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Field Notes: Day 18

NO ONE EVER SAID THAT THE LIFE of an anthropo-linguist with subspecialties in nutrition and botany would be an easy one. Still, it seems especially difficult to me this evening, in the third week of my field study with the Pelika'a of the Avadawa'an Plateau, as I kneel before my supper of *nulipawana* and *bisa*.

Nulipawana is cooked *nelepawan*, literally "ground root," a local variant of yam, heavily exploited by the Pelika'a when it is in season. It is filling and, lab analysis pending, I suspect that it affords several important nutrients not otherwise abundant in their habitat. But I am finding it binding.

I am also beginning to find the eating rituals a trial. I knew when I started this course of study, a head full of Franz Boas and Margaret Mead notwithstanding, that I would experience moments of cultural fatigue. But the eating rituals are still going to do me in, I think, this time. For example, these rituals oblige me to eat my *nulipawana* in a kneeling position, as if at prayer. This hurts my knees and puts my feet to sleep. To eat in any other posture, however, is considered sluttish, and excites the worst sort of comment from the locals.

At moments like these, I regret leaving my large and well appointed dining room, painted in cream and berry and furnished with glowing wood. But then I remember the people—family, colleagues, lovers—I have corralled in my dining room, and I return to my *nulipawana* with new purpose. I mash another morsel into a starchy ball and raise it into the air. "*Palia lele wakanda'au*," I say. "The cook, I praise her."

"*Palia nola esawakanda'au*," comes the cook's ritual reply. "The cook, I am praised."

After three weeks, I am making some progress with the language. I have long been familiar with the related Pelika'ona and Lokana dialects, spoken by a handful of surviving populations, widely dispersed across the

archipelago, mostly in the harshest environments. The Pelika'a and their relatives appear to have been an early population in the region, driven into, and marooned in, its least hospitable reaches by successive waves of migration of more successful or more aggressive groups. Now, the Pelika'a are scattered thinly across the terrain, separated from their closest relatives, surrounded by those peoples who displaced them.

My background in Pelika'ona and Lokana prepared me to some extent for Pelika'an. But wide variation in pronunciation and vocabulary, in directional and intentional signifiers, and something odd in the basic verb conjugations, are all particularly marked within the Pelika'an dialect. Three weeks into the field study I am still a neophyte, working to recognize a basic lexicon and master the pronunciation. From this perspective, the ritual refrains of the daily meal are a useful resource, repetition being key to language acquisition. But I have begun to worry that the phrases are archaic, maybe no more typical of current Pelika'an than the Lord's prayer is idiomatic English.

Nonetheless, I am slowly accumulating a working vocabulary. *Nelepawana*: "ground root"; *nulipawana*: "cooked ground root" including ground root prepared in any fashion for eating, and distinct from the living plant still rooted in the earth; *annulipawana*: "boiled ground root"; *dede-nulipawana*: "roasted ground root"; *bisa*: infusion of bridel leaf; *kokoloo*: "guinea fowl." All this will come in handy in my planned publication, "Cooking with the Pelika'a."

Publications like this fund my research, popularize anthropology, and arouse the contempt of my self-regarding colleagues. Dr. Amanda Prowse, for example, refers to my cookbooks as "the comix." My "Hearths Around the World" series includes full colour, step-by-step illustrations. The pictorial element is attractive to both National Geographic subscribers and cooks keen on experimentation, my chief markets according to my publisher's research. They also contain detailed and precise anthropological, horticultural, and nutritional information, and are written in clear, readable prose.

This is not enough to recommend them to my most severe critics, and they are an easy target for academic rivals looking to belittle my work. Finally even Dr. Tomas Czernik, my erstwhile lover, adduced these publications as evidence of intellectual frivolity, and claimed that they, and not the failure of his most recent grant application, the subsequent suspension of his ongoing field work, and his resultant feelings of professional castration, were the chief factors in his decision to end things with me.

He had avoided me for days, and when I finally ran him to earth in the Faculty Club, he solemnly informed me that, in his opinion, full colour

photography precluded scholarly rigour. This statement, rather than his failure to return my telephone calls, convinced me that it was over. I started to cry, great windy sobs, right there in the foyer. He found this unprofessional, too, and turned the conversation to theory.

"I see now that we are just too dissimilar in our intellectual positions," he said, scrupulously avoiding my eye. "Crucially I think you undermine the process of inquiry when you taint it with capital projects. I know why you have taken this route. Research is inexcusably neglected by the bean-counters, and I concede that, in the absence of reliable granting protocols, one might be driven to desperate measures, especially if one has only a weak understanding of or allegiance to the principles of academic freedom. The pressure to cop some funding by fair means or foul is constantly testing one's resolve. But I think the route you've chosen can only undermine the principles of unbiased inquiry." He adopted the look of searching empathy that he had so often used to good effect with me. "You are an attractive woman," he said, "and I enjoyed our time together. But we can't make a go of this." Then he ambled back to his table, where he rejoined Dr. Amanda Prowse.

Among the Pelika'a, nobody is left standing in the foyer while others enjoy their meal. Food is prepared and shared at a single hearth, and everyone gets a seat around the fire. The communal hearth is a rare bird in ethno-cultural terms, with a wide majority of peoples opting for a family hearth, the hearth itself becoming symbolic and even symptomatic of family life. But the Pelika'a haven't caught any environmental breaks, and in their arid, high altitude habitat, fuel is scarce. This scarcity makes the single hearth the economical choice, and this choice leads to communal cooking and communal feasting. The entire band gathers for hours around the meagre fire, eating, and saluting the food, and telling and singing stories of the Pelika'a.

At the heart of the meal is a series of ceremonial and communal thanks, graces, and gestures, which form the basis for a ritual conversation, part prayer, part banter. There is a thanks when the food is presented to the individual, a communal grace when everyone has his food in front of him, and ritual praises of the food, the cook, and the providers, with each mouthful of food. The meal begins with a senior member of the band offering the ritual thanks: "*Palia lele wakanda'ok*,"—"the cook, we praise her."

At least this is what I think it means. I have been puzzling over this conjugation, as the Pelika'a seemed to employ two different first person plurals. I have heard both *wakanda'ok*, "we praise her," and *wakanda'eka*, "we praise her," this last greeted with laughter from Leleualaha, the formidable

woman who prepared the first meal of *nulipawana* this season, and who was then tucking into her portion with a will. The two forms aren't used interchangeably, but I can't see what distinguishes them. When I asked what this meant, I was told, as near as I could make out, only that Leleualaha likes her own cooking.

After two weeks, my enthusiasm for *nulipawana* is long gone. I am nonetheless impressed by the comprehensive knowledge the Pelika'a have with respect to the nutritional possibilities of their habitat. The men are hunters, as is typically the case. I have been trying to infiltrate a hunting party, but have so far been unsuccessful. I can't tell if their disinclination to include me arises from a cultural norm, or if it is personal. Either way, my exclusion leaves a gap in my research. So I am working relentlessly to ingratiate myself with Elepekwanda'a, who seems to be the foremost of the hunters, and in the meantime, I monitor their preparations, equipment, and results.

Every day, and sometimes for three or four days at a time, they scour the countryside, either individually or in smallish groups, coming up empty frequently, but returning with a guinea fowl, a rabbit, or a rat often enough that most families get a little meat most days. Once in a while, a hunting party returns with a big kill. This is an occasion for orgiastic feasting, and everyone gets something from the carcass.

I observed this early in my sojourn because, on the day I arrived, a hunting party returned with a young *mattata*, a sort of small ungulate. When they appeared, the work of the day was abandoned. Runners set out to bring the foraging parties home, others gathered fuel, and the hunters began to dress the carcass. In due time, I was served a rich, messy, chunk from the shoulder, including meat, fat, bone, and marrow. I was curious to see how giblets and filet would be divided across age groups and genders. But the women were wrestling me into a kneeling posture while the food was being apportioned, and in the confusion and novelty of the scene, I didn't get a good look at anybody else's share.

This was a missed opportunity, as the filet versus organ debate is a hot topic in anthro-nutrition. Some of my colleagues argue that organ meat, rich in *recherché* vitamins and minerals, is nutritionally superior, and often therefore reserved for their personal use by the most powerful people in the hierarchy. Their slogan, as articulated by Thierry Beaulieu, is *cherchez les rognons*. In the other corner, weighing in at the top of the heavyweight scale, filet-loving scholars, chiefly American, led by Maas and Crenshaw, argue that in most cultures, muscle tissue is the clear favourite, and therefore usually reserved by the big chiefs for themselves and their inner circle. At a recent conference in Helsinki, Beaulieu dubbed this view "the ethnocentric

steakhouse,” and the resulting fracas is still sending shock waves through the field.

On this point, I note that Beaulieu, Maas, and Crenshaw all presuppose a hierarchical social structure. Although they identify different goods as the most desirable, they all assume that the individuals at the top of the social tree monopolize those goods, and exclude others from their enjoyment. Hierarchical and exclusionary behaviour is widely demonstrated across many cultures, but it is not therefore proven to be universal. The assumption that it is wilfully ignores those cultures in which sharing, rather than withholding, is the means to and the expression of standing in the community, with people simultaneously purchasing their neighbours' good opinion and exhausting their wealth in great communal feasts. Sharing remains a clear feature of the hunter-gatherer economy, as it is expressed in its sadly reduced modern forms by the San of southern Africa, the Aboriginal cultures of the North American plains, and the Pelika'a themselves.

More to the point, perhaps, it also occurs to me that people are mighty happy to get anything to eat at all, in many places in the world. Admittedly, there exist numerically insignificant but culturally influential colonies where one shows one's status by rejecting the food available. The Pelika'a of the Avadawa'an Plateau are not among these. My colleagues, on the other hand, are. Or so I deduce from their amusement at my attempts to initiate a weekly snack day in the Department Offices.

For a year, I tempted them with the foods of the world. I brought in *memsamara*, a kind of spiced, fried flat bread of the Marsh Arabs, or the baked patties of *sebet* seed and wild rice traditional to Bani, or more familiar fare like bannock, *churros*, salted nuts. Then at the end of the day, I collected the substantial leftovers and carried them home again.

Dr. Amanda Prowse established a tone of principled resistance. “I don't eat between meals,” she said, when I offered her *Daminyada* sour greens. We paused while she considered the further grounds of her disapproval. Then she resumed. “We have an issue of professional protocol here. In our day-to-day practice, we don't bring food into the Department Offices. When we have a reception for a visiting scholar, we book Dinsmore Hall or the Conservatory, and hire catering. This procedure is grounded in curatorial and public health considerations. Organic materials present our collections with a risk of microbial contamination. They also invite infestation by cockroaches and other pests. For these reasons, Building Services regulate against the importation of foodstuffs. You may wish to verify this, but you will find that we have a definite rule about it.”

Hurt feelings pass, but my admiration abides for the flexibility of Dr. Amanda Prowse's "we," a pronoun capable of infinite shades of meaning. Here, it had the force of "you" in an imperative mood, but also a smattering of the traditional third person plural, with all the ambiguity inherent to that pronoun. Was this definite rule possessed by those who articulated it or those upon whom it was imposed, for example. Theoretically, the two groups were identical, but in practice I wasn't sure this was the case. And did Dr. Prowse's "we" include me or not? My relation to the group remained shadowy and undelineated, a matter of guess work and faith. I call this a dazzling linguistic performance.

The Pelika'a, too, have rules guiding the collection and distribution of food, and I am having some difficulties working out their precise logic also. When I first caught up with the band, they were encamped on a dry riverbed, where a thorny, undistinguished shrub produced nuts that were ripe and delicious. For five days, these formed the bulk of our diet. Then, for reasons I couldn't make out, and, as far as I could tell without much discussion, we abandoned that still abundant resource and hiked to this place, where *nelepawan* is relatively plentiful, the tubers large and succulent, definitely repaying the effort required to excavate them from the hard, dry earth and tote them back to base camp. Every day, the women and children make foraging trips, covering on average five or six miles, varying their route from day to day, concentrating their search on *nelepawan* but exploiting other discoveries opportunistically.

I trot along after them, more or less tolerated. The women carry digging sticks and skin bags. I carry a notebook and pencil. The women school the children as they forage, naming the objects in the world around them, and telling stories about the origin and properties of the plants, animals, and geological formations. The children count as they gather, or play naming games, the Pelika'an equivalent of "I spy." I listen avidly, getting maybe one word in five, maybe a bit more now, and add to my notes when I can.

Once my notes are up to date, I pitch in with the gathering. Lelealaha takes me in hand, and shows me the object of search, a particular leaf or nut, or a shoot barely visible in the hard earth. I have learned to recognize the particular coloration of a ripe nut and the texture of its shell, or the resistance offered by a ripe loba berry before it falls into the hand, or the amount of force needed to drive a fire-hardened digging stick into the ground by the tubers of a suitable *nelepawan*. All this finds its way into my notes, and my publications.

I don't discuss this research strategy with my colleagues. Participation is iffy in academic circles. In particular, the Prime Directive school,

now massively in vogue, regards all participation as pollution. They have a point. When I pick a peck of loba berries, Leleualaha coaches me, and her own labour is compromised. The amount of food gathered that day varies from the norm, reflecting not the group's usual success, but its achievement when the wild card of my labour is factored in. Anthropology practiced in this fashion exemplifies the truism that the observer changes the thing observed.

But I persist. Partly, I am compelled by my own code of manners. It's just rude to watch others work and not lend a hand, especially when one fully intends to share in the product of their labour. I also gain knowledge from experience. Watching Leleualaha wield a digging stick showed me the optimal practice; trying it out on my own taught me the hard labour and high skill level required for success.

But as the days pass and I ruefully survey the events of this year, I realize that I am enacting a lingering resentment against Dr. Amanda Prowse with every thrust of the digging stick. She has aligned herself with the most extreme of the Prime Directivists, and in her recent Harold Markham Memorial Lectures, soon to be published in *festschrift*, she recommended that the anthropologist behave on the scene like a spectre, a silent witness, whose presence is virtually indiscernible to those under observation. In her bravura final lecture, she questioned the value of field work altogether and proposed a new discipline she called "the anthropology of the mind," in which the pure theorist sits in her office and imagines civilizations. Her audience found her ideas bold and innovative. I think she doesn't like to poop behind a tree.

Occupied with such reflections, I sometimes don't notice when a general shift in activity occurs. Interestingly, although they are a highly oral culture, talking through the foraging, the meal, and late into the night, the Pelika'a seem rarely to discuss the undertaking of the moment. This may reflect a cultural bias, a belief system that involves respectful silence on subjects of importance, as the hunters of the Kalahari do not speak of the animal they track for fear their attention will lend it strength. Alternately, their silence may indicate only their familiarity and ease with the task at hand, and the fact that work so routine as gathering, grinding, or sharpening needs no comment. But even major undertakings, like our migration from the nut trees to the fields of nelepawan, stimulate no discussion, the group simply recognizing that the moment has come.

So, at the end of the gathering day, a general feeling seems to arise, that the harvest is sufficient, that other chores, primarily food preparation, but also fuel-gathering, tool-making, and so on, remain to be done. Per-

haps because of my ignorance of the culture, perhaps because of an innate insensitivity to the collective mind, I am oblivious to such group feelings.

So this afternoon, already afflicted with a growing anomie, I was stumping furiously and without much success at the roots of a stubborn nelepawan, when Leleualaha touched my arm. "Marala'an," she said. This is how my name comes out in Pelika'an. "Marala'an, *sonista molent'eka*." I looked up to see the group gathering at the top of the small knoll in whose lee we had been working.

Sonista molent'eka means "We turn towards the hearth." *Soni-* is "hearth" but also by extension "the community," "union," and "a conjoining." The noun encompasses the preposition in the suffix *-sta*, which encodes the concept of "to," "towards," "at," "of," "in," "a part of." But the *-eka* verb ending continued to puzzle me. I tried to sort it out while I dusted myself down. "*Sonista mola'ant'ok*?" I asked, the vowel change in the root establishing the interrogative mood of the verb.

Leleualaha gave me a stony look. Her young daughter, an energetic and scatterbrained child then arranging twigs in the dirt at her feet, looked up at us. "*Sonista Leleualaha mola'ant'ena asnas*?" she asked her mother, in some perplexity. I had to replay this slowly, finally piecing her question together as: "Are you Leleualaha not turning to the hearth?" *Asnas* functions as a negative when it follows the verb, an intensifier when it precedes it.

Leleualaha, in the meantime, made an exasperated gesture, and responded shortly, "*Sonista asnas molent'au*," "I certainly am returning to the hearth." She took her daughter's hand and marched towards the others, while I gathered my things and followed.

Thinking back over this exchange, so irritating to Leleualaha, I wonder if I see a possible distinction between the *-eka* and *-ok* conjugations. In asking, "*Sonista mola'ant'ok*?" I apparently signalled that Leleualaha would not be returning to the camp. It occurs to me that the *-ok* conjugation might function as a "we-exclusive," indicating "I the speaker, [another or some others], but not you, my interlocutor." Asking Leleualaha, "*Sonista mola'ant'ok*?" I might have asked if I and the others, but not Leleualaha herself, were going back to camp, a really spectacular faux pas, given my status as tolerated guest, against hers of tribal lynchpin.

The *-eka* conjugation, on the other hand, might be inclusive, indicating "I the speaker, [another or some others], and you, the person whom I address." Hence the mild hilarity at the eldest's "*Palia lele wakanda'eka*," of the first meal. It meant, "I the speaker, [another or some others], and you, Leleualaha, to whom I am speaking, all praise the cook, Leleualaha." This could also be translated, roughly, as "Leleualaha is mighty impressed with herself."

Such fine tuning among the pronominal persons is neither a difficult nor an uncommon linguistic strategy. But I am struck by the efficiency, not to say the ruthlessness, of this particular specification. There is no ambiguity among the Pelika'a, no shuffling of the feet and wondering if one is included in a carelessly bandied "we." One is either a part of the action, or not, included without doubt, or excluded without elaboration. Contrast this with the sneaking ambiguity of Dr. Prowse's formulation and one sees clarity, specificity, honesty. The Pelika'a are a people who call a spade a spade.

I need to test this reading of the *-ekal -ok* distinction, and it occurs to me that I have at hand a fine way to do so. I have been trying to wangle an invitation to the hunt, but have so far been denied. I wonder if I have failed clearly to describe my wish to accompany the hunters, lacking as I did an understanding of the we-inclusive form.

Sure enough, my notes indicate that I have asked Elepekwanda'a, "*Albada mada'ar'ena?*" meaning, "Do you hunt tomorrow?" and he replied in the affirmative. I have asked him, "*Albada mada'ar'au?*" meaning "Do I hunt tomorrow?" and he looked at me and shrugged, as if to say, "Do what you like. It's no concern of mine." And I have asked him, "*Albada mada'ar'ok?*" intending to put the question: "Might we [I and you and some others] hunt tomorrow?" And he had looked indignant, as well he might, if in fact I had actually asked him if I and some others and not Elepekwanda'a himself might hunt.

Now I might be clear. "*Albada mada'ar'eka?*" I can ask him: "Tomorrow we [inclusive] hunt?" I do not know how he will answer, but if my understanding is correct, I should get a definite aye or nay. I feel nostalgic for ambiguity already, and the little shade of hope it allows. Asking to be included is risky. But it is necessary. It is irresistible.