

# MEMORY OF THE WORLD REGISTER

Arthur Bernard Deacon (1903-27) collection MS 90-98  
(Vanuatu and the United Kingdom)

*Ref N° 2010-30*

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## PART A – ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

### *1 SUMMARY*

The Vanuatu Cultural Centre and the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland are collaborating to nominate a collection of material by brilliant young Cambridge anthropologist, Arthur Bernard Deacon, during his visit to Malekula and other islands of the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) in 1926. By the beginning of 1927 he had died of black water fever, and thus was unable to expand upon the information he had so meticulously gathered. Some of the material was edited and published posthumously, but here we have the original drawings and notes detailing a rich and fascinating culture already in danger of being superseded by ideas from the western world by the time Deacon arrived. Deacon's notes and drawings carefully record the language, customs and traditional tales of the people he studied, and above all, illustrate the famous sand drawing tradition for which the islands are still renowned. This vivid portrayal of a culture without an extensive written history is of importance to all of us and brings to light the work of one of the most promising anthropologists of the last century.

### *2 DETAILS OF THE NOMINATOR*

#### 2.1 Name (person or organisation)

- 1) Sarah Walpole, Archivist, Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.
- 2) Marcelin Abong, Director, Vanuatu Cultural Centre

#### 2.2 Relationship to the documentary heritage nominated Curator

- 1) Archivist of collection containing this heritage
- 2) Director of national cultural heritage organisation of Vanuatu, the country to which the materials in the collection pertain

#### 2.3 Contact person(s)

- 1) Sarah Walpole
- 2) Marcelin Abong

#### 2.4 Contact details (include address, phone, fax, email)

1) Sarah Walpole  
Archivist  
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W1T 5BT  
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Tel: +44(0)20 7387 0455  
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2) Marcelin Abong  
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### **3      *IDENTITY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE***

#### **3.1      Name and identification details of the items being nominated**

Arthur Bernard Deacon (1903-27) collection MS 90-98

MS 90 – 16 volumes of notebooks 1926-7

MS 91 - Correspondence and letter extracts concerning Deacon's journey to and work in Malekula. 1925-6

MS 92 - Glossaries of native terms, compiled from A.B. Deacon's notes by Camilla H. Wedgwood, 193?-. 12 gatherings

MS 93 - Genealogies of Lagalag villages, compiled from A.B. Deacon's notes by Camilla H. Wedgwood. [193-]. 51 paper folders

MS 94 - Geometrical drawings from Malekula, and other islands of the New Hebrides, edited by Camilla H. Wedgwood with notes and appendix by A.C. Haddon. 1926-34

MS 95 - Figures, drawings and description from Malekula, by A.B. Deacon. 1926-7

MS 96 - Place name index with bibliographical references, by Camilla H. Wedgwood. 193-. 233 cards.

MS 97 - Linguistic notes and folktales, by A.B. Deacon. 1926-7

MS 98 - Notes, geometrical drawings, diagrams, plans and maps. 1925-? The material has been arranged into the following sections:-

- /1 Geometrical figure-drawing
- /2 Diagrams, drawings, maps and plans
- /3 Marriage, kinship, clans, descent groups, genealogies
- /4 Birth, conception, childhood, sex magic
- /5 Magic, sickness magic, death magic, totemism
- /6 Incision and knocking out of teeth
- /7 Music, bull-roarers, conches, drums and gongs
- /8 Nimangki, Nalawan, grade systems
- /9 General theories and distribution of New Hebridean culture
- /10 The Ambat, Kabat and Hambat
- /11 Medicine, disease, physiology, psychology
- /12 Death, burial customs, ghosts, inheritance, property, pigs
- /13 Daily life, baskets, canoes, fishing, hunting, agriculture, houses, trade, cooking, kava, pottery, astronomy, time
- /14 Warfare
- /15 Miscellaneous

Material held in the Archives of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 50 Fitzroy Street, London, W1T 5BT, England

#### **3.2      Description**

- MS 90-98

- The material was donated to the RAI by Camilla Wedgwood, who edited a portion of the material for posthumous publication in the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, possibly in the 1930's [no record exists]
- The material, though quite fragile, is in good condition, and is stored in archival quality acid-free boxes within the cupboards of the RAI manuscript collection. The notebooks, in particular, are very flimsy and we would prefer visitors to examine digital copies
- Geometrical drawings from Malekula and other islands of the New Hebrides by the late A. Bernard Deacon, edited by Camilla H. Wedgwood, with notes by A.C. Haddon, JRAI, vol. 64, pp. 129-75; Malekula: a vanishing people in the New Hebrides, by A. Bernard Deacon, edited by Camilla H. Wedgwood, with a preface by Dr A.C. Haddon. London, George Routledge & Sons, 1934 [reviewed by John Layard, *Man*, Aug. 1934, no. 150]; Arts of Vanuatu, edited by Joel Bonnemaison et al., Crawford House Publishing, Bathurst, NSW, 1996
- Referees: Lissant Bolton, Section Head, Oceania, British Museum [LBOLTON@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk](mailto:LBOLTON@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk) ; Kirk Huffman, anthropologist, honorary associate at the Macleay Museum at the University of Sydney and the honorary curator at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre [kirkmel@gmail.com](mailto:kirkmel@gmail.com) ; Christian Kaufmann, (retired) Keeper of Oceania Dept., Museum der Kulturen, Basel, Switzerland [chrkauf@yahoo.com](mailto:chrkauf@yahoo.com)

#### 4 JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION/ ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

##### 4.1 Is authenticity established?

The material is holograph, with both hand-writing and drawings by Deacon. It has been examined and used for the posthumous JRAI articles by Camilla Wedgwood and A.C. Haddon, both respected anthropologists

##### 4.2 Is world significance, uniqueness and irreplaceability established?

'This is not the book that Deacon would have written; it is only a compilation of what he has left behind' so says Camilla Wedgwood in her introduction to *Malekula*, 1934. There is a considerable amount of unpublished information, both written and drawn, within the collection, describing the heritage of Vanuatu, which was already disappearing as Deacon gathered his information in 1926. The material he collected from the individuals he interviewed is of great value to the people of the islands of Vanuatu eager to retain knowledge of their heritage, and his recording is detailed and unique.

##### 4.3 Is one *or more* of the criteria of (a) time (b) place (c) people (d) subject and theme (e) form and style (f) social, spiritual and community significance satisfied?

- (a) Time. The old traditions were already beginning to die out when Deacon visited the islands in 1926, and modern life with its economic pressures and increasing outside influences has meant that knowledge of these traditions is fast disappearing. For a strong sense of the islands' heritage, it is essential that records of the ancient tales and customs are preserved.
- (b) Place. Knowledge of the culture of such places as Vanuatu is important for a world understanding of the human race in all its aspects. Small islands at risk from earthquakes, tsunamis and global warming need to be recognised and treasured
- (c) People. For a people with a pre-literate history, collections of this nature are invaluable.
- (d) Subject and theme. The collection contains much important information on the origins of the various types of sand drawings, as well as collecting folk tales and anthropological knowledge. There is much information on language
- (e) Form and style. The published version of Deacon's work contains corrected geometrical interpretations of his sketches of the designs for sand drawings. The original sketches are full of life and charm, and there are very many more than appear in the published work. He also includes drawings of views, houses, ears and other matters of interest.
- (f) Social, spiritual and community significance. There is some danger now that the sand drawings are made for tourist entertainment resulting in a loss of the knowledge of the original

purpose. The early spiritual beliefs of the people are described, as well as detailed descriptions of social relationships

4.4 Are there issues of rarity, integrity, threat and management that relate to this nomination?

Rarity. – although not the only anthropologist to visit the New Hebrides, Deacon’s work is unique, and his own particular genius and originality give an added value to his observations.

Integrity. - The collection is a record of the young anthropologist’s study. He had no immediate help from any colleagues, and it is a record of his achievements in the field.

Threat. – Although at present in relatively good condition, the papers are subject to deterioration, particularly if handled. Once gone, they cannot be replaced.

Management. – It is the aim of the RAI to make a complete digital copy of the collection, both in order to preserve it, and to be able to share it with other institutions, principally the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. Further funding is necessary to complete this project.

## **5 LEGAL INFORMATION**

5.1. Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

Royal Anthropological Institute, 50 Fitzroy Street, London, W1T 5BT [www.therai.org.uk](http://www.therai.org.uk)

5.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details, if different to owner)

Sarah Walpole, Archivist, RAI archives@therai.co.uk

5.3 Legal status:

(a) Category of ownership. The RAI is a non-profit making registered charity and company limited by guarantee

(b) Accessibility. The heritage may be accessed by appointment with the Archivist, during stated times at the premises of the RAI.

(c) Copyright status.

(d) Responsible administration. The Council of the RAI is legally responsible for the safekeeping of the material; it is being stored in archive quality boxes in locked cabinets in a secure building

(e) Other factors

## **6 MANAGEMENT PLAN**

6.1 Is there a management plan in existence for this documentary heritage? ~~YES~~/NO

There is no written plan for the management of the material; however, it is the intention of the RAI to make a full digital copy of it, and work on this is already progressing. The RAI has a small staff, and the Archivist works part-time with a very extensive collection and has many other duties to perform. There is no budget within the RAI for digitisation work, and such projects are therefore dependent on outside funds. The archivist has established a relationship with the computer science department of York University with the intention that students will assess the best method of making future proof digital copies at the RAI as part of their course work.

## **7        *CONSULTATION***

7.1        Provide details of consultation about this nomination with (a) the owner of the heritage (b) the custodian (c) your national or regional *Memory of the World* committee

a) The Director of the RAI, on behalf of the RAI Council has approved of and supports the nomination.

b) The archivist who curates the collection has consulted with Ralph Regenvanu, who is a ni-Vanuatu and a member of the Register Sub-Committee of the Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Program. At his suggestion, Marcelin Abong, Director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, has been chosen as the most suitable person to co-nominate the Deacon Collection. He has a great interest in the culture and heritage described in it.

c) The nomination has been approved by the Chair of the UK Memory of the World National Committee, and shown to the other members of the Committee.

## **PART B – SUBSIDIARY INFORMATION**

### **8        *ASSESSMENT OF RISK***

8.1        Detail the nature and scope of threats to this documentary heritage (see 5.5)

- The political situation is relatively stable, but we are always at a certain risk of terrorist activity
- The environmental conditions are good, although the material is stored in the basement where there is a possible risk of flood damage should water ever enter the building
- The papers are mostly interleaved with acid-free tissue and stored in acid-free boxes in an attempt to preserve them well
- There is no possibility of establishing a temperature and humidity controlled environment for the collection under present financial arrangements
- Access is available to anyone making an appointment to visit. Obviously this will effect the preservation of the material to some extent – it is therefore hoped to offer visitors a full digital copy on a computer screen

### **9        *ASSESSMENT OF PRESERVATION***

9.1        Detail the preservation context of the documentary heritage (see 3.3)

The material is in reasonably good physical condition, and has suffered no traumatic experiences since its inclusion in the RAI manuscript collection.

It has been catalogued and catalogues are available on the RAI website for anyone to see. The papers are numbered according to the catalogue, stored in acid-free envelopes with acid-free tissue interleaved between each paper, and gathered in acid-free boxes. The boxes are kept in locked metal cabinets in a secure and well-maintained environment away from public access. As digitisation progresses, copies are being made in high-resolution tiff format for preservation, and lower resolution jpegs for easy access. The images are gathered in a file program alongside the relevant cataloguing information, enabling visitors to know what they are looking at, and to find individual items. Planned co-operation with the University of York should result in a user-manual tailored to the needs of the RAI. All aspects of care, cataloguing and digitisation are carried out by the archivist.