These are things we want to say together. We visited the British Museum in July 2009, with our colleague and friend James Leach, spending two weeks examining and commenting on objects from the north coast of PNG. While we have been here in London we have been talking about what we are doing here, and this article distils some of our conversations with James and others in the Melanesia Project in the context of looking at objects in the British Museum's collection. We have agreed this text together with James, translating back and forth between English and Tok Pisin.

One thing we have noticed particularly is how beautifully people made things in the past. They took a lot of care in their work. It was hard for them to make things, and because of that, these things have real value and meaning. We feel for these people, our ancestors and predecessors, who did not have the tools that we have now, nor some of the other advantages that we have. We identify deeply with them: we are sorry for them and we admire them at the same time. We have been very interested to see that it was not just these people (our own ancestors) who make objects like this, but that there are lots of other

Figure 83. Porer Nombo, Pinbin Sisau and James Leach documenting the collection (photograph by Elizabeth Bonshe, August 2009).
places in Melanesia where people make and use
the same kinds of thing, and have also taken care
to keep making them into the present. We feel for
these people too. In the past they too worked with
tools that made the work difficult.

It is very important that people from villages
come to the Museum to document the collections.
Villagers understand how things are made and
how they are mended, we can identify
materials and we can explain why they are made
in the way they are. Especially when we have
been looking at objects from near Reite, but not
directly from our place, we have focused on
providing this kind of information about
materials and manufacture. It is interesting to see
how many objects there are in the Museum that
were collected in the past without proper
information, or any information. This makes us
think about something that happened in the
1960s. Some American collectors came to Saidor
on the Rai Coast, and they asked the local
government leaders to collect old things such as
stone axes, bows and arrows. They did not collect
any information to go with the objects. Now we
think that these things were taken away for
nothing; they will not have any meaning in the
future. In giving the Museum information about
the objects we are looking at, we are helping all
those collectors in the past who did not do their
work properly, and we are helping the people in
the places from which those objects were
collected as well.

Seeing things from these other places has
reminded us of objects that we used to make in
the past but do not make any more. This has
helped us to document our own traditions too.
We have been able to tell James about things that
cannot be seen in Reite anymore. For example,
we saw a slingshot, which reminded us that in the
past Reite people used a particular kind of long
leaf called karir i sang as a slingshot once their
arrows were exhausted in battle. James had never
had occasion to enquire into these things before.
We are happy to see things that we do not have in
the village any more have been kept in London,
and that they will be here for our future
generations. This seems very important to us.

As we think of our ancestors and predecessors,
we also worry for those future generations who
we see emerging now. People are giving up doing

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{Porer-Nombo-at-work-on-the-collections.png}
\caption{Porer Nombo at work on the collections (photograph by Elizabeth Bonshek, August 2009).}
\end{figure}

things in the ways our ancestors did them. Some
people no longer bother with the effort needed to
follow the correct ways of bringing children up: of
initiating them and teaching them how to carve
slit gongs, or drums, or decorations for men's
houses, or how to make skirts out of tree bark.
Rather, some people seem to think they should be
putting their effort into making themselves and
their children more like white people. We
continually say that it is fine to become educated
and take advantage of change, but people must
not forget the power and meaning of practising
things in the ways appropriate to the place we live
in. So it is very encouraging to be reminded of the
range and variety of everyday objects that are
made on the whole north coast of PNG, and to
know that other people are still making and using
these things, and that there are people who are still interested in them. This is very affirming for us. Seeing how many other people in PNG make similar things confirms our understanding of the value of our practices, and of the objects that form an integral part of them.

Very few people are now able to use kiramung, the slit-gong drums which we use for communicating over long distances. James has written about these drums (Leach 2002). People don’t know the different beats, and in a few years, after the old people who do know are dead, we will not have any use for the drums anymore. When James first arrived in 1993, we made a joke and said that kiramung are our telephone. But our joke is now working against us. That is, people think that with the spread of mobile telephones, kiramung won’t be needed any more, so they do not bother learning how to make or use them. But we know that there is much more to a slit gong than the ability to call someone at a distance. They are at the centre of a complex of kastom practices in which people co-operate in exchange, make and maintain marriage relations, learn knowledge of other practices such as artistic production or growing particular kinds of foods, and bring new valuables, such as spirit voices, into being. All this has nothing to do with what mobile telephones make possible.

It is good to know that many other people do still understand and maintain the importance of making objects of the kind the museum holds. A part of the feeling of affirmation we have here is the fact that the Museum thinks it worth looking after them, and thinks it worth asking us to come and add to the information about them. That helps us think about how to discuss the future in the village, and to make decisions about what is worth putting effort into. How can we look after the kinds of things we value in our own places in the face of the kinds of changes we are seeing? How are we to carry our kastom into the future? On the visit, we have had some new thoughts about how to carry kastom into the future.

Below are some of our thoughts expressed in the Melanesian pidgin of Papua New Guinea, as we do not speak English, nor do most of our kinsmen, or many others in PNG who would benefit from reading about our experiences here.

**Porer Nombo**


[We must not lose our kastoms. If we see new ways and want to forget kastom, stop exchanging valuables in marriage and child payments, forget how to make slit gongs, we will become fools. We must teach our children. They should have education, but learn kastom alongside schooling. I am always telling people, you must not think that by gaining education you can give up on kastom.]

**Pinbin Sisau**


[I have seen things ancestors made and I feel for them. They used their strength to make things in the past, they did not have good tools and suchlike, and I feel bad – I feel sad – for them. My fathers and grandfathers always said that in the past they only had very small gardens. And they did not have lots of children like we do now. Another thing is that in the time before pacification many people lost their lives in fighting and sorcery. When I see all these things in the museum it makes me remember these people and feel empathy with them.]

*Bipor sampela femili save pinis olgeta. Ol bei kitim olgeta: meri pikini in wantain, na femili save pinis. Mi save bipor ol man save bispela bikpela. Nau mipela ol liklik liklik man, ol'igat mausgras bilong

[Before, some families would die out altogether. They would all be killed, including women and children. I know that in the past men were older before they married. Now, we are all very young men, and as soon as we have beards, we marry. Before, people matured first, they had lots of knowledge about how to make all sorts of things, how to fight, how to make gardens, how to hunt and suchlike. They had enough strength. Now this is not the case. People are only busy making children.]


[We look to future generations of people and we are truly concerned. We see a large mine being built near to our villages. It is called the Ramu Nickel Project Mine at Basamuk Bay, and we have already seen many bad and destructive introductions. People went to make gardens, and were told they could not, that the land now belonged to the Prime Minister (Somare). There are new diseases such as AIDS that have come near to us now. So when we look at all these things from before, we also think of the future for our children and we are very troubled.]