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Images Looking for a Story

Reactions to Video as a new Medium in a Polynesian Society

Excerpts from an unpublished article

by Barbara Lüem

Barbara Lüem is a visual ethnologist. Her focus is not on art but on the ways and means in which images are used culturally, on the significance that is ascribed to them in different cultures. This seems like a highly relevant theme for the art and artists of today. For these are times when the Internet allows us to communicate beyond cultural boundaries, and when different cultures are having to learn how to coexist locally as well.

In the text below, Lüem describes her experiences on the Nanumaga island in the Polynesian State Tuvalu, explaining also how the video images revealed certain aspects of the island's culture to her that might otherwise not have caught her attention. However, Lüem has also realized several projects in Basel, proving that cultural differences in the uses of imagery are not only to be found in faraway places but locally as well.



Barbara Lüem, stills from "Faka Nanumaga", 1993

Setting

The island nation of Tuvalu, the former Ellis-Islands, is a group of nine lowlying coral islands in the Central Pacific with a landmass of 26 km² altogether and a total population of about 8500 people. On all the islands, except one, dialects of a Polynesian language are spoken. On Nanumaga, one of the northern and rather remote islands, about 650 people live on 2,6 km². (...)

Traditionally and mythologically legitimized the island population is divided into five clans or *fale* with specialized clan knowledge and different tasks in the community. The *fale* function much more as cooperative groups of families than as strict kinship units. There is no strict *fale* exogamy and some cases are known where individuals changed *fale* after disputes. But there is a strong sense of solidarity to its own *fale* which is enforced by rigid social pressure.
(...)

Project "Faka Nanumaga"

On my third visit to Nanumaga in 1990 I took a small video8 semiprofessional camera with me with the intention to use video as a research tool. At that time I had already spent more than a year on Nanumaga and was associated with one of the fales, the *Kavala*. Nanumaga is a very performing culture, similar to other polynesian societies and it was very difficult to talk about this performances later, because I didn't understand neither the grammar of the movements nor their semantics. The idea was, to film during the day and discuss the events in the evening. I also intended to use the camera to produce visual references for my research on traditional knowledge and political oratory. Being an unmarried woman, I couldn't address male members outside "my family" and ask about knowledge and political decisions or opinions. But this restriction was not because I was asking for secret information, it was merely a social prohibition. Therefor it was no problem to film relevant meetings and to talk about the filmed events with the informed individuals afterwards in a socially acceptable context. That was the plan.

The very moment I started filming, the project created its own dynamics. My very first shots were of a woman of "my family" weaving a children's dance skirt for the Church children's festival two days later. After they had looked through the view finder, the male members of the family decided that I should film their preparations, too, and we agreed that I would film the catching, killing, butchering and cooking of a pig. The next day there was lots of laughter, performance, showing of and teasing in front of the camera and all my theoretical ideals about unintrusive filming vanished. Enthusiastically I filmed all next day the children being dressed up, performing bible stories in the church and dancing traditional dances in the meeting hall. Everybody seemed to like my filming very much up to the moment when the head of "my family" announced that the video shot during the day would be his family's contribution to the evenings program in the island's meeting hall. I was both angry and upset, because I didn't like to be "used" that way in his own strategies for gaining prestige and I felt uneasy about showing footage to the whole island community I hadn't been able to look at first. Some of the other fale elders were angry, too, because they felt, that

"my" family was in no position to have a word in the evening program of a Church festival. And it was a disaster. After the film had started people very soon began to look at each other in embarrassment and after only about ten minutes, the first began to leave. Only the Pastor, myself, "my" family and the elders of "our" fale stayed through the whole two hours. In the end it was only the Pastor who commented positively. The same night, some of the elders came to wake me up and to explain what I had done wrong. (...) It was mainly about me not having respected the concepts of group solidarity and rights to images by individuals and groups concerned, concepts nota bene I hadn't been aware of up to that incident. (...)

b) Rights to knowledge, rights to images

In Nanumagan worldview there is no such thing like free accessible knowledge. All knowledge is associated with individuals or groups, they are the owners. They have the right to apply and to spread this knowledge. But they also have the responsibility and the duty to use it in solidarity with the group concerned and to this group's benefit. Well applied knowledge leads to social prestige. This complex concept of right, duty, responsibility and group solidarity is covered with the term *pologa*. There are personal *pologa* and there are *fale pologa*. The actual knowledge can be secret or public, what matters is the way of its application. Only knowledge that is applied *faka pologa*, in the *pologa* way, is good knowledge, otherways it enters the category of bad knowledge or sorcery, *vai lakau*. New knowledge, like education or modern fishing techniques for example are only accepted on Nanumaga if they come in a form that allows to incorporate them into the concept of *pologa*. Otherways it will give prestige to individuals for a certain time but will not make its way into the category of "good knowledge" and will find no acceptance. This is one explanation why Nanumagans do call video hardware their own, but not video cassettes. The knowledge how to handle a videoplayer or a generator can be applied to the benefit of a group – *Kalava* is entertaining other fale or its own members with its equipment, the Pastor is educating the Church youth with his', but images as such, *ata*, are not considered to be knowledge as long as they are not connected to a relevant

event or a story, *tala*. (...) Only the Pastor is owning a couple of cassettes all of them documenting biblical places like Jerusalem and the Red Sea. These are images connected to the stories he has a right to and have therefore become part of his *pologa*. In my first video shot on Nanumaga on the Church children's festival I had without knowing better ignored all those rules of applying knowledge in the right context and according to one's group solidarity. As an outsider I could have filmed a Church event and then show it to the island community. As a family member I could have filmed "my brothers" and shown the video at home. But I had first acted as a family member filming the slaughtering of the family's pig and later as a member of *Kalava* by filming their preparations and in the end I even filmed the island community feasting. By doing this I had changed group solidarity more than once and because all those images were on one cassette and shown at one occasion to everybody I had

forced the public to look at images in the wrong company at the wrong place and therefore had offended about everybody.
(...)

This concept (of image, *ata*/ knowledge, story *tala*) explains, why Nanumagans don't primarily look for visual narratives in a video. They look for images they can relate to a story that makes those images meaningful for them in their actual context. And knowing video as a medium that can be handled they often go one step further and relate the images to stories that give them meaning that fits with the actor's strategies of communication. Like in choreographies, images, *ata* in video or film are perceived as being freely available and meaningless in principle. In different contexts and connected to a different story, the one and the same image or scene, both referred to as *ata*, can get a different sometimes even opposite meaning.

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Barbara Lüem, stills from "Faka Nanumaga", 1993