



# Language archives and the history of ethnoscience:

## The digitization and discovery of early ethnobiological research at the University of Hawai'i

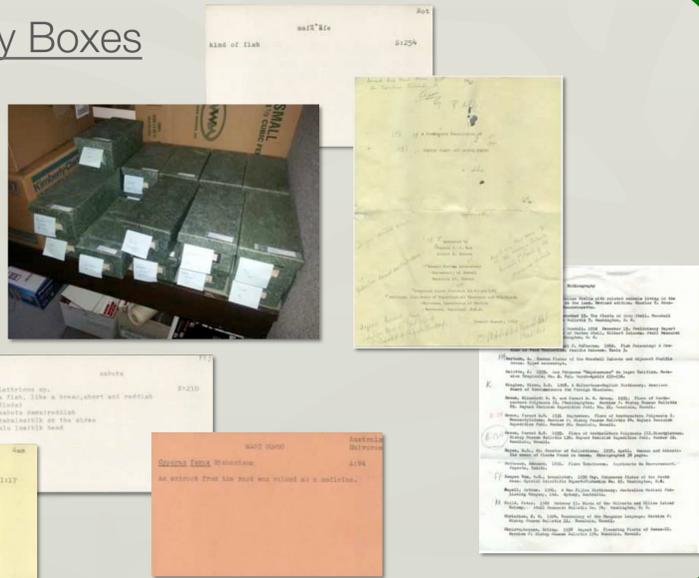
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### The Mystery Boxes

In 2013, personnel in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Hawai'i discovered 11,315 index cards in 21 boxes that had been sitting in storage for close to five decades.

The index cards were lexical slip files containing plant and animal names in Indigenous languages of 15 Pacific Islands, with only one typewritten sheet of fairly vague metadata and a brief bibliography found among them.

Clearly these cards were the result of a major research project involving Pacific languages, yet nobody in the Department had any knowledge of the provenance of the cards or the project of which they were a part. They had simply been forgotten to history.



Island	Number of cards	No. of cards (language)
Australia	1	1
Caroline Islands	1	1
Cook Islands	1	1
Fiji	1	1
French Polynesia	1	1
Guam	1	1
Hawaii	1	1
Marshall Islands	1	1
Mariana Islands	1	1
Niue	1	1
Palau	1	1
Papua New Guinea	1	1
Samoa	1	1
Tahiti	1	1
Tonga	1	1
Tuamotus	1	1
Turkey	1	1
Vanuatu	1	1
Yap	1	1
Zanzibar	1	1

### Funding, Digitization, Archiving

Andrea Berez received funding from the National Science Foundation Documenting Endangered Languages /Research Experiences for Undergraduates Program to:

- Digitize the cards
- Archive them at Kaipuleohone, the University of Hawai'i Digital Language Archive
- Discover the role of the cards in early ethnobotanical research at the University of Hawai'i

Undergraduate student Ivana Matson digitized the cards using an Epson GT-S50 automatic feeder scanner to TIFF at RESOLUTION. Digital files were converted to high-resolution and low-resolution JPEG and PDF.

Digital files are available for free download at <http://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/handle/10125/32618>.

The collection is findable on the OLAC Language Resource Catalog.



## An Example of Early Ethnobiological Research at the University of Hawai'i

### Why were the cards made?

While she was digitizing the cards, Ivana Matson also researched the provenance of the cards.

It seems that in the late 1950s or early 1960s, the National Institutes of Health contracted researchers at the University of Hawai'i to compile ethnobiological information in native languages of Pacific Islands, ostensibly for medical research. Fannie C. C. Goo and Albert H. Banner oversaw the project.

The cards are a result of the amassing – by hand – of plant and animal names from dictionaries, wordlists, notes and briefs from early linguistic and ethnobiological fieldwork from the Pacific. Bibliographies are included in the Compilations, but sadly, the full list of sources from which the vocabulary was collected has been lost to history.

In 1963, some of the vocabulary was then published in 8 "Preliminary Compilations" of plant and animal names, based on location:

- Marshall Islands
- Samoa
- Caroline Islands
- Gilbert Islands
- Mariana Islands
- Fiji
- Tahiti
- Tuamotus
- Tonga



### The role of the Compilations

The compilations were intended to serve as "linguistic fieldguides" for biologists and other researchers working in the Pacific:

*"This listing of plant and animal names has been issued as a preliminary step in the development of a series of complete and precise interlingual glossaries covering the biological names in the more important languages of the Central Pacific. It is hoped that the final glossaries, and to a lesser degree, these preliminary listings, will be of aid to those workers in the Pacific who are not native speakers of the languages and who must refer to the biota and to the indigenous people who wish to communicate with those who speak English."* (Preface to A Preliminary Compilation of Fijian Animal Names, Goo & Banner 1963)

As far as we know, the cards from the Australs, Cook Islands, Kapingamarangi and Nukuoro, Line Islands, Marquesas, Niue, and Rotuma were never published as Compilations.

Whether the final glossaries were ever produced is not known (we haven't found any).



### Why should we care?

The linguistic value of the cards is not particularly high by today's documentary linguistics standards—they are not based on new or original fieldwork, but are only pulled from library sources. So why should we care about a project like this?

In a broader context, it seems the Compilations came out of a time when the United States, and especially the University of Hawai'i, were beginning to document and understand the Pacific. Once World War II ended, the UN gave the United States a Strategic Trusteeship over parts of Micronesia, so there was a desire learn about and capitalize upon the geography, biology, and cultures of the central Pacific.

In addition, the cards give us some insight into how scientists at the time conceptualized the ontology of biocultural knowledge; for example, the card boxes are organized by location rather than language; some cards contain ethnographic notes while others contain notes on species appearance, and some contain no notes at all.

The Compilations are also now serving as source material in a new digital era of scientific knowledge aggregation. Websites like FishBase.de have used the Compilations as sources for their comprehensive database of fish species.