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Abstract

Across the world, knowledge communities categorize and attach conditions of guardianship to different kinds of knowledge. For private or secret knowledge, those responsible for its care have obligations for arranging and restricting transmission to ensure community survival. While an insider/outsider positionality is often used to navigate this knowledge area, a binary approach is unhelpful. Taking a more relational reading of positionality, we support a dynamic understanding of the transmission of restricted knowledge, using relevant principles of guardianship or custodianship. Based on a Melanesian Solomon Islands tribe, the study sketches a set of principles and shows how they operate in practice. Our intents are: to honour the contribution that Melanesian thought makes to rethinking research dichotomies regarding secret knowledge; that readers appreciate the dynamic nature of knowledge guardianship; and that this case study enhances the discussion on ethical entitlement to, or restriction of, Indigenous knowledge in the Pacific region and beyond.

Keywords

knowledge guardianship, research ethics, relational positionality, Pacific-Melanesian, Solomon Islands

Introduction

In this article we focus on secret or private knowledge. This is knowledge which is not available to everyone in a society. It is restricted and subject to custodianship or guardianship by one or more of those who are “in the know”. Thinking about what this kind of knowledge is, its purpose, importance, the obligations attached to it, and the principles that guide its availability and transmission is a fruitful ground when considering the relational management of knowledge, particularly in a research context.

The ownership of and access to knowledge, particularly that of indigenous provenance, is a contested area. Access to traditional knowledge is often appropriately discussed through the language of colonisation and decolonisation (Smith, 1999), referencing unethical practices of the past that continue into the present. Recognition in the academy of longstanding complex indigenous thinking about access to knowledge has been mirrored by recent advances in relational understandings of positionality (Carling, Erdal, & Ezzati, 2014; Crossa, 2012; Hoogendoorn & Visser, 2012). These developments affect how researchers think about the ethics of who may know what, and the circumstances that frame changes in one’s position in relation to restricted knowledge.

We seek to extend the discussion of positionality by reference to Melanesian thinking about the care of private or secret knowledge. Melanesian thought addresses guardianship and custodianship of restricted knowledge through principles that create opportunities, responsibilities and obligations for knowledge guardians. Although these principles may seem relatively fixed, dynamism exists in the application of principled thinking in changing contexts. Appreciating such dynamics can inform ideas about relational positionality by

enhancing understanding of the relationship between private knowledge and those offered access to it.

This article offers a brief global literature review as a way of contextualising how various groups think of private or secret knowledge. This is followed with a brief description of the study methodology. Then, using a Mala'ita example, we discuss how knowledge is categorised in Melanesia. We offer a brief discussion of positionality which pays particular attention to relationality. Following this, we give a brief account of the concepts of authority and seniority and a specific discussion of Mala'ita principles of guardianship or custodianship of secret knowledge. Finally, a concluding discussion re-contextualises the key elements of the argument in a global context.

Secret knowledge in the literature

In many societies, the concept of a private domain of knowledge is significant. However, the basis of privacy can vary. Private knowledge can have a sacred element but historical knowledge can also be the subject of privacy (Murphy, 1980). Masoni (2017), whose doctoral study deals conceptually with the area despite presenting a Māori case study, suggests that for some, privacy is widespread since “everything in indigenous communities has a story and a purpose. Everything responds to protocols and is generally controlled by elders, holders or guardians” (p. 55).

The privacy of knowledge can relate to the origin or use of what is known. Private knowledge stories can relate how something came to be known; a private purpose relates restricted knowledge to the way it affects relationships and/or is to be enacted. Murphy (1980) suggests that the content of secret information can be of less significance than the obligations, rights and privileges associated with the fact of secrecy. Secret societies which control sacred knowledge have been discussed by many researchers across continents (Allen, 2000; Ntuli, 2002) and a over long period of time (Fison, 1885).

In many indigenous societies, the right to private knowledge is related to the expertise of professional groups, specialism, seniority or rank (Keesing, 1991; Murphy, 1980; Scaglion, 2015). In some contexts, a combination of these ways of qualifying to know that which is private operates (Johansson-Fua, 2017). Dutfield (2000) suggests that for some groups, including some in Melanesia, private knowledge can be a commodity for exchange or transfer. Despite changing times, private knowledge domains persist in Melanesia. Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (2001) observe that for the Kwara'ae of Mala'ita in the Solomon Islands, knowledge associated with certain rituals, sorcery and healing persists in secret domains, notwithstanding the influence of Christianity.

In Melanesia, kin-lines can dictate access to various forms of knowledge. Sanga (2015) describes moral education in Gula'alā, Solomon Islands, as existing in a private knowledge domain guarded by sub-groups in clans. As observed on Malekula Island, Vanuatu, by McCarter and Gavin (2011), traditional ecological knowledge can also be private, residing with families and clans and protected by vertical seniority-based transmission mechanisms. Thus, in various guises and for multiple reasons, private knowledge domains in Melanesia continue to structure ideas, communication and the relationships through which transmission of knowledge is warranted and the enactment of transfer occurs. Drawing on this literature, the principled relationship between knowledge guardianship and seniority in the context of private knowledge domains forms the focus of this article.

Methodology

This study is part of a wider multi-year project on the Gula'alā people of East Mala'ita, Solomon Islands. Aspects of the wider study methodology had been described in previous studies (Sanga, 2015; Sanga, 2019). Specifically for this study, data sources included expert tribal knowledge by the principal researcher, the rara'aba (calming of nerves) meeting with the Gwailao tribe and ala lā kini (focused discussions) with key tribal leaders. Study findings were analysed to explore relationality in a nuanced and dynamic way. At this rara'aba meeting, primary clan alafa (male tribal leader/leaders) debated and gave approval for the tribal secret knowledge contained in the Fānanau lā 'I Gula'alā (Sanga, 2015) book to be publicly gifted for education purposes. Additionally, approval for the use of the specific subject matter of this study, including the recordings of the rara'aba meeting, was given to the principal researcher as alafa of Gwailao and principal guardian of this knowledge by a council of the principal alafa of Gwailao. The rara'aba meeting records were in Gula'alā language and were translated into English by the principal researcher, then shared with key Gwailao tribal alafa and members for accuracy and accountability. In every phase of the study, all appropriate undertakings of Gula'alā knowledge ethics were satisfied according to Gula'alā kastom (customs). As alafa of Gwailao, the principal researcher assumes responsibility for any limitations or weaknesses of this study being mindful that this topic is a new in the emerging Indigenous Pacific scholarship.

Types of knowledge in Mala'ita

In Mala'ita, three kinds of knowledge can be identified. First, public knowledge can be held by almost anyone. It is communal and access to it is open. Examples of public knowledge include knowledge about food, farming, fishing and some medicinal information. This kind of knowledge is needed for daily survival - it is the basis of people's livelihood in the village. In addition, faka (introduced) knowledge such as that learnt in school, from the media or the Church is of the contemporary world and applicable in it, and thus is deemed public.

A second category is specialised knowledge. Mala'ita examples include some medicinal knowledge, some trade knowledge (as used by master fishermen or hunters), some social-spiritual knowledge (as used by members of secret societies and sorcerers) and all clan genealogical knowledge. Specialised knowledge can be held by secret societies or encoded in secret language. Access is restricted; those permitted access are limited in number and require a certain kind of qualification to gain entry. In addition, access is graded and progressive. The aim of restricting secret specialised knowledge is to maintain its purity and power.

A third category is sacred knowledge. This is knowledge that is about the day- to-day but which maintains spatial and temporal links with spiritual dimensions both in and beyond time. Sacred knowledge is about spiritual continuity within the theocratic clan structure of Mala'ita. Examples include the names of clan-tribal ancestor spirits; physical and verbal forms of knowledge repositories that are associated with tribal religious ceremonies; certain ritualistic utterances; certain invocations; and certain process knowledges associated with clan-tribal religions. Sacred knowledge also includes that which sustains holy living and uprightness of moral character. Access is limited to those who are qualified so that the sanctity of the knowledge is maintained.

Although Mala'ita knowledge domains can be enumerated, a Melanesian world view is integrated (Sanga and Walker, 2012) and does not separate the physical world from the spiritual; all aspects of life that can be identified co-exist in an overlaid and interlinked fashion. Thus, although specific domains of knowledge exist, the application of any knowledge affects the whole of life in a holistic fashion.

Insider/outsider positioning

Restricted knowledge and access to it is relevant in the context of research for at least two reasons. Firstly, accounts of the ethics of research generally include protocols of ownership, transfer and use of knowledge. Secondly, publication as a consequence of research removes knowledge from its context and makes it available to all.

Whether or not private knowledge is, or should be, transferred to a researcher is sometimes understood through the researcher being an “insider” or an “outsider” (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane, & Muhamad, 2001). However, this division is simplistic and requires development. For instance, if a study involves sex, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, is an outsider a person who identifies with, or is identified by others as being “inside” all three categories? A this-or-that approach is an inadequate account of people's lived realities (Hird, 2000).

Carling, Erdal and Ezzati (2014) point out that concepts such as superdiversity and intersectionality disturb simplistic views of positionality, but that understanding positionality as relational and reciprocal is a greater challenge. The actions of any researcher or participant can, over time, alter the way they are seen and thus their position relative to other participants and to the knowledge they carry (Crossa, 2012). In some circumstances, access to private knowledge such as magic can be earned (Keesing, 1991).

A further contextual aspect of positionality in communitarian Melanesian Solomon Islands is that a person's identity can be both an individual one (the “I”) as well as a communal one (the “We” as representing the clan). Hence, the Gula'alā Mala'ita maxim, “'oe 'amoe lau wane teifili 'oe” (Sanga, 2014, p.21; translated as “a person exists relationally with other people”). The Melanesian individual is one of many family and clan members, and at any point in time and place, he or she occupies a role or place as a family or clan member among equals. Hence, when an individual plays the role of a knowledge guardian, they are an individual and a family or clan representative.

Understanding the communal self extends discussions of relational positionality beyond knowledge or research and into the heart of what it means to be human. Questions of authority over knowledge in Melanesia can be questions both of one's position in regard to knowledge and in regard to others, not only as an individual but as part of one's collective identity. Gender and lineages are further aspects of the communal self. Patriarchal lineages apply to the guardianship of certain kinds of knowledge and matriarchal lineages to others.

Challenging principles of authority over knowledge transmission

Having discussed some of the complexities of position, attention is now drawn to the way position affects the authority to transmit knowledge in a Mala'ita context. The question of authority is a question of who one is in relation to knowledge. That this has immediate, contemporary and vital impact for those involved. This is displayed in the following anecdote

offered by one of the authors of this paper, Kabini, in the context of a pedagogical discussion of material from Sanga (2014).

During a seminar with my advanced qualitative research doctoral students, I was narrating an account of my research experiences with members of my Gwailao tribe (of East Mala'ita) when suddenly one of my students injected, "What authority do you, an outsider who lives in New Zealand, have in undertaking research on indigenous secret knowledge in a tribal community in the Solomon Islands?" Authority aside, this question assumes a dual view of the world wherein there are insiders and outsiders. Even as my student was still speaking, I was already thinking about the various dimensions of his question. Following a brief explanation, I proceeded to apologize to my students that time did not permit me to elaborate on my response.

In a sense, this paper is a response to honour the student and his learning. It provides answers to his question with a focus on the principles of custodianship of certain kinds of knowledge within indigenous Mala'ita, Solomon Islands. The understanding offered follows Gegeo (2001) in rejecting simple ideas of physical position a basis for authority by dealing with the way seemingly fixed principles that govern knowledge transmission require fluid application according to context, providing further nuance to the notion of relational positionality (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019).

Melanesian principles of knowledge guardianship

There are two key underlying principles of indigenous knowledge custodianship in this Mala'ita example. First, a foundation platform is the principle of 'ado lā ana rau lea fainia tōa or stewardship. Literally, the principle of 'ado lā (stewardship) to use its shortened form, refers to the value of sharing something good with other people. It assumes knowledge is a good thing to be shared with family and people now and into the future. To be shared in a perpetual sense, knowledge must have knowledge guardians whose duty is to ensure knowledge as a good is cared for and looked after. Second, the 'ado lā or stewardship principle is to be operationalized through the principle of nao-nao lā or seniority. In knowledge guardianship, nao-nao lā is inherited through lineage. This can be to an individual as well as to the clan of a knowledge guardian. Access can also be attained through acts of repute, influence and credibility, again via an individual or the clan. In the context of this example, there are seven dimensions of the nao-nao lā or seniority principle.

Seniority as garangi (closeness of relationship to a key reference point)

In the general garangi principle, seniority of guardianship over certain knowledge is vested either in the person or clan that constitutes a direct line to the descendants the first custodian - the creator or finder of the knowledge. For example, if a body of fānanau lā (ethics teachings) are traced to a common ancestor as the principal creator of the knowledge, then all descendants of the person, whether through birth and marriage, can claim seniority. An essential prerequisite of this principle is that a reference point such as a first episode of a bigger and continuing story is established before seniority of custodianship is traced and sustained through time and space using the garangi principle.

Seniority as futa lā (through blood relationships)

There are two basic understandings of seniority as *futa lā*: First, ancestor or current knowledge custodian's male siblings and their male children are more senior as knowledge custodians than other relatives, including female siblings and their children. Second, the older male children of a knowledge custodian are more senior as custodians than their younger brothers.

Seniority as wane ma geni (through gender as male or female)

This principle indicates that males within a family or clan have greater seniority of knowledge custodianship than their female clan members. An exception relates to secret knowledge belonging to females only. For example, son 1 and son 2 are more senior custodians of certain knowledge which is created by their father than their sister daughter 1, even when daughter 1 is an older sibling to her two brothers. When this principle is extended, it may be said that the male children of male clan members have greater seniority of knowledge custodianship over the female children of male clan members.

Seniority as fuli wane (through generational closeness)

The *fuli wane* principle makes clear that members of a generation which is closer to a principal knowledge guardian have more seniority of custodianship than those who are relatives from an older or more distant generation. For example, a relative from two generations earlier has more custodianship seniority than one from five generations earlier.

Seniority as futa lā ana tē 'abu (as “sharing the same blood” or via DNA)

This principle means that those who are related by blood to a knowledge creator or finder have seniority of custodianship over those who are non-blood relatives, such as in-laws or those adopted or relatives who are bought into a family or clan. For example, if James is a knowledge creator or finder, all his blood relatives—aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, children have seniority as custodians of the knowledge rather than those in his family, clan or community who are not his blood relatives, including wife, in-laws, adopted relatives and neighbours.

Seniority as wane futa- wane kwaitā (as relatives or non-relatives)

This principle implies that those who are related to a principal knowledge guardian through blood ties, marriage, adoption etc have seniority over custodianship of knowledge rather than all non-relatives, visitors to the clan and foreigners. For example, if Sarah was/is a principal knowledge custodian, her relatives have seniority of guardianship over members of the community who are not relatives of Sarah. Even Sarah's relatives by marriage, her in-laws, have greater seniority than foreigners, strangers in and visitors to the community.

Seniority as wane gournouri (by virtue of agency, credibility and esteem)

This principle means that the credibility of one's life, as this relates to a particular knowledge and is attained through one's agency, achievements and efforts, offers greater seniority of custodianship over those whose lives are less credible. For instance, an older son who is disloyal or lazy may be regarded as less senior than a younger son who is loyal, industrious and responsible.

The intersections of various kinds of seniority determines the position of people as potential custodians in relations to a particular body of knowledge while the principles of seniority determine one's place in relation to other people, family and clan members. These two relational positionings intersect in ways which depend on context.

Although the principles described seem fixed, their application may be subject to change as people's relationships develop. For example, if adopted by a clan, changes a set of relational positionings occur. Similarly, the actions of individuals such as laziness, when recognised, can lead to a shift in their relational positioning vis-à-vis seniority. This in turn affects knowledge custodianship roles. Social change is another source of dynamism the response to which, when framed through principled thought, can lead to a shift in the way knowledge is positioned.

The dynamic application of Melanesian principles of knowledge guardianship

Rara'aba (calming of nerves) meeting

In a 2015 rara'aba tribal meeting, more than thirty Gwailao tribal members of Solomon Islands gathered to discuss the question of knowledge authority over knowledge which is deemed secret, the indigenous ethics teachings which are published in *Fānanau lā 'I Gula'alā* (Sanga, 2014), a book in Gula'alā language of East Mala'ita, Solomon Islands. The meeting had four generations of tribal members present. Food was shared, followed by three hours of discussions. Excerpts of the debates and discussions by key participants are offered as an illustration of how some of the principles of custodianship and seniority described play out dynamically in practice.

As meeting convener, the book author welcomed all and outlined the purpose of the meeting:

Welcome to this rara'aba gathering. We're living in changing and challenging times. As a tribe, we want to negotiate the challenges we face in ways which keep us united, make us stronger and help us adapt and flourish. Specifically, we're to discuss matters of guardianship relating to the ethics teachings which are recorded in the published book, *Fānanau lā 'I Gula'alā*. We're here to talk together. We're here to clarify any thing which is unclear. We're here to think. We're here to challenge each other. We're here to offer direction. We're here, sitting together as part of a rara'aba ceremony.

Matakwalobola, 60 years old and a respected male relative with connections to the clan three generations previously, opened the conversation:

Yes, this new book truly contains tribal secret knowledge. With publication, this knowledge is now made public to the wider Gula'alā people. As we know, the Gula'alā people are made up of seven tribes. How do you, my tribal uncles as the primary clan knowledge guardians, maintain your authority, given that this knowledge is now made public?

Matakwalobola is using the futa lā (blood relations) principle to reinforce the guardianship authority of his clan uncles by invoking the garangi (closeness of relationship) principle. He is, however, addressing his tribal uncles generally, rather than making a distinction between which clan group he is supporting.

Alafafungu, Gwailao tribe alafa (male leader) and one of three principal and senior male clan leaders who were present, responded:

Indeed, you are right my clan nephew. This situation is new. Tribal secret knowledge is secret. But now that we have the knowledge recorded in a book, how do we deal with this particular kastom (custom) governing secret knowledge? Gula'alā kastom prohibits open distribution of such knowledge which is unlike Western knowledge contexts. In Gula'alā, private domain knowledge does not provide space for open-sharing of such knowledge. We have indeed broken kastom, so what do we do?

Being mindful of his status and tribal authority, Alafafungu is aware that his comments are launched from at least five principles of indigenous guardianship authority; garangi, futa lā, wane, fuli wane and futa lā ana tē 'abu. As the cultured leader he is, Alafafungu uses the garangi principle to affirm collective responsibility for having broken kastom as well as for the responsibility to face the new challenges now experienced.

Similarly, Tarafulaa, a 40 years old maternal nephew to the principal clan leaders, questioned:

For me, the first question is: who has guardianship authority over the private clan knowledge which is now published? In publishing the ethics teachings, did my senior uncle do so as an individual or a clan elder or a tribal alafa of the Gwailao tribe? Then, how do we ensure and exercise knowledge guardianship now that the knowledge is now in the public domain?

Up to this point, Tarafulaa is the youngest to have spoken. His two questions are direct and succinct. While these questions too are directed culturally, Tarafulaa is very aware of the bases for his forthrightness. Given that his mother is a senior sister to his uncles, the tribal leaders, Tarafulaa is standing on a number of authority principles including garangi, futa, futa lā ana tē 'abu and fuli wane.

Alafabaita, the oldest male and at the time, the principal Gwailao tribe alafa, expressed his own dis-satisfaction as follows:

As the most senior Gwailao tribal alafa, I am unhappy that our valuable indigenous and secret knowledge is being publicised and is made available to others. I think we should keep the knowledge within the tribe only, for our families and children, and not share the knowledge with others.

Using the opportunity presented by Tarafulaa's forthright questions, Alafabaita asserts his tribal headship role as the most senior of Gwailao alafa. His expressed concern over the loss of knowledge guardianship authority is legitimate and right. For younger and unaware clan members present, however, Alafabaita's assertion of tribal leadership could have been interpreted to mean that he had the authority over the knowledge published in the book. Nevertheless, other senior male alafa present would have been alerted to be careful about Alafabaita's reminder to the tribal members.

It was at this point that Welagoumouri, a 58 years old clan nephew, asked with much emotion: "Why is my clan father sharing this clan treasure with the underserving people of

Gula'alā? Let such ungrateful people die. Why offer them wise counsel and advice? Let them sink."

Welagoumouri's intervention is cleverly crafted to deflect the tension created by Alafabaita's comments by appearing to support him while also not pointing to him as the principal guardian of the knowledge in question. Being a clan son to the three senior males and tribal alafa present, Welagoumouri focussed on the Gula'ala people, calling them an undeserving people. By doing so, he was rallying the Gwailao tribe together given that the principal tribal alafa had created a wedge between himself and other senior male tribal alafa.

Maiwane'ilalo, the 65 years old sister of the author and clan status woman, spoke with calmness:

These teachings were food which our father and mother fed us with. No one will dispute the fact that this knowledge was one which was "hidden" in the house I grew up in. Who in Gula'alā can challenge the wane goumouri (principle of credibility and esteem) of the house I grew up in? The fact that my brother is showing generosity with such a previous secret to all the people of Gula'alā is not un-noticed by the people.

To all present, Maiwane'ilalo's status in the tribe, clan and gathering is clear. She is forthright in her claim that all seven principles of knowledge guardianship are traced to "the house she grew up in". Particularly, she re-emphasizes the goumouri principle to point to who of those present, actually has the final authority over the knowledge in question.

Alafafungu, one of the three male tribal alafa present, and Maiwane'ilalo's younger brother, said:

My sister is right in what she is saying. We grew up with daily fānanaua (ethics education). For me, there are a number of issues requiring scrutiny. First, I am unsure if in the case of this book, the fānanaua actually belongs to the Gwailao tribe. I say this because fānanaua is culturally widespread throughout Mala'ita Islands. The teachings may be expressed differently but the understandings, wisdom and insights are similar.

Second, my questioning a tribal guardianship authority is also due to an experiential reality. In looking at our tribe, I know that there are certain Gwailao tribal elders who actually do not know about these fānanaua. They do not teach their own children using these wise teachings. Nor do we see them live by these ethical teachings.

Third, there is also the issue of Mala'ita tradition where women who are married into men's clans actually bring in much of the traditional fānanaua knowledge. In time, the men's clan claims such knowledge to be theirs. So who are the legitimate guardians of fānanaua?

Fourth, if we look carefully at this book, the fānanaua knowledge is all kōkō (grandmother) Ruth's. In this respect, guardianship of this knowledge is not with the Gwailao tribe but rather is more specifically with our family.

And fifth, a further challenge for me is to ascertain the originality of the fānanaua knowledge. Was the knowledge from kōkō Ruth of Walade? Or from her mother ‘Auolo of Mana’oba? Or from her grandmother Suigali of Funafou? Or from her great grandmother Maota of Baelelea? The point of this is that it is hard within Mala’ita cultures to clearly state the original source of a particular fānanaua teaching. We therefore cannot claim monopoly.

Following Maiwane’ilalo’s forthright statement about her own family, Alafafungu appears to be trying to deflect this attention by introducing a number of other questions for consideration. Alafafungu is doing this only because he knows that the authority question is settled. But by introducing the additional questions, Alafafungu deflects the focus on his family and creates a win-win situation for other clan leaders present by widening the issues which remain unclear and require looking into more closely.

Matakwalobola, the 60 years old male tribal relative, intervened:

I cannot dispute my clan uncle and alafa. It is true that fānanaua is common in indigenous Mala’ita but in the case of the ethics teachings in this book, because kōkō Ruth and her son are the sources of this knowledge, this is why Gula’alā people are saying that this knowledge belongs to the Gwailao tribe. As well, because kōkō Ruth had lived out the fānanaua knowledge during her lifetime, she had indeed honoured those who had sent her—her family, her clan and her maternal ancestors.

Matakwalobola is re-stating his view that the question of who holds guardianship authority is clear. He named two people, using the principles of futa lā ana tē ‘abu and wane gougouri as the final arbiter to settle the question under discussion.

Maiwanesikau, younger sister to Maiwane’ilalo and a clan sibling, interjected:

Indeed, my clan nephew Matakwalobola is correct. Properly understood, those with guardianship over fānanaua knowledge are confirmed by the people as true guardians because the people regard them to be credible as emulators of such knowledge. In other words, those who, by their lives are a living proof of the fānanaua are the ones with authority over such knowledge. Guardianship is therefore accorded to those living proofs of the knowledge; rather than is claimed by people. In this regard, it is a privilege for guardians to practise, emulate and demonstrate such knowledge by living it out in their lives.

Again, having heard all other principles being used in the evening’s discussions, Maiwanesikau is re-emphasizing the wane gougouri principle to assert the understanding of who hold authority over the knowledge in question.

Following an extended lull in the conversations, Matakwalobola stood up and with deep emotion, exclaimed:

My tribal relatives and senior clan alafa, it is clear that the question we have been considering is settled. Would you finally answer me? Who has called us all to come together tonight? Though we are related to each other, we do not gather often. Why have each of us left our families at home so that we could be at this meeting? Who amongst us can say anything else to counter your authority? Alafa, speak on!

The rara'aba meeting concluded late that night but all members of the Gwailao tribe were satisfied. Not only have they settled the question over who has the communal role of principal guardian of indigenous Gula'alā fānanaua knowledge but they have also kept the tribe united.

Discussion

Three areas of discussion can be drawn from an analysis of the rara'aba that contributes to a nuanced understanding of positionality in the context of private or secret knowledge: How the knowledge is positioned as private or secret; how people are positioned in relation to responsibilities of guardianship over secret knowledge; and how speakers use seemingly fixed principles of seniority in a dynamic way to preserve group or clan cohesion. In each case, the discussion reveals a little more of the context behind the context (Sanga, cited in Airini, Anae, Mila-Schaaf, Coxon, Mara, and Sanga, 2010, p.11) of relational positionality as it applies in complex areas such as access to indigenous knowledge in the modern world.

Interrogating secrecy or privacy

The rara'aba was a forum for interrogating concepts of secrecy or privacy as they relate to knowledge. While discussion in the rara'aba did not dispute the status of knowledge as secret in general, the discussion process examined the qualities and extent of that secrecy. Three means by which that was achieved are discussed here.

Firstly, the origin of the knowledge was related to its status as secret through a consideration of time. Alafafungu ascribed the origin of the knowledge in published book to kōkō Ruth, a well-known person. However, he then speculated on where she had obtained the knowledge by tracing her genealogy. This shifted discussion to the knowledge itself, pre-existing Ruth and passed down through clan structures. This extended the discussion of secrecy to previous generations, extending the communal parameters of secrecy. When viewed in this way, the level and type of secrecy applied to knowledge cannot be unequivocally stated. This reveals that definitive claims about secrecy in the present are on a less secure historical foundation than might at first appear.

Secondly, the status of the secrecy of the knowledge was related to its movement through space. Alafafungu pointed out that private knowledge is part of what women bring with them to a clan through marriage so that origin of the secret knowledge is unclear. Its distribution is also unclear. Is knowledge a set of expressions of wisdom or the teaching that wisdom embodies? The second approach reveals that the knowledge is known well beyond the immediate clan so that the sense of secrecy is less intense and the immediate guardianship over it needs reconsideration. Further, some people who should be "inside" the secrecy "border", do not have the knowledge, judging by their interactions and other conduct. In other words, the relevance of certain principles of seniority can be questioned when people's relationship to secret knowledge is not as one might predict.

Interrogating the claims and responsibilities of guardians of secrecy

The rara'aba contained a discussion of the identity of custodians of the secret knowledge and their responsibilities. Three levels of discussion will be presented here. Firstly, a clear distinction can be made between seniority in the clan and guardianship of a specific corpus of

private knowledge. Alafabaita can legitimately speak of his unhappiness at the publication of knowledge because of his position of seniority in the tribe, but the guardianship is not his. Instead, other more specific guardianship principles apply.

Secondly, reflecting the communitarian Melanesian society and relational nature of the self, questions arose about the position of the person who published the private knowledge. Tarafulaa offers three positions for that person - as an individual or a clan elder or a tribal alafa of the Gwailao tribe? Tarafulaa's question is relevant to the principles of guardianship because clarity comes from understanding the position in this way. Since operating as an individual makes no sense in this context, the suggestion that this might be the case serves to set up a clarifying contrast between western notions of the self and Gula'alā kastom.

A further element of guardianship is the matter of understanding what 'knowing' actually means, and how this affects who may and may not be the guardian of knowledge. This implicates practice as a core element of possessing wisdom, a key understanding in other parts of the Pacific (Helu-Thaman, 1988). The "house" of a person who truly understands and practices the knowledge gains credibility not by claiming it but by enacting the privilege of practice. One honours secret knowledge through the way one relates to it.

It follows that to address the issue of the publication of secret knowledge as a kind of research text, the rara'aba arrived at a point where it examined its reason for being. The question of authority became a matter of whose lived understanding of the produced credibility so that others would be present at a specific place and time. This, in association with other principles, created a situation where one person might speak for the group on such matters, and through which publication might be thought of as generosity, a kastom tenet, and a response to a changing world, rather than breaking kastom for gain or by overstepping principled boundaries of protocol.

Interrogating the application of principles

Two points may be made about the way principles were applied in a rara'aba. The first deals with the value of principles to sift a situation. For instance, the section of discussion between Tarafulaa and Maiwane'ilalo's interventions facilitates a rethinking of the application of principles through a detailed examination of the case. The second is the way that potentially divisive principles are actually used to promote something valuable: the unity of the group. For example, Matakwalobola's use of the futa lā (blood relations) to invoke the garangi principle affirms the status of his uncles in a general unifying way, without seeking in by direct means to apportion knowledge custodianship in a way that will separate one from another. While a situation that may stress the unity of the clan is being discussed, the way principles are wrapped in language and used, sometimes indirectly, serves to prioritise social unity and relational harmony over a swift and decisive conclusion.

Further, the progress of the rara'aba as process is what enables the fluid and discursive application of principles to embrace an ever more precise understanding of the issue at hand. What may have appeared simple has been rendered dialogically in a complex and therefore more true form. In this way, responsibility for the secret knowledge has come to rest on those who most fully practice the wisdom that it contains. The influence of the wisdom is understood as the reason the group attended the rara'aba, thus bringing the form and purpose of the encounter together such that the rara'aba recognises its existence and state of unity as an expression of the wisdom of the secret knowledge made manifest.

Conclusion

This article has provided a Mala'ita contextual example as a way of adding nuance to debate about a relational reading of position. A dynamic has been demonstrated between seemingly fixed principles of seniority that apply to custodianship of a body of secret or private knowledge and their fluid application in context. A process of deepening appreciation of the exactness of context can result in the integrated achievement of dual aims; sifting of principles of seniority and maintaining social cohesion.

What emerges from the rara'aba is that what can appear to be intractable differences of opinion about relational positions vis-à-vis knowledge may, through a dialogic process by which nerves are calmed, be re-thought by valuing greater depth of appreciation of context. Communal negotiation through a dialogic process is not unique to Mala'ita. Terms such as the Polynesian fono and the Māori hui (meeting) represent different dialogic social structures that may at times have similar aims to the rara'aba described here; other groups beyond the Pacific region may also recognise elements of the discussion as relevant to themselves in some ways. Whatever the context, attention to the integrity of process may be the key.

The rara'aba also shows that in matters of relational positioning in regard secret or private knowledge, the dynamic between principles and context can produce resolutions that are primarily ontological rather than political. In the modern world, paying attention to context is a matter worth keeping in mind as this is important despite the pressures of change. Opening the *rara'aba* with shared food and closing it with a communal resolution are ethical acts of unity that transcend the importance of the specifics of any issue.

We have discussed an example of people from Mala'ita challenging ideas about kastom. This suggests that what matters in changing times is not only what people do, but also the way they come to understand how to respond to previously unimagined challenges. One of those challenges is how private knowledge should be positioned in a modern world, especially when research of one kind or another is involved. Both research and those with whom they engage might benefit from researchers appreciating how complex relational positionality can be in regard to secret knowledge. It is clear that a nuanced, dynamic appreciation of relational positionality offer more in this regard than a binary approach.

Glossary

'ado lā	stewardship
alafa	male tribal leader
Baelelea	a cultural region in north Mala'ita
faka	introduced
fānanau lā	ethics teachings
fānanaua	ethics education
fono	Polynesian for meeting
fuli wane	Generational group
Funafou	a village in north Mala'ita
futa lā	relationships
futa lā ana tē 'abu	relationship through "sharing the same blood"
garangi	closeness of relationship to a key reference point
Gula'alā	a linguistic group in east Mala'ita

Gwailao	a tribal group in east Mala'ita
hui	Māori for meeting
kastom	custom(s)
kōkō	grandmother
Mana'oba	an island in north Mala'ita
nao-nao lā	seniority
'oe 'amoe lau wane teifili 'oe	a person exists relationally with other people
rara'aba	a "calming of nerves" meeting or ceremony
Walande	a village in south Mala'ita
wane futa- wane kwaitā	relatives or non-relatives
wane goumouri	one who is virtuous or credible through agency
wane ma geni	male or female

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