Myths, tales or history? On two storytelling traditions in Vanuatu

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Abstract

Vanuatu has preserved a rich heritage of oral literature, in the form of narratives that have been passed on, up to this day, by word of mouth. While scholars have been collecting texts since the 1880s, these intangible treasures still remain to be inventorised and analysed in a systematic way. In doing so, we should pay justice to the important diversity internal to the archipelago, by meticulously describing individual traditions before comparing them.

Our study examines two distinct corpora: the Torres–Banks islands in the north, and the Shepherds in central Vanuatu – with respectively 300 and 100 recorded narratives. Not only do these two areas differ in the repertoire of their stories, but they even contrast in the very nature of their storytelling. Northern traditions are dominated by timeless folktales, and ahistorical myths referring to a distant time of origins. Conversely, the Shepherds show a strong preference for reality-anchored accounts, best described as history or "mythistory".

This spectacular opposition can be explained, in our view, by differences in the social organisation of these two groups, and in what features of their world they pay attention to. Torres–Banks people build their storytelling traditions around the contrast between humans and non-humans – with a special place for the spiritual entities that play a key role in their social practices. By contrast, the narrative system of central Vanuatu revolves around the memory of historical events and human migrations. For social reasons, this area replaced the discourse of myths with a tradition dominated by oral history.

Summary in Bislama

Olgeta pipol blong Vanuatu oli bin holem taet ol kastom stori blong olgeta kasem tedei; be hemi impoten se yumi rikodem ol tradisen ia, nogut se i lus kwiktaem. Projek blong yumi hem blong traem rikodem ol voes mo raetem evri stori blong wanwan provens fastaem; afta, bae yumi jes save komperem ol tradisen ia, se wanem pat oli semak nomo, mo wanem pat i difren. Olsem ia bae yumi no tokbaot "ol kastom stori blong Vanuatu", be i moa gud blong diskraebem ol tradisen blong wanwan provens o wanwan aelan: from kastom blong Tanna hemi difren wetem kastom blong Paama, o blong Pentikos.

Stadi blong mitufala ia hem blong komperem tufala kastom blong talem ol stori long Vanuatu: wan hem blong Torba provens, ale wan hem blong Sheperd aelan, long Shefa. Mitufela i bin rikodem ol komyuniti we oli talem plante kastom stori ikam, mekem 300 long Torba mo 100 long Shefa. Olgeta storian ia oli difren long saed blong ol karakta, ol ples, ol narrative plot… be mitufala i luk se wok blong storian tu hemi difren. Sapos long Torba provens, plante kastom stori oli stap tokbaot taem blong long taem bifo, olsem taem blong ol god o spirit taem oli krietem ol samting: o hao nao ol god (olsem Qat) oli krietem ol aelan, mo Naet, mo fes woman… Ol storian ia oltaem oli shoem hao nao ples blong man long wol hemi difren wetem ol narafala samting – olsem ol anemol, ol spirit, ol devel, ol god blong bifo.

Be long Shefa, kastom hemi difren: ol storian bae oli fokas long histri blong ol pipol mo laen blong olgeta. Hem espeseli tru from ol man Sheperd oli stap tingbaot yet wan impoten disasta we i hapen long 15th century. Volkenu i distroem bigfela aelan blong Kuwae, mekem se ol niufala aelan olsem Tongoa o Tongariki oli kamaot. Mo tu wan impoten pat long kastom blong olgeta hemia histri blong wanwan laen we oli kam setol long ol niufala Sheperd aelan. Wok blong ol storian ia hem blong tingbaot se wanem graon hemi blong wanem famle mo laen.

Hemia nao, komparesen ia i shoem se tufala provens ia, Torba mo Shefa, oli gat difren tingting mo kalja, mekem se ol kaen storian we oli stap talem oli difren tu. Long Torba, oltaem yumi harem storian blong ol spirit; ale long Sheperd aelan, yumi harem storian blong ol man blong bifo, mo histri blong olgeta. Hemia nomo.

1   Introduction: Verbal Arts and Oral History in Vanuatu

1.1   On the oral literature of Vanuatu

Verbal arts in Vanuatu take various forms. ORATORY, or the art of public speaking, involves skills in composing convincing monologues in public, that can win the audience's approval; this rhetorical skill is much less codified in Vanuatu than, for example, in Polynesian cultures (Holmes, 1969). POETRY is embodied in songs, whether they accompany music and dance, or are sung *a cappella* – from lullabies to chiefly odes (François & Stern, 2013). But the present study will focus on yet another domain, namely the art of STORYTELLING – and what can be described as the ORAL LITERATURE of Vanuatu. This domain pertains to *folk narrative research* – or *comparative narratology* – at the intersection of linguistics, literary studies, folkloristics, and anthropology.

In most rural areas of Vanuatu, the oral literature is still vivid to this day. It takes the form of myths, legends, tales, transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth. Most communities still have a large repertoire of narratives, including animal fables, trickster stories, tales of ogres and demons, heroic myths, historical legends, and so on. (One type of narrative that is absent from Vanuatu, and from the Pacific generally, are epics.)

Just like Vanuatu is a diverse country in terms of languages, musical forms and other social practices, likewise its oral literature shows a variegated landscape. This diversity shows at different levels of analysis. The inventory of genres, for example, differs from one place to the other – not just in the names used, but also the number of distinctions recognised in a given community, and their relevant criteria [Section 3.2.1]. Another level of variation concerns the narratives themselves: while a few stories – or episodes within them – are widespread across the country, the default situation is for every community to have its own repertoire of traditions, its main characters, its storylines and motifs. And just like linguists describe the inventory of phonemes or morphemes specific to each language separately before drawing comparisons, likewise every local tradition would deserve to be described in terms of its own storytelling practices, its literary genres, its recurring motifs and storylines, its most prominent narratives.

Describing the diversity of oral traditions across the entire Vanuatu would open a scientific agenda for several decades. The present study will examine two sets of oral traditions – the Torres & Banks islands in the North, and the Shepherd islands in central Vanuatu. Among all the aspects that could be involved in their comparison, we will focus on the nature of their narratives, particularly in terms of their relationship with history. Do these stories present themselves as fiction, or as accounts of real events? Far from just reflecting Western concerns, this contrast between fiction and historical reality is – as we'll soon see – locally essential. But what is these narratives' exact relationship to oral history? Are they anchored in our modern experience, in our social networks, in our landscapes – or do they take place in a mythical past, or an alternate reality, definitely cut off from our here-and-now? We will see that the two societies under comparison provide different answers to these questions.

1.2   Myth, tale, legend: three relations to history

Before we go further in our reflection, we need to define some of the key concepts we will be handling. Within traditions of storytelling – the art of performing prose narratives – different genres can be distinguished. In principle, the nomenclature of literary genres should be defined, when possible, using emic categories – i.e. concepts that are defined in the local language itself; we will do that below, in our study of two local traditions in Vanuatu [Section 3]. However, when doing comparative work, it is also legitimate to propose universally applicable concepts, whose definitions would not depend on local systems. This approach is the equivalent, in folkloristic studies, of the notion of *comparative concept*, used in linguistic typology when comparing languages (Haspelmath, 2010).

Table 1. The three main forms of prose narratives (after Bascom, 1965, p. 5)

	MYTH	LEGEND	FOLKTALE
Belief	fact	fact	fiction
Time	remote past	recent past	any time
Place	different world: other or earlier	world of today	any place
Attitude	sacred	sacred or secular	secular
Characters	non-human	human	human or non-human

Important "comparative concepts" in folklore theory include MYTH, LEGEND and FOLKTALE. These notions have been the object of academic inquiry ever since the early works by Creuzer (1810) and the Brothers Grimm (1812). The 20th century saw attempts at providing technical definitions of these words (e.g. Aarne, 1910; Boas, 1940; Thompson, 1946). One useful synthesis was proposed by Bascom (1965), based on an informed discussion of emic

nomenclatures across a wide range of cultures. Table 1 reproduces his typology, outlining what we could describe as three "meta-genres". Obviously there would be room for discussing Bascom's hypotheses, but his proposal provides us with a solid starting point.

Essentially, the FOLKTALE or TALE is a timeless narrative, that is not anchored in any identifiable timeline. In its purest form, it is a work of fiction, which does not pretend to tell us about our world: its function is to provide moral education as well as distraction to the audience – typically children – using imaginary characters and a fictional story.

By contrast, the MYTH is a narrative about the past – understood as remote – whose role is to tell us about our present world. In that sense (and despite the word's common meaning in modern English), the notion of *myth* is, in a way, the opposite of fiction, because it purports to tell a certain truth about the world. This is why Bascom is correct in presenting the myth as a discourse about fact, not fiction [Table 1] – as reflected in his definition:

> "MYTHS are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past." (Bascom, 1965, p. 4).

Obviously, many myths involve supernatural events, or elements which could be regarded – especially with a modern eye – as unrealistic, and understood, at best, as allegorical. But the issue whether storytellers themselves, or their audience, "really believe" in the truth of a myth is a moot question, of secondary importance: what matters is that mythical discourse *presents itself* as a discourse about reality.

As Table 1 suggests, the notion of LEGEND shares some traits with the myth, and some with folktales. One crucial difference between myth and legend is time depth. Myths refer to the "remote past" (as reflected in Bascom's definition), that of times immemorial, understood as the times of origin – akin to the "Dreamtime" of Australian cultures (Kolig, 1995). This absolute discontinuity with our world, in passing, is what allows myths to feature non-human or godly characters, supernatural episodes, allegorical figures. By contrast, legends recount events that belong to a more recent past, typically the last few centuries. They are normally grounded in history: they may present themselves as actual memories of events that happened to our ancestors, and were remembered through the generations. As Bascom (1965, p. 4) put it,

> "LEGENDS are prose narratives which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period considered less remote [than myths], when the world was much as it is today."

While legends are always rooted in actual events, they commonly include additional episodes, apocryphal dialogues, or extraordinary elements that were added, over time, to render the narration more dramatic or lively. For example, the Battle of Roncevaux, which took place in 778 in the Pyrenees and led to the death of Charlemagne's commander Roland, evolved from actual memories of the battle into a legend that circulated in the Frankish kingdom (Burger, 1948); later on, in the 11th c., it became an epic song, the famous *Song of Roland*: epics are essentially versified legends. The transformational process from history to legend – and then to epic – involved several forms of distortion for the purpose of dramatisation: e.g. Roland was portrayed as the emperor's own nephew; Basque enemies became Saracens; Roland's death was depicted as heroic. Rather than describe legends as a mere equivalent of history, it is thus wiser to equate legend with what has been called *mythistory* (Bensa & Rivierre, 1988; Rivierre,

1996); from now on, we will use the latter word as an equivalent for 'legend'. But what remains is that legend too – or mythistory – does present itself like a truthful account of past events.

The important observation is that the three main categories outlined above represent three different possible relations between the act of storytelling and reality. While folktales are cut off from any reality or timeline, myths and legends both present themselves as truthful account of real facts. However, the time of myths belongs to a distant past, fundamentally alien to the world we know: although they symbolically link the present to the past, myths are fundamentally ahistorical. This is different from mythistory, or legend, which connect our present lives to historical events, and constitute the living memory of a community

In the 1870s, German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann took the descriptions in *The Iliad* seriously, and famously identified the actual sites of Troy and Mycenae – thereby showing that ancient epics were not just literary works, but also memories of actual historical events. One hundred years later, French archaeologist José Garanger decided to give credit to the mythistory collected by Jean Guiart in 1958 in central Vanuatu, and identified the burial site of the last Roi Mata (Garanger, 1972) – which is now the only Vanuatu site inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List (Wilson et al., 2011; Ballard, 2023). Likewise, excavations on the island of Tongoa identified the tomb of the hero Titongoa Liseiriki, with two women – probably his wife and daughter – and their ornaments, just as described in the oral tradition of the Shepherds (Garanger, 1972, p. 90). This was a spectacular demonstration that oral tradition, in some cases, can literally be understood as history.+

1.3   A comparative study

The present study will zoom in on two literary traditions – the Torres–Banks vs. the Shepherds – and compare them from this perspective. Are their narrative traditions closer to oral history, or to folktales? Do they purport to tell us about the past? As we will see, the answer to these questions will depend on the genres, and also on the profile of each local tradition. Northern communities favour ahistorical accounts, whether in the form of fictional TALES, or as origin MYTHS rooted in a remote past. By contrast, genealogies and MYTHISTORY are the preferred type of narrative in central Vanuatu, and never go back to the times of origins.

We will outline these two quite different cultural profiles, and suggest possible explanations. In a nutshell, we will propose that northern traditions focus all their attention to the boundary between humans and non-humans – whether animals, ghosts or spirits – a notion that is key to the transmission of symbolic power in the area. This results in a literary system that pays limited attention to relations among modern social groups, and is instead anchored in the remote distance of the myth. By contrast, the societies of the Shepherds organise their intergenerational transmission of wealth – particularly land rights – around the affiliation to genealogical lineages. Collective memory there focuses on remembering every lineage's trajectory across time and space: this results in an oral tradition where the attention focuses on the social history of the last centuries.

This study will unfold as follows. Section 2 will concentrate on methodology. After providing a short inventory of previous research in the domain of oral literature in Vanuatu, we will present our own corpora, and the methods we used for collecting texts. Section 3 will then present our central discussion, based on the empirical analysis of our two text corpora. As we describe the two storytelling traditions of our focus groups – first the Torres–Banks, followed by the Shepherds – it will appear that the two traditions hold quite different relations with respect to history, and to their deictic anchoring with the present. Hopefully, this study will inspire future descriptions of storytelling traditions, whether in Vanuatu or elsewhere in the Pacific – paving the way for systematic comparison.

2   Methodology

2.1   Previous research on Vanuatu oral literature

While our knowledge of Vanuatu's oral literature is still fragmentary, some local traditions have been the object of attention. (Figure 1 shows the location of places mentioned below.)

Besides his pioneering work on languages – notably those of the northern islands – Reverend Codrington showed strong interest in their folklore and mythology (Codrington, 1891). Some of the myths he collected in the Banks Islands are featured prominently in Dixon's early overview of "Oceanic" mythologies (Dixon, 1916), and in other derivative studies (e.g. Kirtley, 1955; Maranda, 1977). Along the 20th c., myths and folktales were regularly discussed by anthropologists in their articles and monographs: e.g. Vienne (1984), Taylor (2008), Hess (2009) for the Banks Is; Jolly (2003), Garde (2015) for Pentecost; Guiart (1973, 1994), Luders (1996), Ballard (2014, 2020) for the Shepherd Is.; Humphreys (1926), Bonnemaison (1986), Tabani (2008) and Lindstrom (2021) for Tanna; among many references. However, their citations of the oral literature often took the form of abridged versions, in French or English.

Access to the actual text of the narrative in the original vernacular has been much rarer. One early exception are the stories of South Pentecost, which Père Tattevin (1929–1931) published in bilingual format, in Sa and French. It took several decades before other sets of stories were released in print – e.g. texts from the Shepherds (Sperlich, 1986; Rivierre, 1996), or from North Efate (Facey, 1988). The increase in linguistic research since the late 1990s gave linguists the opportunity to constitute linguistic corpora, often based on audio recordings that featured narratives from the oral literature. This resulted in the publication, in print, of several stories in bilingual format – e.g. in Mwotlap (François, 1999), Araki (François, 2002, pp. 201–223), Uripiv (McKerras et al., 2004), Vera'a (Vorēs & Schnell, 2012), South Efate (Thieberger, 2013), Sakao (Touati, 2016).[1]

Electronic technologies soon made it easier to publish such texts, whether in self-publications accessible online, or through institutional archives. The added value of such tools is the ability to include the recordings of original storytelling performances, in audio or video format, along with text annotations. According to a 2018 survey (François, 2018, p. 281), the online archives with the greatest number of media resources in Vanuatu languages were then MPI DOBES with 113 media items, the *Pangloss Collection* with 869, and PARADISEC with 874. To these, one can add the 27 collections of Vanuatu field recordings – some with annotations – currently represented on the ELAR archive.

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[1] We do not include here examples of self-published collections of texts, in monolingual format, made primarily for the communities.
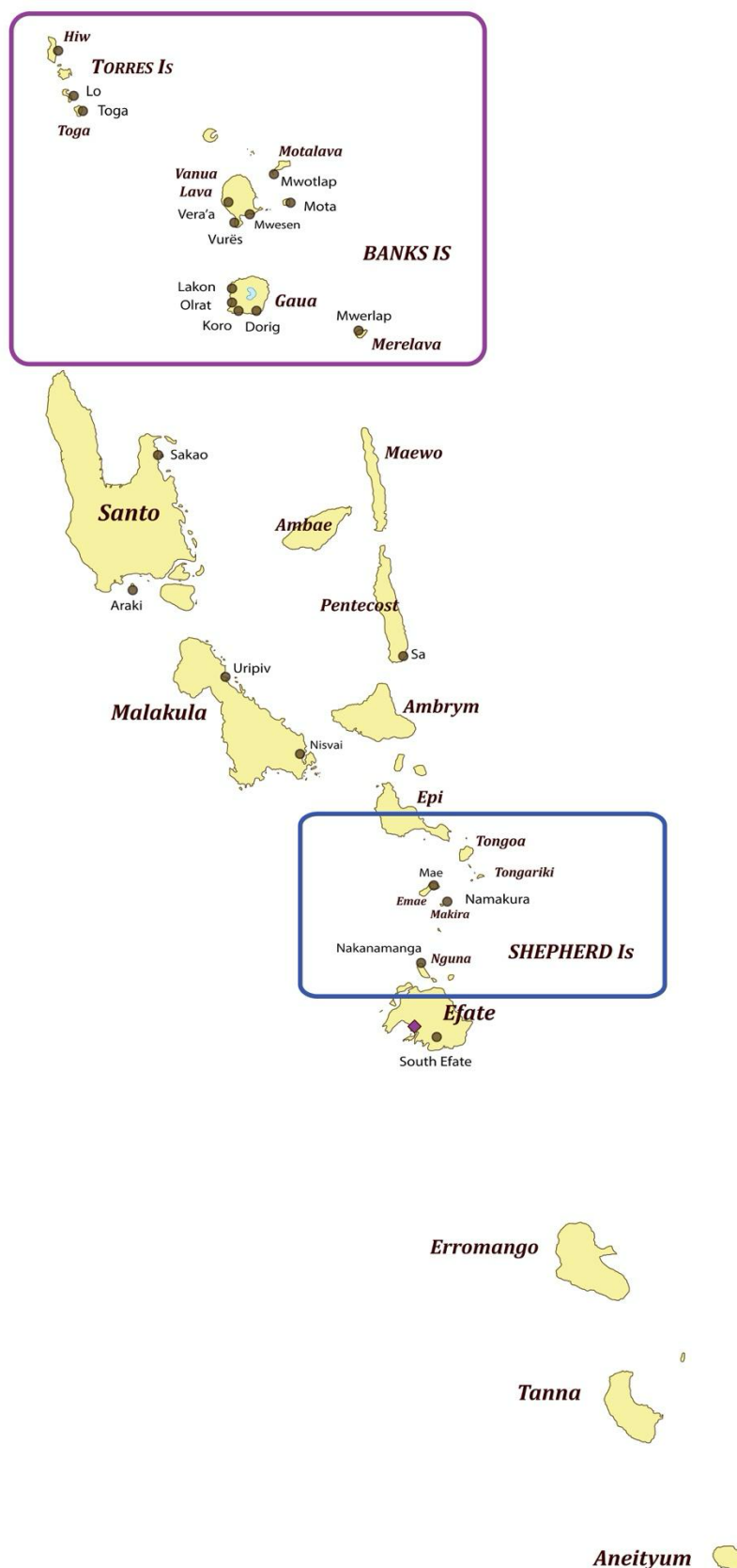
Figure 1. Map of Vanuatu showing the languages and places mentioned in this article. The frames locate the two areas discussed in this study.

All in all, among the 138 different languages – not counting dialects – that are spoken in Vanuatu (François et al., 2015), we can estimate that at least fifty have had their oral literatures documented, to various extents, in the form of recordings accessible through online archives. While it is always possible to do more and better, the efforts deployed in the last 25 years already show encouraging results. These archives often include full-length narratives in the original languages, together with translations (word-for-word and/or running text). Such collections are directed at a diverse audience, including linguists, anthropologists and other social science researchers – notably folklorists and mythologists – as well as a broader public interested in the world's cultural diversity. As the target communities also access these recordings and their transcriptions, they can find various benefits in them: they may view them as valuable testimonies of their ancestors' cultural productions, but also as opportunities for passing on the language, maintaining the art of storytelling, and preserving the indigenous values and knowledge attached to these stories and myths.

One type of research has been missing among all the publications listed above: namely, studies specifically dedicated to investigating the art of storytelling itself, through a structural analysis of the recorded texts, or a description of the performances. A few exceptions exist, though. Facey (1988) made proposals on ways to classify her Nguna texts. Touati (2016) compared different versions of the myth of Ser among the Sakao, and analysed the moral representation of the hero. Aznar (2019) described *nabol*, a narrative tradition of southern Malekula, and showed how storytellers tend to adapt their performance depending on who takes part in the event; he also created an online corpus of Nisvai narratives (Aznar & Gala, 2020). Finally, in her 1000-page dissertation, Bessis (2023) documented the oral tradition of the Shepherd islands, paying particular attention to the mythistorical narratives revolving around the 15th-century eruption of the Kuwae volcano, and the social upheavals that ensued; she proposed an in-depth analysis of the different versions known, breaking them down into their essential components [see Section 3.3].

2.2   Our methods and corpora

The present study will focus on two specific areas, based on the authors' expertise and firsthand data. Both authors have acquired years of experience studying the oral literatures of Vanuatu. François carried out fieldwork in South Santo (Araki island) in 1997–98, and in the Torres & Banks Is., from 1997 to 2011.[2] While his work revolved primarily on the linguistic comparison of the area's seventeen languages (François, 2011), his immersion in different communities was also largely dedicated to documenting their artistic traditions – from storytelling (François, 1999) to poetry and music (François & Stern, 2013). As for Bessis, she spent long periods, from 2015 to 2023, recording the oral traditions of the Shepherd Is. of central Vanuatu, in the context of her doctoral project (Bessis, 2023; cf. François & Bessis, 2025).

The methods we used when collecting literary traditions were on a cline between spontaneous and planned events. The first type, practised mostly by François, begins with casual chats with villagers, sometimes for hours, during walks around the island, informal gatherings, or at night by the fire. As certain topics emerge in the conversation, someone may think of a story, and volunteer to tell it; the researcher then takes out their microphone – which must be ready at all times – and, with the storyteller's consent, begins recording the story. While this method has the authenticity of impromptu interactions, it could have the

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[2] In addition, he also carried out fieldwork on the island of Vanikoro (Solomon Islands), where he documented the four languages and the oral literature. Because the present paper focuses on Vanuatu, this other corpus is not analysed here; it will only be briefly cited in Sections 3.2.3 and 3.3.1, for comparative purposes.

disadvantage of requiring long stretches of casual interaction until a spark suddenly lights the fire of inspiration. Luckily, the people of Vanuatu – at least until recently – know many stories and are always eager to share them, so it was never too difficult to record some narratives. Sometimes, a single storyteller would volunteer up to seven or eight narratives in a row in the same recording session – the source of abundant corpora. Although the storytelling itself was triggered by a conversation with the researcher, it would often unfold in the presence of other adults and children, and become a family or community event [Figure 2].

Figure 2. Lamis tells a story to a group of teenagers (Motalava, Banks, 1998) [photo AF]

Depending on the circumstances, it can sometimes be more efficient to organise a session of stories. That is, the researcher can prepare a community meeting, explaining their interest in recording narratives of all kinds; this has the advantage of giving potential participants more time to think ahead of which stories they would like to tell. The researcher may be interested to record any member of the community, regardless of their age or status: this is how our different sessions recorded young children, along with the elders. On a single afternoon, storytellers can volunteer all sorts of topics – from animal fables to ogre stories, from sorcery tales to Biblical legends… About one third of narratives include a song, performed at the appropriate moment in the story; because its lyrics are usually in a cryptic "spirit language" [Section 3.1.1], a younger storyteller may ask an elder, who knows it better, to perform the song part.

While Bessis's doctoral project focused on one topic – the eruption of the Kuwae volcano and its consequences – she chose to examine it in relation to the full mythological system of the Shepherd islands. With this objective in mind, she designed a protocol whereby, in each community she visited in the Shepherds, she would set up a village meeting, named *Bulak!* ('Tell us!'), in order to collect stories from the area's oral traditions (Bessis, 2023, p. 189). During those meetings, Bessis would bring a large poster of her making, where she had reproduced old photos, archives, maps or other illustrations revolving around the Shepherd Is. [Figure 3]. This often had the welcome effect of providing inspiration to community members, who would remember specific stories they associated with places or characters. Their storytelling would often, in turn, trigger the memories of other villagers.

Figure 3. A poster created by Bessis in 2019 to help jog the memory of Shepherd islanders and foster storytelling events about the community's history.

Some narratives could easily be uttered and recorded in public: in the Shepherds, this was the case of etiological tales [Section 3.3.3], which are viewed as belonging to the public domain. By contrast, some stories were too sensitive to be told openly. Thus, while the first part of the Kuwae myth – leading up to the eruption – was public and often filled with narrative detail, the second part retold events of migration and settlement by certain chiefs onto the newly emerged islands (Ballard, 2020; Bessis, 2023). Such sensitive narratives had to be recorded in private settings and discussed beforehand among the chiefs, in order to prevent potential future conflicts over land rights. They were characterised by a minimal number of narrative details – e.g., specific boundary names, explicit references to ownership – each carefully chosen to achieve particular rhetorical effects [Section 3.3.4]. All recordings were submitted to the chiefs, who could decide to withdraw or restrict any material they considered confidential.

This kind of "private" narratives found in the Shepherds have been observed elsewhere in Vanuatu, and sometimes described under the notion of *traditional copyright* (Huffman, 1996; Lindstrom, 1996; Geismar, 2013): their exclusive ties to certain clans or families mean that they can only be retold by individuals from those particular groups. Interestingly, this sort of lineage-based copyright is absent from the Torres & Banks islands, where no narrative is exclusively linked to a specific clan or descent group: if a narrative or a song can be publicly performed by someone, it can be by anyone. Northern islanders do, however, impose strict restrictions onto certain songs and narratives: namely, those that can only be told by, or to, individuals – usually adult males – who have gone through initiation rituals (Vienne, 1984; Kolshus, 1999; Stern, 2013). Such restrictions do not apply at the level of the lineage or family, but of the individual. Whenever storytellers chose to entrust us with such secret knowledge, they would specify the restrictions attached to their songs or narratives, reserved to the initiates.

Over the years, the two authors combined different methods, and were able to collect numerous stories. During her Vanuatu fieldwork, Bessis recorded and transcribed over 100 narratives from the oral traditions of the Shepherds, totalling 8 hours, in four different languages. Likewise, François recorded 329 full-length narratives (not counting his corpus from the Solomon Islands), totalling 44 hours; among these, about two thirds were judged valuable enough to be fully transcribed, yielding a total corpus of 218 Vanuatu stories in 19 different languages (François, 2018, 2020).

Whenever suitable and approved by the communities, we archived our audio files in the *Pangloss Collection*, the open-access archive of French CNRS dedicated to endangered languages [Section 2] (François, 2020; Bessis, 2022). On some occasions, storytellers were happy to be recorded by us, yet did not wish the recording to be made public. This happened when the conversation was restricted to a certain audience such as initiates (Torres–Banks) or members of a specific lineage (Shepherds); or when the discussion revolved around touchy matters, such as genealogy and land rights, sorcery, or other private conversations. In that case, we respected the actors' wish for privacy by archiving their recordings in protected mode, whether on Pangloss (François) or on PARADISEC (Bessis).

Another crucial task, which begins in the field, is to transcribe the text of the stories in the original language, with the assistance of native speakers. François generally did these transcriptions in handwritten format before typing them on SIL's *Toolbox* software; Bessis transcribed directly in digital format, on SIL's software *SayMore* and *FieldWorks* (FLEx). Both Toolbox and FLEx can be used to assist interlinear translation.

The result of these longhaul efforts are two corpora of oral narratives, one for the Torres–Banks area, one for the Shepherds. While these corpora can also provide data for linguistic analyses, we will examine them here for their narrative value.

3   Torres–Banks vs. Shepherds: Contrasting Two Oral Traditions

Our first section defined the concepts central to this study – oral tradition, myth, folktale, mythistory – and foreshadowed our main hypothesis. The remainder of this paper will now allow us to develop our arguments and provide evidence in detail.

Our main claim is that the narrative traditions heard in the Torres–Banks group on the one hand, and in the Shepherd islands on the other, present significant differences in their relationship to time and history. Northern Vanuatu favours timeless stories, or myths that go back to the times of origin – but their traditions remain mostly silent about events of recent history. By contrast, the Shepherd islands give major importance to historical or "mythistorical" narratives, where events of the past are connected with today's actual places and people.

Table 2 shows the distribution, between the two areas, of the three main narrative meta-genres we introduced in Section 1.2. (By convention, the sign '–' indicates absence, '+' presence, '+++' massive presence, '(+)' marginal presence.) Sections Section 3.2 and 3.3 will explain this table – including the splitting of the *folktale* category in two – as we examine the oral traditions of both regions in more detail.

3.1   *Two different relations to history*

We believe that the divergence in these two societies' narrative traditions correlates with a contrast in their social system, defining two different relations to historical time.

Table 2. Geographic distribution of the main narrative genres of the oral literature,
in two areas of Vanuatu

Genre	Time anchoring	TORRES–BANKS	SHEPHERDS	Rest of Vanuatu
MYTHS	distant origins	++	–	?
MYTHISTORY	last centuries	(+)	+++	?
TALES	reality-anchored	(+)	++	?
	timeless	+++	–	?

Generally speaking, the Torres–Banks and the Shepherds share many aspects of their lives. Their languages are Oceanic, descended from the language of the Lapita navigators who first settled the archipelago. Their landscapes are similar enough; and so are most of their daily practices, or their economies – ancient and modern. They do present significant differences, though.

3.1.1 Two separate ways to assert one's social status

In Central Vanuatu societies, individuals access their land rights and social status by being born into a matrilineal clan (on Efate) or a patrilineal lineage (in the Shepherds); and by inheriting a title inalienably attached to a parcel of land (Bessis, 2023, p. 143; Ballard et al., f/c). A man's social status is directly tied to his genealogy, and to his ancestors' position among the community's different lineages. Knowledge of that genealogy, and of the group's detailed history, is essential to their ability to claim ownership on specific portions of land. In particular, modern individuals must be able to demonstrate, through a convincing narrative, their ties to a specific Master of the Ground – i.e. the historical figure who first set foot onto the newly created islands, post-eruption. As we shall see, this plays a crucial role in shaping the oral narratives of the Shepherd Is [Section 3.3].

By contrast, the organisation of political power and social status in the Torres & Banks islands is not primarily determined by genealogy. Unlike what is found in central Vanuatu, northern societies are not divided into family lineages or clans. In the social system that prevailed until mid-20th century, a man's social rank was achieved by taking part in a status-enhancing process that was, in principle, available to anyone, regardless of his family pedigree. While grade-taking ceremonies involved the public display of wealth (Codrington, 1891, Ch. 7; Vienne, 1984, pp. 309-317), another essential part of a man's status was determined by a more secret process: namely, a series of initiation rituals carried out in the men's "secret enclosure", a secluded place in the bush (Vienne, 1984, p. 319, François, 2013, pp. 230 *ff*., 2022, p. 230). In addition to physical ordeals, those rituals involved the transmission, across generations, of various secrets: about the meaning of rites and symbols, about the cosmogony and the mythology, about the arts of singing or dancing, about ethics and morals. These learnings revolved around the crucial notion of *tamate* – a polysemous word referring to the ghosts of our forefathers, but also to the 'ancestral spirits', invisible to most of us, by whom most of our culture was handed down to us (Vienne, 1996; François, 2013). The same word *tamate* can also refer to the ritual headdresses worn during important dances – as well as to the secret societies themselves. A successful initiation allows the candidate to become *les-tamate* 'entitled to ghosts' – that is, someone who has earned the right and the supernatural power (*mana*) to navigate the boundary between the two worlds: the mundane world of the Living and the supernatural world of Spirits (François, 2013, 2022, p. 231).

Interaction with spiritual forces was crucial not just to assert one's political status (Vienne, 1984, p. 377), but also to perform efficient witchcraft, or receive poetic inspiration. In order to compose a song, one has to learn a mysterious poetic language, opaque to the non-initiates, reserved to those who are in contact with the supernatural world (François & Stern, 2013, p. 91); that poetic register is known as the "language of ancestral spirits", or sometimes the "language of Qat", after the god-like figure of the Banks [Section 3.1.1]. To be precise, Qat was originally a *vui*, sometimes glossed 'demigod' (Codrington, 1891, p. 152). This term *vui* is another prominent concept in the ancient religion of the Banks (Ivens, 1931), and can be defined 'non-human spirits: eternal spirits of the place, present in the world before mankind'; it is the concept closest to the notion of deity or god (François, 2013, p. 219).

In sum, the central role played by supernatural forces (whether *tamate* or *vui*) in the ancient societies of the Torres–Banks implies paying attention to the place of humans within the broader universe. Their verbal arts – whether sung poetry or spoken literature – often question the primal divide between men and animals, or the ambiguous boundary that separates humans from ancestral spirits. Such a metaphysical landscape is not concerned with the memory of social groups or with recent lineages: it goes back, ultimately, to the depths of antiquity, to the mythical times when humanity somehow defined itself against the non-human forces that surrounded it. As we will soon see, this has important implications on the nature of the narratives that are prominently told in northern Vanuatu.

3.1.2   The memory of past encounters

Another difference between northern and central Vanuatu groups lies in the relative attention they pay to their past encounters with neighbouring societies – and whether or not these form part of their collective memories.

The Torres–Banks islands have always had interactions, if only intermittent, with their neighbours. The missionary and anthropologist Codrington (1891, pp. 297 & 320) reports on how the Banks islands were sometimes visited by large sailing canoes hailing from the north – from Tikopia or the Santa Cruz islands in the Solomons (Kolshus, 2013). On a deeper time scale, archaeologists have repeatedly shown that pottery, obsidians, stone adzes or other artifacts found in certain Lapita and post-Lapita sites in the Pacific, from Tikopia to Fiji, can be traced to Banks sources (Reepmeyer, 2009; Spriggs et al., 2010; Hermann et al., 2023). This is evidence for recurring voyaging and trade between the Torres–Banks and surrounding archipelagoes; so true in fact, that Bedford & Spriggs (2008) described Northern Vanuatu as a major "Pacific crossroads".

And yet paradoxically, these ancient forms of distant contact are never mentioned in the oral traditions of the area. Islands north of Vanuatu (Vanikoro, Tikopia, Taumako, Anuta…), despite lying only a hundred miles away, are never cited under any name, other than a vague collective term such as Mwotlap *Bekyepnō* 'the ultimate islands', of which nothing is known. No story tells of those islands' populations, nor of their visits to the Banks; let alone do they mention any specific event or person. The people of Vanikoro (Solomon Is.) do tell of their ancestors' encounter with Banks people further south, and how this led them to borrow their *tamate* ritual headdresses;[3] but while this event of cultural exchange is well acknowledged by Vanikoro people, it is not mirrored by any similar story in the oral traditions of the Torres and Banks.

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[3] Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002634. "The island of the Dancing Spirits", narrated by Teliki James Pae in Teanu, recorded by A. François in May 2005.

All in all, it appears that Torres–Banks islanders hardly keep the memory of interactions with outsiders, even when we know they happened. This contrasts with their pervasive mention of placenames and people from *within* northern Vanuatu – thereby reflecting the extensive kinship networks (Vienne, 1984, pp. 232*ff*) and facts of linguistic convergence (François, 2011) that hold their islands together. In sum, Torres & Banks oral traditions keep the memory of interisland contact within Vanuatu, but the existence of other populations further north is just absent from their oral history. Part of the explanation may be that this contact, while attested, remained superficial: this would be consistent with the lack of any significant linguistic influence between the languages of north Vanuatu and those of the Solomons – whether Polynesian or not (François, 2021). Evidently, interactions with outsiders from the north also had limited impact upon the social structures and collective memories of the Torres–Banks population.\The contrast is stark with the Shepherd societies of central Vanuatu, who frequently acknowledge the considerable influence they received from their Polynesian neighbours to their south. Polynesian presence in the area, which goes back to the 11th c. AD (Flexner et al., 2019), is reflected by considerable genetic admixture (Arauna et al., 2021), numerous linguistic traces left in the non-Polynesian languages of central Vanuatu (Hermann & Walworth, 2020),[4] and cultural borrowings. In particular, the political system of the Shepherds briefly mentioned above, based ideally on titles of hereditary chieftainship, owes a lot to these Polynesian neighbours (Shirakawa, 1998). The historical figure of Roi Mata, associated with the Polynesians of Efate, is also featured prominently in the Shepherds oral tradition [Section 3.3.1].

3.2   Northern islands and the predominance of ahistorical narratives

After this comparison of the two regions' social and ideological profiles, let us now delve more deeply in the stories themselves.

3.2.1   On emic genres of storytelling

If we look into the names given to "traditional stories" in the vernacular languages of Vanuatu, we find different terminological systems. In Bislama, all narratives generally fall under a single category, named *kastom stori* or *storian* – in relation with the verb *storian* 'chat, narrate, recount'.

Surprisingly, most languages of the Torres and Banks islands do the same as Bislama, as they group all their narratives under a single genre. As François (2013, pp. 222) showed, the Torres islanders call them 'ancient stories' (e.g. Hiw *vegevage r̄ossë*); those of Vanua Lava say literally 'voices of the gods' (e.g. Vurës *elñe-vu*); Gaua people call their stories 'tellings of the Spider' (e.g. Lakon *suusuu pulē Maraw*) in relation to what was probably a Spider deity in the past. These languages label all traditional narratives in the same way, regardless of what meta genre (folktale, legend or myth) we might want to assign them to.

In this context, the Mwotlap language is original in having not one, but two different terms: *navap t'am̄ag* (liter. 'words from the past') vs. *nakaka t'am̄ag* (liter. 'conversation on the past'). While little can be inferred from these expressions themselves, the storyteller Woklo from Motalava once explained these words to us, in the following way:

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[4] To be precise, the region of central Vanuatu today includes two different Polynesian languages (Hermann & Walworth, 2020). Mae or Fakamae is spoken on the island of Emae, in the middle of the Shepherds group; Mele-Fila is spoken on Efate further south. It is not clear which of these two languages is most likely to descend from the Polynesian language that arrived in the area in the 11th century.

- *Navap t'am̄ag* are stories about imaginary characters, in a fictitious universe. They imply a neat separation from our own present, and often include supernatural characters.

- *Nakaka t'am̄ag* are 'conversations', 'true accounts' – typically among adults, usually initiated men – about ancient events that have actually occurred. Those conversations what linguists describe as deictic shifters (Jakobson, 1971 [1957]), anchoring the reported epoch with respect to the time of utterance.

The reader will find a translation of Woklo's interview in the Appendix. Here is an excerpt:

(1)   *An interview about genres*

[lg: Mwotlap; speaker: Woklo; Motalava, 1998]

"(…) If you start a story with "*a long time ago*" then it's a true account. Like when I point to a place, saying "*that hamlet up here*"… You got it? If I begin a story with "*a long time ago*" and then I say "*there was once a 'Femme fatale' up there in that hamlet*", then my story is real. Whereas a tale would go "*Once upon a time…*" (…) And tales, we can't really say if they are true, or otherwise."

In sum, the dichotomy made in Mwotlap opposes 'fiction' to 'true account' (see François, 1999, p. 173). It contradicts the notion, sometimes claimed (e.g. Aufray, 2015, p. 123), that the contrast between truth and fiction would be mostly a Western construct, irrelevant to Pacific storytellers. On the contrary, this question of whether a narrative is truthful or not is crucial to the very definition of the two genres of the Mwotlap storytelling tradition – as made crystal-clear by Woklo's interview. In fact, this opposition has been shown to define emic genres in many cultures around the world (Bascom, 1965): this quasi universal relevance led Bascom to formulate the general contrast [cf. Section 1.2] between *folktale* on the one hand, and *myth* or *legend* on the other.

3.2.2   Myths of origin

Our corpus of stories from the North includes a large majority of *folktales*, as defined above. These are fictional narratives unfolding in a timeless reality, cut off from our world – where children fight Ogres, men interact with supernatural entities, animals transform into humans… Fictional folktales make up a large part of our corpus, at least for northern Vanuatu.

That said, a good number of north Vanuatu narratives belong to another kind, that of the *myth*. The cultural hero of the Banks islands – named *Qat* by Codrington (1891, p. 156), and also called *Qet*, *Iqet*, *Qo'* or *Merawehih* depending on the language (François, 2013, p. 220) – belongs to the world of myths. He is depicted as an ancestral spirit himself, using the word *vui* 'primal spirit, deity' [Section 3.1]; nowadays, some narrators call him the "King" of the Banks,[5] others insist on identifying him as the "God" of northern Vanuatu[6] – using respectively the English words *king* and *god*. Some syncretic stories equate Qat with Jesus Christ [see Table 3]. The mythological figure of Qat stands behind many creation stories in the Torres–Banks.

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[5] Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003140.
[6] Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002495.

Table 3. A few origin myths from north Vanuatu.

Theme	Myth	Language	Area	Notes
COSMOGONY: How our god(s) created our world	*How Iqet brought the Night*	Mwotlap	Motalava, Banks	1
	Merawehih creates Night and Day	Lo	Lo, Torres	2
	How a cricket created the Night	Sa	south Pentecost	3
	How mankind arose from a coconut spathe	Sa	south Pentecost	4
	Qat creates mankind out of clay	Mota	Mota, Banks	5
	Iqet sculpts the first woman	Mwotlap	Motalava, Banks	6
	How Iqet–Jesus created Death	Mwotlap	Motalava, Banks	7
	The hero Ser creates Death	Sakao	east Santo	8
	The battle between Gods and Men	Koro	Gaua, Banks	9
GEOMYTHS: How our landscapes came about	*Creation of the Torres Islands*	Toga	Toga, Torres	10
	How Araki island moved here	Araki	south Santo	11
	The woman who became volcano	Dorig	Gaua, Banks	12
	Origin of Gaua's great lake	Lakon	Gaua, Banks	13
	How two women created the sea	Sa	south Pentecost	14
PHYLOGONY: Origins of certain natural species	*Origin of yams*	Lo	Lo, Torres	15
	The coconut born out of a snake	Mwotlap	Motalava, Banks	16
	Origin of kava	Mwotlap	Motalava, Banks	17
	Origin of mosquitoes	Mwotlap	Motalava, Banks	18
	Origin of pigs	Sa	south Pentecost	19
SOCIOGONY: Origins of our social practices	*Origin of our kin moieties*	Mwesen	Vanua Lava, Banks	20
	Origin of sex and marriage	Mwerlap	Gaua, Banks	21
	Venventey creates marriage rules	Mwotlap	Motalava, Banks	22
TECHNOGONY: Origins of our techniques & art forms	*The mat from the Other World*	Hiw	Hiw, Torres	23
	How Saon-Bwerang discovered fire	Sa	south Pentecost	24
	Origin of our newēt *music*	Hiw	Hiw, Torres	25
	Origin of our magh *dances*	Lakon	Gaua, Banks	26
	How sēwēes'i'i *songs came to be*	Vera'a	Vanua Lava, Banks	27

Notes:
1. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002495; published in François (1999).
2. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002922.
3. Tattevin (1931a, pp. 496 *ff*.).
4. Tattevin (1929, pp. 984 *ff*.).
5. Codrington (1891, p. 160).
6. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002493.
7. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002411.
8. Touati (2016).
9. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003190.
10. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002933.
11. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002293; published in François (2002).
12. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003255.
13. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003138.
14. Tattevin (1931a, pp. 495 *ff*.).
15. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002912.
16. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002418.
17. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003310.
18. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002531.
19. Tattevin (1931a, pp. 489 *ff*.).

20. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0006974.
21. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003076.
22. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002438.
23. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003257.
24. Tattevin (1931a, pp. 499 ff.).
25. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003266.
26. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003164.
27. Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003280.

Some myths explain the origin of mankind, the birth of islands, the reason why people marry, or die: they are always etiological, telling us something about our world. Even if they are less numerous than folktales, the origin myths of north Vanuatu are many – especially in comparison with other islands further south (see Table 2 above). Table 3 presents a selection of them – some from our corpus, others from publications documenting other northern traditions.

The first column classifies these myths into different subcategories, defined thematically (see Le Quellec & Sergent, 2017). Cosmogonic narratives explain the origin of the world, and of its essential components: mankind, Life and Death, Night and Day… Geomyths (Vitaliano, 2007) relate events that have shaped our natural landscapes – whether in the form of new islands, mountains or volcanoes, lakes or rivers… Some etiological myths recount the origin of plants or animals: we propose to call them *phylogonic* (from Gr. φῦλον 'race, species', cf. *phylum*). Sociogonic stories explain the origins of specific social practices, such as kinship systems and marriage rules. (We note the absence, at least in our north Vanuatu corpus, of *ethnogonic* stories – i.e. myths explaining the separation of people into different ethnic groups, or their histories of migrations.) Finally, what we call *technogony* (from Gr. *tekhnē* 'art, technique') is the category of myths that explains the emergence of techniques or art forms – often through some event of supernatural revelation.

All these narratives are myths rather than tales, because the events they recount are explicitly tied to our world. This explicit connection often takes the form of sentences, usually at the beginning or the end of the story, featuring some deictic link or personal pronoun anchored in the situation of utterance:[7]

(2)   *The origin of kava*

[lg: Mwotlap; narrator Edgar Howard; Motalava, 2000] [8]
"|| **A long, long time ago**, kava didn't exist. That plant **we call** kava, it was nowhere to be seen in the whole world. But then, one day, there was a couple (…) → (…) [And then] kava diffused across the whole archipelago of Vanuatu. So **today**, we can say that kava **exists** everywhere in Vanuatu, in all islands; but the very first place where it was discovered, that was in the Land of Pigs [Pentecost]. And in fact, it grew out of a woman's body. (…) And so, this was the myth of the kava, how it came out of a woman's body. (…) It appeared **to us** with a special meaning. This is the end. Thank you. ||"

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[7] The numbered examples throughout this study will use certain typographical conventions. Whereas external links provide access to the original text, a text in quotes cites the English translation of the actual story. The sign '||' marks the beginning and end of a text; an arrow '→' stands for the main part of the story, between the introduction and the conclusion.

[8] Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003309.

(3)   *The woman who became volcano*
                              [lg: Dorig (Gaua); narr. John Collection Wemaras; Gaua, 2003] [9]
"(…) The old woman suddenly took a big leap, and threw herself up to the top of a mountain – the one **we call** "Mount Ghrāt". As soon as she landed, all the vegetation there took fire – grass, leaves, trees, everything was in flames. **Up to this day**, that old witch **still lives** on top of Mount Ghrāt. She **has** consumed that mountain all the way down to its depths, and **is still burning today**. One day, if **you** want to see by **yourself**, just board a plane, and then look down: you'll see a cloud of smoke on top of a mountain – that's **our** volcano, Mount Ghrāt. She may have sunk into the ground, but **she's still there**, inside the volcano. ||"

Pointing to known placenames and to visible elements of our landscape is an effective way – widespread in Vanuatu narratives – to anchor a myth onto our present world:

(4)   *Origin of the Gaua lake*
                              [lg: Lakon (Gaua); narr. Nikson Wevales; Gaua, 2003] [10]
"(…) The woman jumped in the water, and sat down there in the middle of the flow, **up in Liwsal**. Exactly at the place of **a rock down there**, called **Rotung** ('*Lake Woman*'). **That rock** is no other than the old woman, who had jumped in the water. That rock's the one hit by the waterfall; that is the rock we call **Rotung**. ||"

(5)   *How the island of Araki moved here*
                              [lg: Araki; narr. Lele Moli; Santo, 1997] [11]
"(…) Mount Tumepu started to complain about [the island of] Araki blocking its view; so they started a fight. **You can see** Tumepu, how **it is** white on the other side: **this** white colour **we see** recalls how it was struck by Araki. This is why Araki decided to shift southward, towards the ocean. And it has remained there **until today**. ||"

The importance of deixis and spatial anchoring was noted by the storyteller Woklo himself, as a criterion to distinguish 'true accounts' from 'tales' – see (1). By contrast, explicit links with our present world are usually absent from ordinary tales:

(6)   *The Curse of the Eel*
                              [lg: Olrat; narr. Maten Womal; Gaua, 2003] [12]
"|| Here is a little story of mine. *Once upon a time*, a man found a small eel. This was a river eel. (…) → (…) Finally, the two children went to get some fire, and quickly set fire to the house. In a second the house was on fire! Everyone rushed outside: some eels crept to the lake, others to the ocean. Thanks [for listening]. ||"

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[9] Link to the passage: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003254#S40.
[10] Link to the passage: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003139#S18.
[11] Link to the passage: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002292#S12.
[12] Link to the passage: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003135.

(7)   *Stuck in the cave*

[lg: Vera'a; narr. Fredrik Qarngi; Vanua Lava, 2003][13]
"‖ *Once upon a time*, there were two brothers. So they were living, and one day their mother came. (…) → (…) He understood that his brother was dead. And so, he went back home, alone. ‖"

Admittedly, some narratives are difficult to classify, because they have features both of myths and of folktales. For example, the famous Banks story (8), where the hero Qet (i.e. *Qat*) and his brothers defeat the Ogre, is never told to explain any major shift in our world. It does not explain why we marry, or the origin of a plant we use every day, or the emergence of a volcano; it is rather an entertaining story of a trickster hero who defeats a fictional Ogre. And yet, among the ten versions François recorded of this story, one does end with a form of anchoring in our familiar landscape:

(8)   *Qet, the trickster god*

[lg: Mwesen; narr. Tevēt Mesigteltōk; Vanua Lava, 1998] [14]
"(…) [The Ogre] flew away into the clouds, and then started falling down. He kept on falling until he touched the ground **over there in Lesis**; and as he reached the ground, he died. He became a rock, and **that rock exists to this very day**. So then, Qet climbed up the mountain and planted ironwood trees. **These trees are still standing up there to this day**. If you want, you can go east to **Lesis**. **You'll see** a forest of ironwood trees there: it was Qet who planted them. Finally, Qet and his brothers went home to Leseper, and stayed there for a long time. And this is no doubt the end of my story. ‖"

We hesitate to call such stories *myths*, because it would give excessive weight to what are, after all, only cursory remarks on minor features of the landscape. Calling it a *myth* would give the false impression that the whole point of this narrative was to explain why there are trees on the cliff of Lesis; in reality this is a very minor comment, which is omitted in all other versions. In fact, the whole narrative is typical of a folktale – but simply, one that is anchored in the topography of the landscape.

We propose to call this type of hybrid text a REALITY-ANCHORED FOLKTALE; they are quite common in Vanuatu. This anchoring is a manner to assert the validity of a story. Its presence in (8) may be explained by the fact that all other episodes of Qat's cycle are indeed myths of origin – as suggested by the first rows of Table 3: so a mention of that heroic character, even in a folktale-like episode, will sometimes include the traces he left in the landscape – as symbolic tokens of his existence.

3.2.3   Two different notions of the past

Proper myths draw connections between the present and the past – but not just any moment in the past: the events they recount typically take place in a distant antiquity, often the mysterious "time of origins". While that period is sometimes just labelled "in the past" or "a long time ago", occasionally the narrator is more explicit:

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[13] Link to the passage: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003037.
[14] Link to the passage: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002303#S150.

(9)   *The battle between Gods and Men*
                                          [lg: Koro (Gaua); narr. Banabas Womal; Gaua, 2003] [15]
"|| My story goes back to the **very sources of our land**, way up on Lake Beteas, **in the
times of Wisdom**, during a Dance of the Spirits. It was one of those Dances of the Spirits
that we knew *in the olden times*, and in fact that we still know *even to this day*. And so it
was a day for the Dance of the Spirits **in the times of Wisdom**. (…) → (…) These are
the very first divinities **from the beginning of time**. This, I believe, is the ritual legend
that has been transmitted *to us* **from the beginnings of our world, in the times of
Wisdom**, on the great Lake Beteas. ||"

       In principle, not all reality-anchored stories need to go back to such a distant past. We saw
in Section 1.2 that many cultures around the world tell legends, or mythistory, as a memory of
past generations. Thus, in another part of his field research in Melanesia, François surveyed
the oral literature of Vanikoro, an island of the Solomons, north of Vanuatu. There, people still
remember the first European explorer, the Count of Lapérouse, whose ships became fatally
caught in a cyclone off their island. This event of 1788, which is also studied by historians and
archaeologists (Association Salomon, 2008), has given rise to a local series of legends among
the islanders, transmitted by word of mouth, to this day (François et al., 2022). Just like for
myths, these legends constantly include deictic anchoring in the present:

(10)   *The chest buried by Lapérouse*
                                          [lg: Teanu (Vanikoro); narr. Chief Thomas; Vanikoro, 2005] [16]
"|| The chest that I mentioned was found **over there**, to **your left**, beneath the roots of
the big chestnut tree **you can see** overhanging the beach. So, as I was saying, the day
Lapérouse landed **here** with his men, just as their ship was wrecked, well, on the same
day, a little girl was in her house. (…) → (…) This very chest still exists **in our day**, it's
around **here** somewhere. ||"

       But unlike myths, a crucial property of mythistory is the possibility, for contemporary
actors – including sometimes the narrator him- or herself – to have personal connections with
the characters in the narrative:

(11)   *John Young, one who went to Queensland*
                                          [lg: Olrat (Gaua); narr. Maten Womal; Gaua, 2003] [17]
"(…) She gave birth to that boy, called John Young. John Young Henry. John Young's
children are still alive today; they all have their roots in Olrat. (…) The whole line goes
back to Olrat, and is actually **connected to me** today. (…)"

(12)   *The mat from the Other World*
                                          [lg: Hiw (Torres); narr. Jimmy Tiwyoy; Torres, 2007] [18]
"|| Here is the story of the mat from the Other World – **a true story**. It happened at a time
when **one of my ancestors**, called Samuel, was alive. Grandpa Samuel was **one of my
mother's uncles**. During his life, Grandpa Samuel was a shaman. He would travel to the
Other World, sometimes walking, sometimes floating. (…)"

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[15] Link to the passage: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003139#S18.
[16] Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003269; published in François et al. (2022, p. 162).
[17] Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003131.
[18] Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002587.

Narratives pertaining to legend or mythistory are very rare in our corpus from northern Vanuatu: there is a reason why our best example (10) comes from another region, in the Solomons. François did record a couple of personal genealogies,[19] which are called *nubum* ('ancestry') in Mwotlap – itself a subgenre within *nakaka t'am̄ag* 'conversation on the past' [Section 3.2.1]. But these are the exception rather than the rule: in general, historical narratives are not a common type of storytelling in the Torres and Banks islands. (Note that we are not including here the many conversations we've had with speakers about the past, when they did not take a narrative form.)[20]

Likewise, Torres–Banks islanders never recount the lives and deeds of Christian missionaries in any narrative form. While our collecting methods spontaneously triggered the telling of missionary stories in other parts of Vanuatu – in South Santo[21] or the Shepherds [Section 3.3.1] – we were never able to record any narrative about missionaries in the Torres and Banks islands. The only Christian stories François was able to obtain were a couple of episodes inspired by the Bible – but no account of any local history.

In sum, what is most striking in the Torres & Banks cultures is the virtual absence of any historical narrative. No named character, no identifiable event from the last few generations seem to have left any trace in popular memory; the only exceptions are a few personal anecdotes, illustrated in (11–12) above, with limited collective relevance. We also saw [Section 3.1.2] how contact with Polynesian or other northern neighbours is hardly acknowledged in local traditions.

All in all, the oral literature in the North consists almost exclusively of *ahistorical* narratives – whether fictional tales, or myths of origin. It seems as though the activity of storytelling in northern Vanuatu is never centred on social relations among humans, but concentrates exclusively on something else – the metaphysical dialectic between humans and non-humans. Indeed, in light of the central role played by spirits (*tamate*, *vui*) in the social representations of north Vanuatu islanders [Section 3.1.1], it is little surprise that it should also define the main principle of their narrative system.

3.3   The Shepherd Islands, an archipelago impacted by history

The northern configuration comes in stark contrast with the oral traditions observed in central Vanuatu, where social groups and their recent history play a much larger role.

The oral literature heard in the Shepherd Islands presents various similarities with the one found in the North. However, our corpus has not trace of any origin myth: thus, our consultants know of no narrative that would recount the origin of the world, or of mankind. It is as though the mythological time of the beginnings, while well represented in the North, were absent from people's minds in the Shepherds. This does not mean that Shepherd islanders only tell fictional stories: quite the opposite in fact. What dominates there are narratives anchored in historical times.

The islanders distinguish between three main genres, which we will call respectively *bakamatu* 'sociogonic narratives', *nariwota* 'canoe stories' and *tukunu* 'etiological tales'. As

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[19] See for example https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002393, where Chief Robertson Apet of Motalava recounts his ancestors' genealogy – remembering people's migrations through space.

[20] See for example https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003253 *Conversation about the grade system and about sorcery*, where François interviews Father Jimmy about ancient practices in the Hiw society, and the impact of Christianisation.

[21] See for example https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002295 *How the village of Sope was exorcised*, in the language Araki.

Table 4 shows, the terms come from different languages, but correspond to genres that are found throughout the Shepherds.

Table 4. The three narrative genres in the Shepherd islands

	BAKAMATU	*NARIWOTA*	*TUKUNU*
in Namakura	*bakamatu*	*naworean*	*tukunu*
in Nakanamanga	*histri*	*nariwota*	*tukunu*
English equivalent	historical narrative	canoe story	etiological tale

While these three genres follow the typical structure of myths – retelling a transformative event that once changed the world – they unfold through a spatialised trajectory, in a time period perceived by the audience as recent and familiar (Ballard et al., f/c). This central presence of mythistorical narratives in the Shepherds is arguably due to certain major events that have shaped its people's history in the course of the last ten centuries. The stress on history is also tied to social rules, specific to this area, regarding land ownership [Section 3.1.1, 3.3.4].

3.3.1   Bakamatu *or 'historical narratives'*

Bakamatu narratives revolve around the figure of a local hero whose adventures had a major impact on the natural or social landscape. Figure 4 shows the timeline (François & Bessis, 2025; after Bessis, 2023, p. 58) that can be reconstructed from the oral history of the Shepherds.
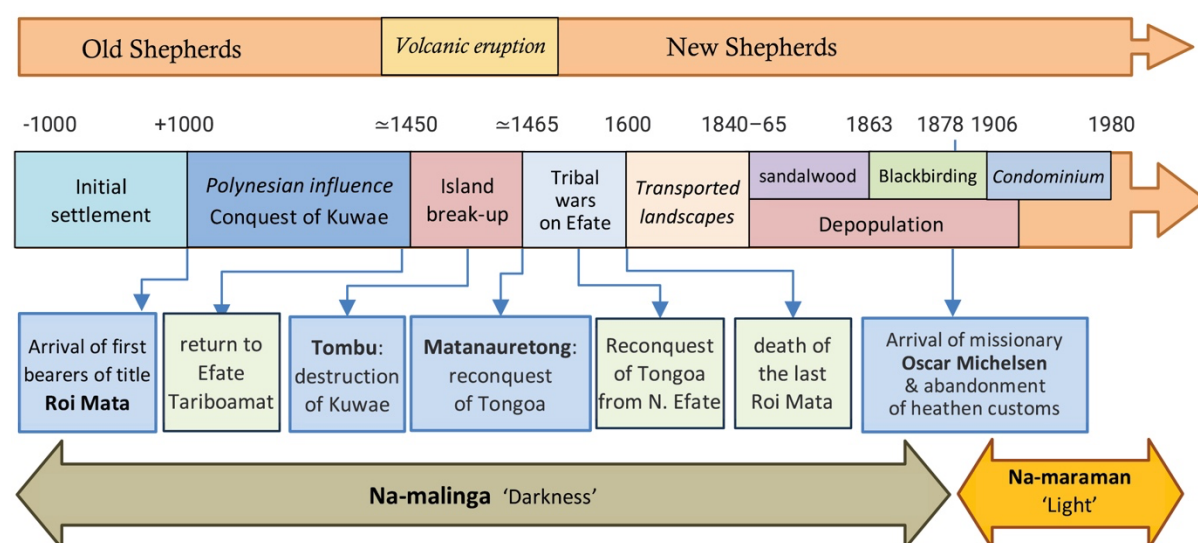

Figure 4. A timeline representing the perception of history among Shepherds islanders, based on their oral literature. The four main historical narratives ('bakamatu') are in blue.

The four main *bakamatu* historical narratives, shown in blue in Figure 4, correspond to the four periods that are central to the Shepherds oral tradition. These are, in chronological order:

(a)   The beginning of Polynesian influence in central Vanuatu, which can be dated to the beginning of the 11th c. AD (Kirch, 2018; Flexner et al., 2019; Arauna et al., 2021; Ballard & Van Dijk, 2019). This period centres on the figure of **Roi Mata**, a Polynesian leader

who came from overseas and unified the tribal system into a system of matrilineal totems.[22] → See the excerpt (14) below.

(b)   The destruction of the ancient island of Kuwae, dated to mid-15th c. Built around the character of **Tombu**, this geomyth tells a story of incest and revenge, leading to the 1452 eruption of the underwater volcano Kerua. In 1973, French geologist Espirat (1973) concluded on the former existence of the Kuwae island, broken to pieces by the eruption.→ See the excerpt (13).

(c)   The resettlement of the (post-eruption) "new Shepherds", and the social reconstruction of Tongoa. This cycle revolves around the legendary figure of **Matanauretong**, the first man to have reached the new Shepherds. This hero is said to have installed the Polynesian patrilineal system of transmission of titles, which is unique in Vanuatu; these hierarchical titles are connected to a piece of land (Ballard, 2020; Bessis, 2023).
→ See the excerpt (16).

(d)   The arrival and deeds of Oscar **Michelsen**, the local missionary. This event of 1878 splits the timeline between a "before" (*na-malinga* '[time of] Darkness') and an "after" (*na-maraman* '[time of] Light'). → See the excerpt (15).

All *bakamatu* stories recount events related to these four pivotal moments of history. As far as their narrative structure is concerned, they are not fundamentally different from folktales. After all, narrativity is not just a property of fiction, and equally concerns the telling of historical facts (Genette et al., 1990). In order to create an effect of reality, a story may employ the same motifs and cultural references as we saw in Section 3.2: a rock in the landscape, the mention of specific placenames… In that sense, one could think of classifying these narratives in the category of "reality-anchored folktales" that was illustrated in (8). However, the point of mythistory goes well beyond the wish to simply project a tale into a fantasised geography – or "mind map" (Roberts, 2012) – of the landscape: its objective is to recount actual historical events that determined the fate of the community as a whole.

As a corollary, a good *bakamatu* story will include not one or two, but many cultural references meant to tie the narrative to the world known to its audience. These are reminiscent of what Rudan (2006) calls "authentication formulae", defined as "text units which demonstrate [the] authenticity [of a story], or the belief in that authenticity". In the case of central Vanuatu storytelling, the formulae consist in the various references used by the storyteller to convince the audience of the narrative's factual accuracy. We identify three subtypes of such formulae (Bessis, 2023, pp. 311–334, who labelled them 'mythèmes'):

  ▪ **archaeological** formulae – including elements of the social or natural landscape;

  ▪ **magical** formulae – such as forbidden knowledge about black magic or elements that are not subject to improvisation, like songs;

  ▪ formulae of **legitimacy** – all elements of authentication that rely on the performer's personal identity.

For example, the *bakamatu* of the Kuwae eruption is one of the best known mythistorical narratives of the Shepherds. The hero Tombu, furious at his brothers who had tricked him into committing an incest with his own mother, sought vengeance by destroying the whole island of Kuwae. To this end, he performed a charm on the Kerua volcano, using six pig bladders and

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[22] His descendant, the last bearer of the title *Roi Mata*, would die around 1600. In 1967, the burial site of the last Roi Mata was discovered by archaeologist Garanger [see Section 1.2].

a magical chant.[23] The episode of the eruption (13) is rich in geographical formulae, in the form of prominent placenames easily identifiable by the audience:

(13) *How the island of Kuwae was destroyed*

[lg:Namakura ; narr. John Robert Muri ; Makira, 2015][24]

"(...) But Tombu refused to listen, and our brothers watched him do it. When he burst the fifth [bladder], **the island of Tongoa over there**, which belonged to Kuwae, detached itself and floated away into the air. Tombu was now standing at the foot of the oak tree, and he took hold of the sixth bladder, the last one. He burst it on the trunk of the oak tree. The tree flew away, and Tombu's head separated from his body, crashing onto the **island of Ambrym**. The fire [of the eruption] consumed **Tongoa** and broke it apart, with lava flowing from all sides. It broke up the island of Kuwae and spat out several small islands that **now** surround Tongoa. One of them is "**Tongariki**", another is "**Buninga**", another is called "**Valea**", and then "**Ewose**". These small islands are scattered around Tongoa, the main island."

Besides features of the landscape, authentication formulae in *bakamatu* stories also include the mention of chiefly titles – which have been transmitted up to this day – as well as ancestral lineages. On Efate, these lineages can correspond to the totemic clans, to which everyone still belongs today. The *bakamatu* (14) recalls how the *nakainanga* system of totems was originally introduced by the chiefly figure of Roi Mata:[25]

(14) *How Roi Mata changed our social landscape*

[lg: Nakanamanga (Poganisu); narr. R. Kanegae; Efate, 2016][26]

"(...) Even today, we use this ***nakainanga* system**. We have **the 'napu' clan**, the **'cabbage' clan,** and the high chief bears the title of **'napun manu'**. Titled chiefs such as **Tariboaliw** and **Tariboamat** have also joined us. This is how **Roi Mata**, who sought peace, succeeded in establishing it. Today, not all of our islands, from here to the **Shepherds**, have *nakainanga*: only us, the people of **Efate,** from the south to the northeast, are organised in this way. **We**, along with a few other islands, **all have totems that we inherited from Roi Mata. This is why we have totems today**. This is the end of my story. ||"

Finally, some *bakamatu* have emerged in the last few generations, as an account of more recent history. (15) recalls the arrival of the "Light" (*Na-maraman*) – that is, the Gospel[27] – in the Shepherds:

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[23] Link to the song: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0008241.

[24] Link to the passage: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0007511#S68.

[25] This is a loan from a Polynesian word, ultimately from Proto-Polynesian **kainaŋa* 'clan, descent group' (Pawley, 2020).

[26] Text reproduced in Bessis (2023, p. 483).

[27] This metaphor, introduced by missionaries, is also found among Nguna people (Facey, 1988) and in the Banks Is. In Mwotlap, *toglolqōn̄* 'living in Darkness' refers to pre-Christian or heathen times (François, 2013, p. 207).

(15) *The arrival of Michelsen on Tongoa*
                      [lg:Nakanamanga ; narr. Chief Fandanamatu; Blacksand, Efate, 2017] [28]
       "(...) It was in 1879 (...) for an entire year, Michelsen had learned the language, and when
       he went to **Tongoa**, his boat arrived at **Panita**. He jumped ashore, and the chief came to
       greet him with his warriors (...) Michelsen played the violin and sang a passage from the
       Bible in the Tongoa language titled: "*The Lord is magic*". The chief's tears rolled down
       his cheeks. For a prophecy had foretold the arrival of a white man with straight hair, and
       when this event occurred, these people should not be eaten. It has now been one hundred
       years since this story has been passed down through generations. When he sang his song
       in the Tongoa language, Light came to the Shepherd Islands. The chief said that the Holy
       Spirit had arrived, and they gave him the name "*Manuatavara*"."

       Based on the historical timeline shown in Figure 4, a modern storyteller will always situate
their story before or after the eruption; and in the time of Darkness or the time of Light. But in
major contrast with the myths heard in the North [Table 2], *bakamatu* stories never go back to
the primeval times of the origins – such as the 'times of Wisdom' evoked in (9). Instead, they
revolve around identifiable historical events: *bakamatu* clearly forms a genre of mythistory,
rather than myth proper.

3.3.2 Nariwota *or 'canoe stories'*

A second type of narrative in use in the Shepherds is called *nariwota*, or 'canoe stories'.
Arguably a subtype of *bakamatu*, *nariwota* narratives are highly confidential, transmitted
vertically from father to son. These texts recount the geographical itinerary of a legendary
ancestor, and trace his descendants until they reach the current titleholder – namely, the narrator
himself (Facey, 1988; Ballard et al., f/c). The events of migration in question concern
especially the slow process whereby some human groups came to resettle the "new Shepherds"
– the new islands that were born out of the Kuwae eruption [Section 3.3.1].

       For obvious reasons, we will not reproduce one of the individual narratives here. But to
give the reader an idea, we reproduce the account by Guiart (1973, p. 375, our translation):

       "The general pattern is as follows. A sailing canoe, usually explicitly named, sets out
       from a certain island, with a helmsman and crew on board, under the authority of a
       chief. The various characters are named exclusively using their titles. The canoe
       undertakes a more or less lengthy journey through the archipelago, stopping at various
       points, where it generally drops off a member of the crew to whom a title is then
       assigned – until the end of the journey, when the pirogue chief, the helmsman and the
       rest of the crew disembark."

       These narratives are generally accompanied by extensive genealogies, essential to
establish a family's rights on a specific land. Every *nariwota* stems from the arrival of the
"Master of the Ground", the first man to set foot on an uninhabited land. This foundational
event establishes a title that is then passed down through generations. A *nariwota* will thus
narrate the successive arrivals of the different chiefs, who divided the land into parcels under
the authority of the first chief. This is how oral memory has preserved a cadastral record
(Hébert, 1970), spanning approximately fifty generations of titles.

       Rivierre (1996) published a version of the *nariwota* story of Songite Matanauretong, the
Master of the Ground of Tongoa island. Besides the many placenames (here in small capitals)

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[28] Text reproduced in Bessis (2023, p. 532).

and some proper names (in bold), the excerpt (16) lists certain plant species that were planted by the Master of the Ground, and which are still used today to separate the same territories:

(16) *The nariwota story of Songite Matanauretong*
                    [lg: Namakura; narr: Chief Titongoamat; Tongoa 1965; J.-C. Rivierre]
     "(...) Then **Tarimas** brings them back to MAKURA, and they stay there. The vegetation recovers on the island of TONGOA. With Tarimas, **Songité** cuts plants of ***Garuga floribunda, na-lalab* flowers,** and ***na-mele* plants**. They bring the plants and put them **in the canoe called "Kaisir"**. Then they leave MAKURA with their canoe and land on the beach of NALEMA, on TONGOA. They see the anchorage and find it calm. This anchorage since then is called NALEMA. They then plant a ***Garuga floribunda***. (..) They set off to come here, stay at PETIT-MERIW (...) They climb the broken hill, come here, and settle in the village of MATANAIM. They build their house there... and walk to RAVENGA. They plant a ***na-kuma'ir*** at the place called NA-BWAP. Another one is at LUBUKIT NAVISAAN. Another is planted at MATAAS KURUMABE, and they plant one more at MALAPOA PURAO, and another, it is BAKAK EUTA. They plant one at MALASA MAGARISU, then another at TONGALAP MAGARISU. (...)"

     These *nariwota* narratives are reminiscent of the "canoe" traditions typically found among Polynesian societies (Taonui, 2006). Within Vanuatu though, they seem to be unique to the central islands. None of the oral stories recorded by François in the North bears any similaritywith such legends. The most similar narrative he has encountered was told on Vanikoro (Solomons), by Chief Kaspa Niu Maketi, the leader – precisely – of the Polynesian community.[29] That community, originally from Tikopia, began settling the south coast of Vanikoro several centuries ago (Dillon, 1830; Firth, 1961, p. 158).

3.3.3   Tukunu*, or 'etiological tale'*

The two genres we just discussed for the Shepherds, namely *bakamatu* and *nariwota*, pertain to mythistory: they are certainly not presented as fictional. The third category, called *tukunu*, is closer to our understanding of "folktales". Contrary to *bakamatu* or *nariwota* legends, a *tukunu* story does not attempt, for example, to tie the hero to the storyteller's personal genealogy: the events take place in an indeterminate past. That said, unlike the pure folktales such as (6)–(7), which are common in northern Vanuatu, *tukunu* stories always include deictic shifters and/or place names that somehow anchor the tale onto our lived realities. In other terms, they are rather similar to the hybrid category of "reality-anchored folktale" which we illustrated in (8).

     Tukunu folktales almost always include an etiological dimension – to such an extent that we propose to dub them 'etiological tales'. Whatever happens in the story will be the occasion for some form of etiological conclusion – such as in this version of the Rat and the Octopus:

(17) *How the Rat of Amor got its tail*
                    [lg: Namakura; narr. Marie-Anna; Tongariki (Shepherds), 2019] [30]
     "At the beginning, **the rat did not have a tail**. The story I am going to tell explains how

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[29] Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002690. For this "History of Tikopian settlements on Vanikoro", François deliberately refrained from uploading a transcription and translation online, to prevent them from being used in existing land disputes.
[30] Link: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0007521.

the rat got a tail. (…) → (…) Then the octopus saw an oak branch that was floating and there, he grabbed the branch and pierced the rat whose behind was split, and **that is how the rat got its tail**. And that is why **today**, when you look at a rat, it has hair and a tail. Ah! You will see, it looks like an oak branch."

The subject of a *tukunu* tale like (17) is often too light to be considered a genuine *myth* – at least in comparison with the narratives we mentioned in Section 3.2.2, recounting the source of major human experiences such as marriage or death. The main function of the *tukunu* is to entertain, through lighthearted stories that tell us about a noteworthy – though minor – detail of our world.

Yet because we are in the Shepherd Is, even these light folktales, sometimes, cannot help talking about land distribution or social organisation. Thus, a story explaining why white bats and black bats live in different places will ultimately recall that, since the past events in the tale, the land has been divided in a particular way:

(18) *The distribution of Black and White Bats*
[lg: Namakura; narr. Marie-Anna; Tongariki (Shepherds), 2019][31]
(...) The white bat said, "I live with my brother, and he chased me away. I came here to see you, **my chief**." And the bat has stayed there until today. Even **today**, there are many white bats flying **over Lekimbale**, while the black bats are abundant **over Baletiri**."

Likewise, narratives about victories over demons are often set within the framework of a chief's authority, as triumph leads to the expansion of his sphere of influence – his *nakainanga*:

(19) *The Victory of Chief Marivira over the monster Totorikipan*
[lg: Namakura; narr. Marie-Anna; Tongariki (Shepherds), 2019][32]
(...) "After they had killed Totorikipan, Marivira made his ordination. This story that I wanted to tell is a traditional story of Marivira, who went to Tavi and then to Mataso. There is a *nakainanga* in Mataso. The Marivira of Mataso went to see Marivira, and Marivira went there and saw the *nakainanga*. This story ends here".

Even though *tukunu* stories are not fundamentally grounded in history – at least less so than *bakamatu* – their style still somehow mimics the rhetorical structure of mythistory.

3.3.4   A tradition focused on land ownership

As Bessis (2023) has shown, the art of storytelling among the "people of Kuwae" is primarily driven by rhetorical codes whose function is to defend one's lineage in a land dispute. Indeed, the whole social structure of central Vanuatu rests on a system of land rights that are linked to totemic clans (in northern Efate) or to chiefly titles (in the Shepherds). The only way, for an individual, to be rightfully granted ownership on a piece of land is to be able to prove their ties with the totem or title associated with that land. The *bakamatu* and *nariwota* are primarily used to justify a landowner's rights, and the logic of the entire mythosystem is influenced by these mythistorical elements. The constant concern with titles and land rights makes its way through the whole narrative system of the society – even in the most innocuous etiological tales.

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[31] Link to the passage: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0007524.
[32] Link to the passage: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0007535#S245.

In a way, the strong influence from Polynesian neighbours has left such an impact on people's minds, that the memory of the cosmogonic "times of origins" was relinquished, and 'reset' to a more recent period – just a few centuries ago. The adoption of hereditary chieftainships, and of the land titles tied to them, has given utmost importance to the transmission of genealogies and lineage histories. This historical impact explains how the Shepherds have, so to speak, replaced myth with mythistory.

4   Conclusion

The Torres–Banks Islands and the Shepherds exhibit two different relations with time. The northern islands favour ahistorical narratives – whether these are timeless stories of fiction, or mythical projections into the times of origins. Indeed, the main key to the Torres–Banks societies is less the relationship among human groups, than the metaphysical divide between humans and non-humans – a theme that is central to origin myths, and to the majority of folktales. By contrast, the descendants of Kuwae dedicate most of their narrative traditions to oral history, meticulously recounting events from the last centuries as part of an ongoing narrative.

This difference in perception shapes how each group tells their stories. In the oral traditions of the Torres–Banks, narrating a myth stages a fundamental discontinuity between the mythical times of origins and our present existence. Conversely, the Shepherds people emphasise the continuity of their history, the significance of specific landmarks, and the role played by their own ancestors in shaping the present.

This study highlighted the diversity of storytelling types in Vanuatu, by focusing on two areas that are geographically close enough, but anthropologically quite different. We showed that their relationship with the past leads to different ways of discussing it, embodied in different genres. Ultimately, we wish to encourage fieldworkers and scholars to collect full narratives while they are still being told, ideally in the original language, and archive the recordings for future reference. Firsthand data is essential for the proper study of regional traditions. Our fine-grained analysis here was only possible because we did not use abridged versions of stories in English, but the exact texts as they were uttered, with all their placenames, their deictics, their parentheses – the sort of linguistic material that would typically get filtered out from a summary.

The preservation and systematic study of Vanuatu oral traditions does not only enrich our knowledge of Oceanic folklore: it also contributes to broader discussions in the field of comparative narratology. This is a scholarly domain to which Oceanic cultures contributed early on, and which deserves to be resumed and developed further in the 21st century.

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Appendix: An Interview about Genres

In May 1998, François was collecting narratives from the islanders of Motalava (Banks Is.). One of the best storytellers was Woklo Wongyuy, a man in his forties from Toglag village. One day, he had just told the story *The femme fatale and the murdered prince* – the longest and most elaborate narrative ever recorded by François, with a length of 73 minutes. At the end of this memorable session, Woklo commented on the nature of that story, and this became a five-minute interview about narrative genres.[33] The interview was conducted in the Mwotlap language, but is presented here in an English translation.

The Mwotlap words *na-vap t'amag* 'a tale' and *na-kaka t'amag* 'a true account' were explained in Section 3.2.1; they will be symbolised below as Ⓥ and Ⓚ, respectively. (W stands for 'Woklo', F for 'François'.)

W –   […] This was a taleⓋ from Betesayig [*placename on Vanua Lava island*]. The 'femme fatale' I mentioned was from Betesayig; it's a taleⓋ from Betesayig.

F –   And you said your land was… ?

W –   It's on Ates, towards Tanmat; not far from here. My storyⓀ comes from that hamlet.

F –   And who taught you that taleⓋ?

W –   That taleⓋ I just told, I heard it from one of my uncles. But wait: the taleⓋ in question was actually not a taleⓋ, it was just an accountⓀ. A true accountⓀ. A true accountⓀ from the past, from our ancestry [*nubum*]. Yea, it was not a taleⓋ actually, but a true accountⓀ of the *femme fatale*, from the hamlet over there on Vanua Lava.

F –   Oh, so there's a distinction between "taleⓋ" and "accountⓀ"?

W –   Yes. Actually this was just an accountⓀ… which I turned into a taleⓋ. But deep down it's an accountⓀ – I mean, it's a true story. It comes from tradition [*kastom*]. It's from "a long time ago" [*tog tog me amag*]. You know, like when you say, "*A long time ago there used to be a village there, over there on Vanua Lava; there's a rock over there, there's a cave over there… Over there on our land.*"

F –   But you said you had made it into a "taleⓋ"? How so?

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[33] Link to the audio: https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002386.

W – Exactly. I made it into a "taleⓋ", although in reality it's a true accountⓇ.

F – But how can an accountⓇ be turned into a taleⓋ?

W – Well, sometimes the time distance is so great, it can become a taleⓋ… But then, we do the dances nowadays [*which proves it was a true story*]. You know the song I sang [*in the story*]? Well, that has become a customary dance that we regularly perform. People from Lahlap have created a dance to go with that song I was singing; maybe they've shown you? That's from the taleⓋ I just told you. Yea, it's become a taleⓋ but originally it's a true accountⓇ. It's from tradition.

F – Oh so they are different types of discourse. What's the difference exactly? Is an "accountⓇ" some kind of discourse about ancestry?

W – Well, it's a bit different, but… indeed, you can say that an "accountⓇ" is rooted in ancestry. And then it's been made into a narrative.

F – Oh really.

W – Yes. If you start a story with "*a long time ago*" [*tog tog me am̄ag*] then it's a true accountⓇ. Like when I point to a place, saying "*that hamlet up here*"… You got it? If I begin a story with "*a long time ago*" and then I say "*there was once a Femme fatale up there in that hamlet*", then my story is real. Whereas a taleⓋ would go "*Once upon a time…*" [*tog tog i van en*]: now *that* would be a taleⓋ.

F – And what about such talesⓋ? Can we say if they are true?

W – Nah. TalesⓋ, we can't really say if they are true – or otherwise.

F – I see. And then, do "talesⓋ" and "accountsⓇ" only differ by their opening formula? (like "Once upon a time"…) Or are they also different in their contents?

W – Hm… yes they are. So, if I take you around the island, and we see a certain place, I'll start explaining to you: "*A long time ago, there was a village exactly here…*". Whereas if I'm telling a taleⓋ, I'll say something like "*Once upon a time, there was a couple, in a village…*"

F – Wow! I've understood. That's truly fascinating!

W – Ha, true. That is the main contrast between them. So one kind will begin "*A long time ago, my ancestor did this and that*". But if we're telling each other talesⓋ, we'll go "*Once upon a time, there was a Spirit, there was a man…*", that sort of thing.

F – Yes, got it. One last question. In a true accountⓇ, let's say you're talking about your ancestor. Will there be Spirits? Or do Spirits only appear in talesⓋ?

W – Hm… no. If I'm telling you about my ancestor, there won't be any Spirits. Spirits only appear in talesⓋ.

F – Wow. Thank you so much.

W – You're welcome.