, social change, and the responsiveness of Pacific peoples' identity to Western conceptions of cultural difference: To what extent is the content of *kastom* genuine and unreflexive, as opposed to being a new essentialist construction of urban elites? Does the appearance of new group identities imply an internalization of foreign perspectives on the self? It would certainly be reasonable to probe the meaning of the Melanesian Way with questions such as these, given that Narokobi was an educated Papua New Guinean explicitly asserting the value of indigenous culture at that time.²⁴ But we have come to believe that doing so would run counter to the spirit in which Narokobi himself put forward his ideas. As has been noted by Ton Otto, what

²¹ Ibid., 38–9.

²² See article by Bashkow, this issue.

²³ See, e.g., Roger Keesing and Roger M. Tonkinson, eds, 'Reinventing Traditional Culture: The Politics of Kastom in Island Melanesia', *Mankind* 13, no. 4 (1982); Alain Babadzan, 'Kastom and Nation Building in the South Pacific', in *Ethnicities and Nations: Processes of Interethnic Relations in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific*, ed. Remo Guidieri, Francesco Pellizzi, and Stanley J. Tambiah (Houston: Rothko Chapel, 1988), 199–228; Jocelyn Linnekin and Linette Poyer, eds, *Cultural Identity and Ethnicity in the Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990); Margaret Jolly, 'Specters of Inauthenticity', *The Contemporary Pacific* 4, no. 1 (1992): 49–72; Margaret Jolly and Nicholas Thomas, eds, 'The Politics of Tradition in the Pacific', *Oceania* 62, no. 4 (1992). Two sources that systematically relate this literature to Narokobi's thought are Nicholas Thomas, *In Oceania: Visions, Artifacts, Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) and Alex Golub, *Leviathans at the Gold Mine: Creating Indigenous and Corporate Actors in Papua New Guinea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

²⁴ See, e.g., Nicholas Thomas, *In Oceania*, 152–5.

Narokobi wanted above all was to find a way to live with the oppositions that troubled him; he was less inclined to try to systematically analyse and resolve them. In fact, one of Otto's main arguments in his thoughtful exposition of the Melanesian Way is that Narokobi believed that 'opposites can and must coexist' and that a 'kind of dialectical reasoning' will be required 'to establish a new synthesis' from which Melanesians can move forward in history with integrity.²⁵ This orientation he felt was best 'reflective of human life' with all its 'inconsistencies, contradictions, emotions, reason and intellect'.²⁶ Indeed, Narokobi considered it 'a mark of social maturity' to accept that the various domains of life cannot be neatly separated.²⁷ Narokobi rejected the idea that the basis for a modern Melanesian subjectivity could be reduced to a definition or set of features.²⁸ He preferred to conceive of the Melanesian Way as a holistic ideal, 'a total cosmic vision of life'.²⁹ Thus, while to treat the Melanesian Way as an intervention in the politics of *kastom* might be revealing in some ways, it does not give us insight into this concept as Narokobi himself understood it.

Narokobi's reluctance to define what he meant by the Melanesian Way may be attributable in part to his personal intellectual style.³⁰ But it also reflects a distinctively Melanesian approach to persuasion and public speaking that attempts to engage audiences and draw their support by presenting positions for them to consider while leaving them ample freedom to make their own sense out of what is said (or, in this case, written). This is a communicative ethos that 'privileges ... meanings construed by listeners rather than those conveyed by speakers', one that operates more by allowing listeners to create their own new interpretations than by pointing back to pre-established ones, as Western understandings of communicative efficacy tend to emphasize.³¹ Narokobi's writings are unquestionably directed at a readership of Melanesians. So it only makes sense that rather than laying out in detail what *he* meant, Narokobi aimed to rouse his interlocutors to invest the interpretive effort and undertake for themselves what he called an 'inward study' of the Melanesian Way, 'a period of introspection' that could lead them toward positive self-understanding as 'a people of unique quality, character and dynamism'.³² This he felt was important because

²⁵ Otto, 'After the "Tidal Wave"', 38, 43.

²⁶ Narokobi, *The Melanesian Way*, 4.

²⁷ Narokobi, *Lo Bilong Yumi Yet*, 4.

²⁸ Even if he did at times concede and provide some, such as bride payment or sister exchange, family land ownership, reliance on oral tradition, and belief in an afterlife. Otto, 'After the "Tidal Wave"', 46.

²⁹ Narokobi, *The Melanesian Way*, 8.

³⁰ John Burton characterizes Narokobi as a 'lumper' as opposed to a 'splitter'; see 'Fratricide and Inequality: Things Fall Apart in Eastern New Guinea', *Archaeology in Oceania* 32 (2003): 204.

³¹ Don Kulick, 'Anger, Gender, Language Shift, and the Politics of Revelation in a Papua New Guinean Village', in *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*, ed. Bambi B. Schieffelin, Kathryn A. Woolard, and Paul V. Kroskrity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 87–102. See, also, James Slotta, 'Can the Subaltern Listen? Self-Determination and the Provisioning of Expertise in Papua New Guinea', *American Ethnologist* 44, no. 2 (2017): 1–13.

³² Narokobi, *The Melanesian Way*, 9, 30, 9.

‘[c]hange is easier when we understand who we are’.³³ And he recognized that if you want ‘to change for the good or better, you have to love that which you are seeking to change’.³⁴ So there are reasons, based both in general principles and in his native communicative culture, why Narokobi would have chosen to leave the precise meaning of the Melanesian Way open and underspecified.

PLACING NAROKOBI AMONG PHILOSOPHERS OF MELANESIANISM

While Narokobi’s account of the Melanesian Way was initially addressed to Papua New Guineans and sought to provide the cultural grounding of a new nation, it also clearly has implications for the region more broadly. For this reason, it is useful to compare Narokobi to other Pacific intellectuals who address similar topics: Jean-Marie Tjibaou, a key figure in the struggle for Kanak independence in New Caledonia, and the great anthropologist of Papua New Guinea, Eveli Hau’ofa.

These three thinkers, we argue, addressed fundamental issues of identity, cultural change, and regional connection in Melanesia in a way that other authors did not. For instance, Peter Kenilorea, the first prime minister of the Solomon Islands, was a relatively unideological public servant who actively resisted attempts by his constitutional advisor to innovate on the British model he inherited.³⁵ The first prime minister of Vanuatu, Walter Lini, is well-known for his doctrine of ‘Melanesian socialism’. But as one of his best-known expositors, Ralph Premdas, has pointed out, this concept was ‘intended to serve as a broad policy map ... erected on a paucity of principles’ without ‘enunciat[ing] a theory or definition of the purpose of man and society’.³⁶ Lini’s doctrine was itself, moreover, deeply influenced by Narokobi’s work.³⁷ Overall then, Hau’ofa, Tjibaou, and Narokobi seem like the right set of thinkers to focus on in charting out the intellectual history of Pacific decolonization as we do here.

On the surface, Hau’ofa and Narokobi have much in common. Both were born and raised in PNG. Both wrote plays, poetry, and literature, and both envisioned a modernity guided by Indigenous rather than Western values. But Hau’ofa’s path was very different from Narokobi’s. The son of Tongan missionaries raised in Milne Bay Province, Hau’ofa grew up in diaspora rather than on his family’s land in Tonga. His schooling took him throughout the Commonwealth to Tonga, Australia, Canada, and the Caribbean. Hau’ofa gave up religion relatively early in life and committed himself to a secular project of modernization, only to grow disenchanted

³³ Ibid., 30.

³⁴ Bernard Narokobi, ‘Nobility of Village Life: The Economic Development and the Political Process in Papua New Guinea’, *Catalyst: Social Pastoral Magazine for Melanesia* 4, no. 4 (1974): 61.

³⁵ Peter Kenilorea, *Tell It as It Is: Autobiography of Rt. Hon. Sir Peter Kenilorea, KBE, PC, Solomon Islands’ First Prime Minister* (Taipei: Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies, 2008), 216.

³⁶ Ralph R. Premdas, ‘Melanesian Socialism: Vanuatu’s Quest for Self-Definition and Problems of Implementation’, *Pacific Studies* 11, no. 1 (1987): 124.

³⁷ Ibid., 111.

with it and develop a new vision of a trans-local, pan-Pacific Indigenous modernity. Hau'ofa described his background as one 'of rootlessness, of being a perpetual outsider, a professional underdog, a clown at heart, a connoisseur of absurdity, and an unbeliever'.³⁸ His hilarious satirical writings include scenarios like a set of notebooks documenting local oral traditions being used to attract grant aid but then being sold for toilet paper before they could be preserved, and a novel with the (literally) cheeky title *Kisses in the Nederends*.³⁹

Narokobi could not be more different. While he and Hau'ofa both criticized the economic dependency that foreign powers foisted on the Pacific and sought to combat the disempowering ideology of smallness and remoteness that went with it, Hau'ofa was not directly involved in the struggle as a politician or an activist as was Narokobi. Hau'ofa's identity was decidedly that of a transnationalist, whereas Narokobi was a nationalist, indeed, one deeply rooted in his village culture and family land. While Hau'ofa's life seems one constant itinerary, Narokobi spent almost his entire life living in PNG, except for a few years as a student at the beginning of his career and a few years as a diplomat at the end. Hau'ofa left the civil service to work on satirical novels, while Narokobi never gave up his attempts at government reform. Groomed for leadership from an early age, the fundamental message Narokobi absorbed was one of empowerment, responsibility, and self-confidence. His earnestness contrasted with Hau'ofa's clownish cynicism.

Narokobi did share Hau'ofa's suspicion of secular Western modernity, but he came by his suspicion much earlier in his life than did Hau'ofa, and it sprang from a different source. For Hau'ofa the church was part and parcel of Western colonization, and he experienced his parents' Christian faith as 'heavy and stifling', yet another burden that had to be overcome.⁴⁰ Narokobi, by contrast, drew profound meaning from Christianity, interpreting it as an inheritance from his own forefathers. Narokobi envisioned secular modernity as just one historical epoch, a cultural movement criticized by both the Catholic Church that had preceded it and the decolonized, Indigenous, and spiritual nation state of PNG to come after it. Narokobi saw in Catholicism a deep connection with Indigenous Melanesian views of the cosmos. For him, both Christianity and the Melanesian Way preceded and morally superseded the capitalism that he foresaw would come with a decolonized PNG.

Tjibaou and Narokobi might seem to be more similar. Both were nationalists, both struggled for decolonization, and both were simultaneously committed to Indigenous culture and Catholicism. But here, too, there are important differences. Tjibaou's decolonization struggle was unlike Hau'ofa's or Narokobi's. While Narokobi actively worked for independence, he did so right in step with Australia, the colonizing power. Moreover he was actively encouraged and mentored by Australians who were themselves working for Papua New Guinean independence. Tjibaou, on the other

³⁸ Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are The Ocean* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 100.

³⁹ Epeli Hau'ofa, 'The Glorious Pacific Way', in *Tales of the Tikongs* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1983), 83–93; Epeli Hau'ofa, *Kisses in the Nederends* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995).

⁴⁰ Hau'ofa, *We Are The Ocean*, 99.

hand, came of age politically during the first decades of De Gaulle's Fifth Republic, a time when self-government was withdrawn from New Caledonia and France encouraged recolonization by white settlers. Expatriates in PNG were never more than three per cent of the population in Narokobi's time, while in New Caledonia, Kanak people are not even a majority.⁴¹ To say there was substantial opposition to decolonization in New Caledonia is an understatement: in the 1980s, opposition to settler colonialism meant intense unrest that almost reached the level of a civil war.

As a result, Tjibaou's political career involved trials that Narokobi could never have dreamt of. Like Narokobi, Tjibaou was actively engaged in politics. But Tjibaou was tragically murdered in 1989 at the age of 53 in the course of his struggle for New Caledonian independence, making him a martyr and a potent political symbol, whereas Narokobi continued to work toward an ever more independent PNG into his old age. So Narokobi had a longer life but less fame and renown. In his dogged focus on legislative reform both at the Law Reform Commission and in parliament, Narokobi was more interested in the minutiae of policy than was Tjibaou.

Finally, Narokobi's experience of Christianity differed from Tjibaou's. On the one hand, both relied on the educational opportunities presented by the Catholic Church, with Tjibaou joining (and ultimately leaving) the priesthood. Both also 'saw no contradiction in being both a Catholic and a Melanesian, a Christian and an animist'.⁴² On the other hand, however, Tjibaou struggled with the church as a worldly institution. Tjibaou experienced racism while attending seminary, and in New Caledonia the Catholic Church 'limited the horizons for Melanesians to a few subordinate positions in the Caledonian ecclesiastical hierarchy'.⁴³ Unsurprisingly, given the long connection between church and state which De Gaulle continued, it was referred to as 'l'Église des blancs' (the church of the whites).⁴⁴ Australia, in contrast, was a historically Anglo-Protestant country which lacked a state church. And, as Gibbs shows in his contribution to this issue, the Catholic Church Narokobi encountered was one that was seeking to decolonize and indigenize itself. Tjibaou found it difficult to separate the Catholic Church from colonialism, while Narokobi could imagine the Catholic Church as a resource for resistance.

We hope that by comparing and contrasting Narokobi with these other Melanesian thinkers we have been able to show what made Narokobi's programme for an indigenous modernity distinctive. Narokobi appreciated cultural diversity and international connections but was ultimately a committed nationalist. He was also a political moderate who believed not in overturning but engaging with the hegemonic

⁴¹ On expatriates in PNG, see Sian Upton, 'Expatriates in Papua New Guinea: Constructions of *Expatriates* in Canadian Oral Narratives' (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1998), 2. On New Caledonia, see David Chappell, 'Frontier Ethnogenesis: The Case of New Caledonia', *Journal of World History* 4, no. 2 (1993): 307–24.

⁴² Eric Waddell, *Jean-Marie Tjibaou, Kanak Witness to the World: An Intellectual Biography* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 49.

⁴³ Alban Bensa and Eric Wittersheim, 'Nationalism and Interdependence: The Political Thought of Jean-Marie Tjibaou', *The Contemporary Pacific* 10, no. 2 (1998): 372.

⁴⁴ Waddell, *Jean-Marie Tjibaou*, 52.

political and legal structures whose pressures he felt. This could not be said of Hau'ofa, who built a space outside mainstream politics in which to imagine his new artistic and cultural forms, and who was committed to a post-national regional identity. Tjibaou was a peacemaker who sought to prevent violence, but he was never in a situation like that of Narokobi in PNG, where a 'normal politics' was possible. Finally, as we have seen, Narokobi is also set apart from Hau'ofa and Tjibaou by his unambivalent embrace of Christianity as an appropriate Pacific cultural form.

We believe that Narokobi may continue to serve as a useful ancestor for Melanesian people today who are committed to Christianity, cultural unity-in-diversity, regional connection but national aspiration, and nonviolent resistance to colonialism. West Papuans, for instance, will be interested to know of his long dedication to their cause. Furthermore, while we have discussed Narokobi in the context of Melanesia, we hope that our analysis might stimulate even broader comparisons across the Pacific region. For instance, in many ways Narokobi calls to mind Pacific politicians such as Āpirana Ngata of New Zealand, who sought betterment for his people by promoting a decolonization programme that could operate within existing structures.

POSITION OF THE AUTHORS AND OUTLINE OF THE COLLECTION

The approach to history adopted in this special issue is distinctive in that several of the contributing authors apply to their subject matter an anthropological perspective that takes firsthand experience to be a valued source of insight into human social phenomena. Because these contributors knew Narokobi personally, they are able to write about him not only as scholars but as his kinsmen, colleagues, and friends. This does not mean their contributions are merely personal memoirs. To the contrary, they approach Narokobi's biography and the history of his ideas analytically, but in light of their own situated interactions with him in his own spheres of activity. Because they speak not only to his ideas but to the life experience in which those ideas are anchored, they are revealing of his motives and concerns. Taken as a set, the contributions cover every major aspect of Narokobi's life and work.

Lise Dobrin first got to know Narokobi in the late 1990s when she settled for over a year in his home village of Wautogik in order to conduct dissertation research on the variety of the Arapesh language spoken there.⁴⁵ In addition to making her feel welcome as he would any open-minded stranger, Narokobi took an interest in her research, as he realized that a shift from Arapesh to Tok Pisin and English was underway and that Arapesh people would not likely be speaking their ancestral tongue into the future. He also appreciated the positive attention that an outsider to the community brought to his language and culture. Narokobi stayed in contact with Dobrin for the rest of his life. In 2006, while he was serving as PNG's high commissioner to New Zealand, he shared with her an unpublished manuscript on the history of his village that he had written during this period, when he was stepping away from public

⁴⁵ Lise M. Dobrin, *Concreteness in Grammar: The Noun Class Systems of the Arapesh Languages* (Stanford: CSLI, 2012).

office and beginning to reflect on the meaning of his life's work. In her contribution to the collection, Dobrin describes the way Arapesh language terms and cultural concepts suffused Narokobi's writings and reasoning. In doing so, she draws upon her own linguistic and cultural knowledge of Wautogik, where Narokobi grew from a boy into a young man and returned regularly throughout his life. Through close readings of Narokobi's published writings, complemented by analysis of his unpublished village history, Dobrin shows that when Narokobi identifies 'the village' as the central unit of Papua New Guinean culture, the village he has in mind is frequently his own. Dobrin argues that, at some level, what Narokobi was imagining and promoting was the continued viability of Wautogik itself – that place of his youth that he held so dear and that for him exemplified what was truest and best about PNG.

In his contribution, Ira Bashkow draws explicitly upon his personal encounters with Narokobi. He does this in order to illustrate the Arapesh openness to foreignness and innovation that he sees as characteristic of Narokobi's notion of the Melanesian Way. Bashkow, an ethnographer, began studying the conditions under which Narokobi grew up when he accompanied Dobrin, his wife, during her fieldwork in Wautogik. His article historicizes and culturally contextualizes Narokobi's experiences of education, development, Catholicism, and the local political scene on the Wewak 'West Coast' during his youth, when an ambitious practical modernization movement arose under the charismatic Arapesh war hero and community leader Sir Pita Simogun. Bashkow shows how Narokobi's vision of a self-respecting Melanesian indigeneity that was, at the same time, open to learning from cultural others, was ratified for Narokobi as he saw those around him blossom in a time of rapid cultural change.

Philip Gibbs also had a personal relationship with Narokobi. They met in the mid-1990s at the Holy Spirit Seminary (now the Catholic Theological Institute) in Bomana outside Port Moresby, where Narokobi would sit in on seminary classes. Narokobi's humility in doing this impressed Gibbs, who later invited him to co-chair the final event of the 2003–4 General Assembly of the Catholic Church in PNG that he discusses in his contribution to the collection. In his article, Gibbs examines Narokobi's Catholicism and the role it played in his life and thought. Vatican II sought to revitalize the Catholic Church, indigenize the priesthood, and increase the Church's relevance for laypeople, giving them a stronger voice in its communal life. Gibbs documents Narokobi's participation in the National Catholic Council of PNG, which was part of the Church's Vatican II-era push for change in the Pacific. He also shows how the aspirational Preamble to the *Constitution of Papua New Guinea* (hereafter PNG *Constitution*), which Narokobi helped shape, echoes papal calls for 'integral human development'.

Jonathan Ritchie examines Narokobi's work with the CPC, focusing on the local visits that the committee made throughout Papua and New Guinea in order to get feedback on the proposed PNG *Constitution*. Ritchie details the role that Narokobi had in developing the National Goals and Directive Principles that are outlined in the Constitution's Preamble. Although the technical sections of the document were primarily written by Western policy experts, Ritchie argues that as a whole the constitution sincerely reflects the thoughts and desires expressed by Narokobi's rural interlocutors. Ritchie became interested in Narokobi's role in the constitutional

planning process while doing research in the PNG National Archives in Waigani in the late 1990s. As he sat there reading through the many submissions and discussion group reports the CPC received, trying to make sense of their often conflicting viewpoints, it dawned on Ritchie that because the other consultants were occupied with other matters it was Narokobi who had been tasked with sitting in the CPC's office in Hohola doing the same thing 25 years earlier: synthesizing Papua New Guineans' complex reactions to the momentous times in which they were living.

Like Ritchie, Alex Golub was led to read Narokobi's work while doing research for another project: a study of mining and modernity in PNG.⁴⁶ Knowing Dobrin, Bashkow, and Gibbs, and having once visited Dobrin in Wautogik, deepened his interest. When he realized that the library at his university, the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, held far more material on Narokobi than was available in most places in PNG, he began looking for ways to contribute to the repatriation of Narokobi's thought through his own scholarly work. Trained in political and legal anthropology, Golub took a special interest in Narokobi's role in the PNG LRC, the government body Narokobi took charge of in the years immediately following independence. This was roughly the same time period when Narokobi was writing what would become his masterpiece, *The Melanesian Way*. In his contribution to this special issue, Golub shows that although the vision for indigenizing the state espoused in *The Melanesian Way* was in some respects vague, Narokobi's intentions were in fact clearly articulated in his work on the LRC. Golub's focus is on the LRC's proposals regarding the legal treatment of adultery.

Vergil Narokobi is Bernard's son, a legal scholar like his father, and now a judge on PNG's National and Supreme Court. His contribution provides a deeper examination of the elder Narokobi's legal philosophy. Vergil had accompanied his father to his public speaking engagements since his childhood, but it took many years before he began to appreciate his ideas and what he was hoping to achieve in his work. Admiring his father and wanting to follow in his footsteps, he commenced legal studies at the University of Papua New Guinea with the goal of advancing the central ideas Narokobi had hoped to realize in a modern liberal democratic constitutional framework. In his contribution to this collection, Vergil traces Narokobi's law career from student to parliamentarian, demonstrating the thematic coherence of his jurisprudence and showing how Narokobi sought ways to legitimize a legal outlook centred on grassroots reasoning. Narokobi's character, as it emerges from Vergil's description, is that of a fundamental optimist who audaciously believed that Melanesian culture, despite its very different ontological premises from the common law tradition, could be formalized and used as a source of justice for Melanesians, above all through the vehicle of the PNG *Constitution* that he had helped to create.

Papua New Guinean ethno-historian Greg Babilis inherited a kinship relation to Bernard Narokobi that was shaped and strengthened by socio-historical circumstances. During World War II Babilis's grandfather, Felix Natakur, was taken in and cared for by Natakur's elder sister, Maria Mokoi, who was Narokobi's mother. Babilis grew up listening to his father, Dr Felix Babilis (featured in the article by

⁴⁶ Golub, *Leviathans at the Gold Mine*.

Bashkow), speak admiringly of his uncle Narokobi. As an adult, Bablis spent a year working at the Melanesian Institute in Goroka, where he immersed himself in reading literature by Narokobi that he found in the institute library. When Narokobi died in 2010, he realized that he had missed the chance to learn from him firsthand. In his contribution to this collection, Bablis examines Narokobi's leadership style, both in his home community and in PNG as a whole. What does it mean to lead in a country with a range of leadership systems from hierarchical chieftainships to extreme egalitarianism? Could one be a modern leader and a traditional Melanesian 'bigman' at once? Bablis shows that Narokobi invested his role as a leader with great principle and was suspicious of modern hierarchy, refusing, for instance, to attend the ceremony at which he received honours from Queen Elizabeth II. Bablis uses the events that took place in the period immediately following Narokobi's death to shed light on his status as a leader, including the mourning events, remembrances in Port Moresby and Wautogik, and other commemorations. Taking seriously Melanesian mortuary customs that symbolically reconstitute the social personhood of the deceased, Bablis's analysis helps us understand the meanings of Narokobi's leadership at national, regional, and village levels.

Finally, the collection includes a bibliography of Bernard Narokobi's work. The bibliography is divided into three parts. The first is a list of Narokobi's published writings compiled by Greg Bablis and Alex Golub. The second is a list of Narokobi's judicial opinions compiled by Edward Wolfers. The third section, also compiled by Bablis and Golub, includes publications in which Narokobi writes substantially about important issues but of which he is not the sole author. Although the bibliography may be incomplete, we believe it is reasonably comprehensive and look forward to future research that will produce an exhaustive account of his writings.

* * *

In bringing attention to Narokobi's life and thought through this special issue, we necessarily revisit the stimulating principles and institutional arrangements of PNG decolonization and independence at a particular historical moment. But the meaning and implications of that moment are still unfolding in our time. Nothing would gratify Narokobi more than to know that scholars and public commentators were continuing to debate the status of Melanesian modernity in light of urbanization, environmentally and socially catastrophic resource extraction, gender violence, crises of leadership, and other issues that press upon contemporary PNG. We hope that the present collection will stimulate others to read Narokobi's deliberately provocative writings, thereby furthering discussion about the meaning of Melanesian sovereignty among all who care about PNG today.

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