Interwoven: material culture and lexicography
Deborah Hill
University of Canberra
An interdisciplinary approach to a language documentation project over time

- Ian Hogbin – Sydney University anthropologist – 5 field sites in PNG and Solomon Islands (Longgu 1933)
An interdisciplinary approach to a language documentation project – overlapping in time

• Hogbin collected objects and photographed custom life amongst the Longgu in 1933.

• Collection is held at 3 institutions in Sydney but not properly catalogued (Australia Museum, Macleay Museum, Fisher Archives).

• Objects and images refer to a wide range of activities: house building, gardening, fishing, ceremonial activity, portraits of people.
Museum anthropology and language documentation

‘Archives exist under the assumption that the value and usefulness of their collections will increase over time, extending far beyond the lifetimes of current project participants’ Conathan 2011: 238

Museum anthropologist, Elizabeth Bonshek [with DH], researching the importance of the material in the Hogbin collection to Longgu people today.

(a) Two Longgu people [FW and SB] visited Canberra and Sydney in February 2012 to view the collections. (b) EB [with DH] visited Longgu (Nangali village) to document the carving of bowls and take objects chosen by the community back to the museum (AM).
Photographs

- People (family members), house building, bride price, feasting
- Links between photographs and objects (Meti – grandfather of Bungana - carving lali – lali feasting bowl in Australia Museum)
- Evidence of customs that involved the community – feasting; house building
- Evidence of quality of workmanship – carving, weaving, house building
- Environment – little change in nearly 80 years
- Photographs act like a mirror to the community – they see their reflection and their past.
Implications for language documentation project in general

• Greater ability to conceptualise language documentation project and potential outcomes
• Greater confidence resulting from the respect they saw others had for them, their language and culture.
• Greater commitment to the survival of their language and culture – their roles as leaders.
• Empowerment through ownership/access to digital copies of community’s control of the ‘data’ increased.
• Affirmed a relationship of trust and further developed family and professional connections.
• Provided a platform for new ideas and plans.
Aspects of the lexicography project influenced by an interdisciplinary approach

- Participants – who became involved?
- Community perception that language documentation links the present with the past.
- Dictionary project viewed as part of a broader network or projects within and beyond the community
- Lexicographic decisions – encyclopaedic definitions; focus on documenting the cultural significance of woven products (not environment); inclusion of photographs
- Understanding of how dictionary may be used in the future.
Example 1: Baskets and verbs of carrying

• Cultural significance of the *perai* (basket used for exchanging brideprice money; specifically made for women to carry on their head).

• Photographs of women carrying things on their back as evidence that the women were not Longgu women.

• Incorporating weaving sessions as part of dictionary workshop.

• Audio recordings following weaving sessions as the basis of encyclopaedic definitions.

• Attention to the semantic domain of ‘carrying’
Example 2: Men’s dancing shields

- *Tako* – woven shield originally bought from bush people for dancing
- 2012 – young men sold some of the last shields leaving the community without enough shields to dance.
- 2012 – Florence Watepuru and Steward Bungana (Nangali) see the shields collected by Hogbin in the AM. Great sadness at the loss of shields.
- Not much dancing in the past decades – the last of the singers for the *siokole* dance has died.
- Peter Meti – master weaver retained the necessary skills to weave the shields and teach others.
- Decision to make enough shields (*takogi*) so that *siokole* dance can resume.
- Goals: (1) for Nangali village men to dance at the Anglican Bishop’s inauguration in June 2013 with the shields. (2) to take a dance group to Guam in 2016 for the next Pacific Arts festival.
- Peter Meti asks to be photographed in full dance dress with shield and for the photo (and video) to be included in the dictionary and future pedagogical materials.
Siokole – men’s dance that requires woven shields

Tako (shield) – the more shields the more dancers can join in.
They carry/hold shields for the sikoli dance.
Summary

- An interdisciplinary approach to language documentation has resulted in a more engaged and empowered community.
- The focus on maintenance of culture, as well as language, and transference of skills to the next generation has been enhanced by the work of an anthropologist in 1933 and by collaborative work with a museum anthropologist.
- The community understands that what we do now will be of benefit in the future just as Hogbin’s work – which was not useful to them for many decades – now provides us all with a rich source of information and ideas.


