

Indigenous oral traditions and chronology

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A persistent problem at the interface of academic history and Indigenous oral traditions is the question of chronology, which many would see as critical to the commensurability of these two broad ways of communicating about the past. Claims that oral traditions accurately encode experiences of cataclysmic events such as sea level rise or volcanic eruptions that date to thousands of years in the past are met with disbelief by academic historians such as Africanist David Henige. Henige has recently argued for a maximum limit of about 150 years for accurate oral transmission of memories of events, prior to their documentation on paper. Two case studies from the Pacific, both relating to volcanic eruptions, provide access to some of the mechanisms which enable long-term transmission by societies with profoundly different historicities, or regimes of historical consciousness. The first considers extant traditions amongst Huli-speakers of central New Guinea, which describe a process of cosmological elaboration following the ash fall from a distant mid-seventeenth century eruption. The second relates to a fifteenth-century eruption in central Vanuatu, charting both the causes and consequences of the destruction of the island of Kuwae and the subsequent resettlement of its remnants. Both traditions date well prior to Henige's chronological limit, and both have been recorded almost continuously since first contact with outsiders. Instead of testing such traditions for their accuracy, viewed uniquely from the perspectives of a universalising chronology and historicity, we need to appreciate them on their own terms and understand what it is that their narrators seek to communicate.