

**Virtually Initiated:  
A Personal Account of ASAONET's Impact on the Life of a Young Anthropologist\***  
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**In the Beginning Was the Nerd**

ASAO moved into the world of online communication as early as 1992. The anarchic ethos that characterized the internet in its infancy must have seemed a perfect fit for the egalitarian spirit of the ASAO. Or at least, so I assume. Because I was not there when it happened. But Michael Lieber definitely was. And it is from him that I have acquired the ASAONET founding myth, neatly interwoven with the wonders of technological evolution (Lieber, personal communication, February 6, 2018).<sup>1</sup> My just slightly edited version of Mike's story, smoothed by time and adapted to suit an imagined audience, as befits every traded story, goes like this:

In 1992, personal computers were becoming affordable for all but us academic commoners. Sending instant messages on a mainframe was a possibility, although that was considered showing off. What attracted us at the university was listserv discussion groups. As usual, I came to this somewhat later than my tekkie colleagues. My first listserv experience was Anthro-L, a discussion group hosted by a grad student in the SUNY system. Anthro-L was a zoo—everything from undergrads to young professionals like Monty Lindstrom and Dan Jorgensen. The younger folks spent most of their time insulting one another in interminable flame wars, a game I enjoyed initially but quickly soured on. It was Monty and Dan who taught me how to conduct myself and to manage informal but serious online conversation. I left Anthro-L to start an Oceanic discussion group. I chose the ASAO part because of the Oceanic focus and, more importantly, the tone and pace of conversation that I hoped would replicate written versions of how we talk in ASAO sessions. The NET part just presented itself, like remembering to take your keys when you leave the house.

The process of establishing a listserv is straightforward, so getting ASAONET up and running took about an hour. Figuring out how to encourage discussion without temper tantrums took a lot longer. Dan Jorgensen and I exchanged a lot of emails about managing discussion parameters without patronizing discussants or

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intruding into their conversations. What we eventually settled on was a Statement of Being that was a modification of the Anthro-L model. This is a one-page statement of the goals, boundaries, and rules of engagement of discussion. As we were formulating the Statement of Being, I asked the ASAO Board of Directors to incorporate ASAONET as a sanctioned voice of ASAO like the *Newsletter*. The Board agreed with the understanding that it is the Board that is responsible for ASAONET policy.

By 1994, we were having lively discussions and our first flame war. That was inevitable, I suppose, since subscription was so simple, and the list was unmoderated. Someone from Anthro-L, well known there as uninformed and bellicose, subscribed and quickly found people to attack. I used my position as list owner to delete him from the list, notifying subscribers that I had done so to communicate that people's words have consequences. The reaction was immediate, vociferous, and public—how could I breach the equality that characterizes ASAO discussion? Since I always listen to my betters, I reversed my decision, and this man returned to ASAONET, immediately deploying his trusty flamethrower. I was quickly inundated by emails—private emails—begging, suggesting, requesting, or demanding that I rid ASAONET of this deplorable scourge. I emphasize “private” because who among us would publicly declare our precious equality to be anything other than mindful? Never one to say “I told you so,” I waited until the flames were intolerable and then got rid of him again. Strange as it sounds, however, he knew it was time, and we said rather sad good-byes and good lucks. It was right after this that Dan Jorgensen and I did the final revision of the Statement of Being, putting it on the NET with Board approval.

The list grew from 25 to 200 within the first year. It has remained at between 950 and 990 subscribers since 2006. The numbers are deceptive because subscribers change their email addresses and rarely alert me. A few subscribers have multiple email addresses. A very few, like Torben Monberg and Jane Goodale, have passed away. They were so important to the early development of ASAO and to me that I cannot bring myself to purge them from the list. Maybe the person who succeeds me will do it. I hope not.

Such was the foundation of ASAONET. And this was what met me when I joined the listserv upon returning from my first fieldwork in Vanuatu in 1997. It would still be another eight years before I attended a proper ASAO meeting, on Kaua‘i in 2005. In other words, I had plenty of time to furnish the skeletal digital personae behind the ASAONET exchanges with the overload of flesh and blood that flows from a hair-trigger imagination. The tale that follows will be dedicated to this highly idiosyncratic process. It does not make even the faintest claim to be

representative, let alone generic; and it will be riddled with inaccuracies and possibly even outright errors, dependent as it is on the unfortunate combination of a flawed memory and unfailing indolence, and being read through the cultural lens of a Norwegian who is at least as hierarchy-averse as those early members of ASAONET. In short, you are at the mercy of the proverbial unreliable narrator, depending, as this auto-ethnographer is, on an equally unreliable informant. So in this case, the historians' adage regarding how absence of evidence is not evidence of absence needs a twist: The presence of a history does not historical presence make. And since any claim to my being a trustworthy storyteller has been shattered right at the outset, should anyone who recognizes episodes or incidents find that these are misrepresented, their objections will most certainly be justified. With those caveats in place, I invite you to join my take on ASAONET, and the role it has played, and continues to play, in my personal career and academic development.

### **Peeping Thor**

In *Cosmologies in the Making* (1989), Fredrik Barth argued that the differences between the various male ritual systems in the Ok Mountains are due to didactic choices made by initiators adjusting to the perceived requirements and learning challenges of specific groups of initiands. Communication-wise, what matters are the outward aspects—the transformation of a set of relatively younger men into a group of relatively older—more than the transmission of an accurately replicated fixed set of dogmas and procedures. For me, as I believe has been the case for many other ASAONET-curious individuals over the years, initiation into this particular academic community felt like peeping through the cracks or eavesdropping on fragments of an ongoing conversation. There were precious few means to aid in the contextualization and

interpretation of the postings: There was no self-conscious presentation of identity and key values, no ASAONET 101, or *The web of friendship among the ASAO, or Schism and Continuity in an Online Society*, save for some general phrases on the value of courtesy and a cautious reminder of how the absence of facial expressions and other visual modifiers impacts on how postings are interpreted.<sup>2</sup> The newly invented emoticons might have come in handy, in order to avoid the kind of misunderstandings that follow from clashes of civilizations of wit. But they seemed as inadmissible then as they are now. People of the Word should not defile themselves with popular icons. Let your communication be Yea, yea; Nay, nay—or at least as unequivocal.

In short, we were very much left to our own devices of categorization. An analogy to the initial phases of fieldwork might seem far-fetched, but to a newcomer, ASAONET undoubtedly left much space for misinterpretations, in the attempts to distill this particular community's ethos and doxa from an excess of information. And I readily admit that the first few months of peeping left me none the wiser. I had been encouraged to sign up by a fellow Oceanist at the University of Oslo's anthropology department, who suggested that joining the listserv might compensate for the relative absence of a regional research community on campus. Like most advice I got during those early stages of thesis writing, it seemed well intended but flawed, since the listserv discussions went way above my head. Whenever I signed in with the Pine program that was the University of Oslo's email client of choice, ASAONET messages filled the inbox. I would of course read them carefully—after all, Mark Zuckerberg only perfected procrastination, he did not invent it—but I lacked the knowledge of the individual contributors' ethnographic backgrounds, the details of which seemed to be taken more or less for granted by the intended audience. If I had been better versed in the regional literature, I would of course have been able to connect the dots and link highly specific empirical references to personal names and subregional issues. But

my lack of shared references with the Oceanist community exacerbated a general feeling, from trying to find an analytic angle to my fieldwork material, of having stumbled into something I was not cut out for. Offline gloom met online doom: I was no Oceanist, and I doubted I would ever become one.

But I stuck to my new manner of thesis adjournment, accessing Pine and checking the inbox for messages at far too regular intervals. As time passed, I equipped the names of the more-frequent contributors with imagined personalities, preferences, and temperaments. And after a while, a fairly distinct and of course highly imperfect picture of a social structure emerged. It had its age-sets and old friendships, its conflicting pulls of subregional fractions vs national communities, its feuds and social fault lines, its doxa and taboos (visible only when violated, as in a few memorable “unintended reply all”-episodes). In short, it had most of the workings of your average community.

Apart from the fact that this was not anyone’s average community. Even from my position in the shadows, listening in on, or rather reading, the conversations was more than just a welcome distraction: It had become a highly rewarding undertaking in its own right. ASAONET provided clues about scholarly concerns, differences between national academic regimes, theoretical novelties and their inevitable frictions, and comments on current affairs that in some way had an impact on Pacific-related issues. Every once in a while, a trifle would trigger a trend, the phenomenon we in current social media parlance refer to as “going viral.” The most memorable of these was the 1998 Spam haiku epidemic: Some were elegant and funny, some were simply funny, while a few fell short on both genre and wit. But the sheer range of participation showed that the threshold for taking part was just as low as it ought to be in order for this to be a functional platform for scholarly exchange. On top of this, the listserv featured

this marvelous receptivity to perspectives from other disciplines that I later would recognize as a distinguishing trait of Pacific research. To me, a student at a traditional European one-field social anthropology department, this was an eye-opener with lasting benefits. Put shortly, my new way of passing the time had serendipitously proven remarkably rewarding. I had quite simply learned a whole lot. It affected my thesis work immensely because, to a novice, the invaluable sense of being somewhat up-to-date on contemporary topics and concerns liberates the mind from the stifling caveats of “have-not-read’s” and thus “dare-not-engage’s,” while making writing so much more enjoyable. And I am most likely retrospectively flattering myself here, but I believe I remember thinking that this was what a specialist forum ought to look like. Here we had a safe space for Oceanist geeks, where they (I was still very far from thinking “we”) weren’t required to adapt to the knowledge level of department colleagues, students, or other passersby. It was a vibrant society of people with special interests that bound them together, and ASAONET was their square for living out these interests, while I was a most fortunate fly on the wall, perfectly satisfied with being the unnoticed observer, who caught ever more of the references and even (oh, joyful integration!) some of the puns.

### **Dipping My Toe In**

But as I had come to realize during fieldwork, the distinction between observation and participation is clear-cut in terminology only. Every once in a while, the discussion would touch upon issues that related to my field experiences or the two topics that I felt familiar with, which were secret male cults and Anglicanism. Whenever this happened, an “if I were to contribute, what would I have to say about this?” crossed my mind, and at times it even lingered. Actually entering the discussion was all but unthinkable. However, just this sense of knowing something

that might be of interest to this group of specialists took the edge off the imposter syndrome: Maybe I was not entirely out of my depth after all?

Then one day, the call from the deep end became unbearably insistent. A question appeared from historical linguist Frantisek Lichtenberk, seeking contemporary information on the boundary between betel chewing and kava drinking. I spent the rest of the day in hand-wringing consternation. Should I reply? I realized that I ought to. After all, my fieldwork had taken place on Mota in the Banks Islands, more or less exactly at the dividing line between betel and kava—or, at least, so people had told me, including a couple who had lived in the Torres Islands, which, according to everyone in the kava-loving Banks, was betel country. I knew chances were slim that Lichtenberk would find updated information from other sources: No ethnographic studies had been conducted in these islands since missionary anthropologists Walter J. Durrad and Charles E. Fox in the 1920s, while standing advice from the Vanuatu Cultural Council, the national body that oversees cultural research, and information given at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre depicted these remote islands as acculturated due to Christian influence, directing prospective researchers' attention elsewhere. After another day of unproductive wavering, ASAONET had still not provided Lichtenberk with a response that covered what I thought I knew or, much more importantly, contradicted what I had to say. So I finally decided to send him an email (off-list, of course), weighing my words as though I had been writing my own epitaph. After sending it, I logged into Pine even more frequently than usual, heart hammering, waiting for a response. And having checked for the umpteenth time, there it was—a reply! To my great relief, it was a most generous and grateful one, thanking me for what according to him was a highly significant piece of data that complemented the greater picture. He asked me whether he could use the information for an article he was writing, referring to my email as

“personal communication.” I sprang from my chair in the students’ writing room: My very first quotation! Of the very lowest order, surely, but nonetheless, it counted. I was soundlessly jubilant. My peer group had come to that stage in thesis writing where a fellow’s joy is taken as scorn, provocation, or even a threat, so I knew I could not share the thrill over this whiff of academic progress with anyone but my closest comrades. Since they were not around, I chose to knock on the door of one of my professors, who I had reason to suspect would recognize what a milestone moment this was. And the socially savvy professor delivered: “Congratulations, Thorgeir! There’s your take-off.”

### **ASAONET Live at the ESfO**

In June 1999, I passed two more milestones. One was submitting my master’s thesis, and the other was signing up to present a paper at an international conference, the biennial meeting of the European Society for Oceanists (ESfO) in Leiden. I was supposed to go there in the company of my friend and mentor, Arve Sørum, who had directed my attention to Melanesia and Vanuatu in the first place and had been a source of crucial inspiration and subtle encouragement throughout. I very much looked forward to spending time with him there, to receiving feedback on my presentation, and last, but not least, to being introduced to the many friends this amicable professor had made during his almost thirty years as a PNG scholar and Oceanist. So it was a great disappointment when he told me over a coffee that he had to pull out, with the conference just a couple of weeks away. I had received funding months ago, the fare was paid and the hotel was booked—but, judging by the early version of the program and the list of paper givers, I would not know a single soul there. Nor could I rely on the session to provide me with openings for socializing, since we had been scheduled for the final day. Arve did his best to compensate



by handing me tips on a number of the names that featured in the program. Mark Mosko appeared in the line-up for the session I was in (which was one of the first on Christianity in the Pacific, a topic that for the next decade would become a staple of Pacific conferences), and Arve lent me his copy of Mark's 1985 monograph, *Quadripartite Structures*, in order for us to have something to discuss in case I got the chance to talk to him. As it turned out, Mark did not make it to Leiden either—which was just as well, since I had only struggled my way through a quarter of the book, and as starting points for conversations go, reference to a book that one party wrote and the other failed to finish rarely cuts the mustard. Arve's more tangible advice concerned who might be liable to enjoy a couple of beers with the lonely student of an old friend and colleague. And thus endowed, off I went.

I met a couple of Arve's acquaintances during the drinks reception that followed the opening event, but none of those he mentioned who were amenable to sitting and drinking with me. Fortunately, I came across Henri Claessen, whose work I had read earlier and who recently had retired from his chair at Leiden, and he proved to be the perfect company during those first hours of scholarly socializing. This convinced me that there was room even for a lonesome student who fell miserably, Scandinavially short on the particular blend of small-talk and show-off that was a required skill for events like the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meetings and could be easily adapted to suit this smaller format. I went to bed, animated from both beers and conversation, knowing that the following day would offer new opportunities. Right before I left for Leiden, Arve had equipped me with a final key, namely the precious opening gifts of greetings from a mutual friend in Oslo to Dan Jorgensen and Don Gardner, with whom he had undertaken environmental impact assessment in Papua New Guinea. Dan and Don were people I felt like I already knew, through their contributions to ASAONET, and I sought

them out after a session they were both involved in. Charitably responding to the clumsy approach of an insecure junior, they welcomed my greetings in the most generous fashion. They were off to meet someone and asked me to join them later in the afternoon—but I was too proud to take them up on the offer. What an idiot! I could, and should, have kicked myself. Instead, I spent the evening alone in a pub, scrutinizing alternately myself and the program. In light of the damning assessment of the former, it was strangely comforting to spot some familiar ASAONET names in the latter. The following morning, it became obvious that I was not the only one who settled their schedule this way. The pattern was quite clear: The more frequent contributors to ASAONET also drew the greatest crowd. This made my session hopping seem strangely coordinated with that of many others. And the more outspoken and witty their listserv personae were, the bigger the turnout. For Grant McCall's paper, during which he relabeled Island Studies as "Nissology," it was standing room only. When his presentation was over, I joined a wave of attendees who unceremoniously left the session—ASAONET readers the lot of them, it seemed fair to presume, since most of us ventured off in different directions but ended up in more or less the same place, at a new session featuring another household name from ASAONET.

### **Flesh to the Bones!**

It would take another six years, a second stint of long-term fieldwork, and numerous conference attendances, before I finally got to see ASAO incarnate on Kaua'i in 2005. The first couple of days went by in a jetlag haze, making me miss the welcome luncheon for new attendees. So the only thing I remember clearly is what to me became the very token of initiation, namely when newcomers during the opening plenary were asked to stand up and state our name, academic affiliation, and fieldwork location. A number of us novices turned out to be working in Vanuatu,

since the meeting featured the first-ever session dedicated to research in Vanuatu, and around twenty of us had made it to Kaua‘i. Due to a moratorium on cultural research that had been in place from 1985 until 1994, there was almost an age-set feel to the gathering, where we, the younglings of eight different nationalities, soon found each other. So after the jetlag haze had lifted, Vanuatu toktok took its place. Evening beers by a beachside bonfire was a fine compensation for the missed luncheon, while during daytime our collective pool of acquaintances was accessible to us all, expanding our respective networks almost exponentially—including many of those who up until now had been digital notabilities from ASAONET. So for the rest of the meeting, I could pamper myself with the generous scholarly curiosity of people I had come to respect and admire.

What a treat! And what an experience to contrast with my experiences of the overly hierarchy-conscious AAA conference! It is easier to reconcile being snubbed when you can blame it on a specific structure rather than personal shortcomings. “I know something worth knowing—and I know this because I’ve been to the ASAO.” Another world is indeed possible, also as far as anthropology conferences go. And whenever I meet up with fellow ASAOers during the AAA, either in the delightfully informal ASAO party or over the even more informal beers that so pleasantly many ASAOers find the time to enjoy, we never fail to compare the two structures, congratulating ourselves on our good fortune and the opportunity to assess the giant through the prism of the dwarf.

### **Twenty-Five, Going on Fifty? A Personal Plea**

For some reason, I have never submitted an opening ASAONET posting myself, apart from a note on Fredrik Barth’s passing in 2016. But my first advice to Pacific-curious students is to join

ASAONET. Fortunately, they are less timid than I am and have soon engaged in responses, with several even starting discussions, beating me by twenty years and running. Like them, I thank ASAONET for finding my way into this society of pleasant others. They will have their stories. I have given you mine.

And since I have benefited so greatly from ASAONET, I of course also have a strong desire to ensure that ASAONET, now established for a quarter of a century, continues to be the gift that keeps on giving, by strengthening the community of Oceanist scholars. So, just as the above has been my strictly personal story of integration, I will in the following in equally idiosyncratic fashion point out one of the challenges to Oceanic anthropology's impact beyond our intellectual shores that I see from more than two decades of following ASAONET exchanges at a distance. It is informed by my experiences as a publicly fairly visible anthropologist in Norway, and it concerns how we handle the legacy of Pacific anthropology's colonial past.<sup>3</sup> Because the works of our disciplinary ancestors have left their mark and continue to draw popular attention. This remains a crucial asset in a time when attention is a scarce resource, an asset that is the envy of most other regionally oriented anthropologists also because our disciplinary hegemony is rarely challenged: Cultural anthropologists, and culturally minded historians and archaeologists, are the go-to people for most matters Pacific.

Judging by numerous ASAONET exchanges over the years, this legacy is rarely counted as a privilege. Quite to the contrary, it seems to make us ill at ease. The discussions that followed the ASAONET intervention of *Survival* director Stephen Corry in 2017 is a case in point. The way we leapt at him and his organization's goals was out of our collegial character. More disturbingly, I believe our collective charge made us miss his highly pertinent point—that if we, the experts, shy away from engaging the media and other public venues, we leave the space open

for those of a less-inhibited disposition. Fear of reductionist essentialisms is understandable and in a perfect world commendable. We must nevertheless find a way to overcome this fear. Otherwise, such *touche pas* attitudes will leave the field open to, precisely, reductionist essentialists who are not burdened by “ethnographic refusal” and other explicable but nonetheless intellectually indefensible policies. It would leave us with little but a morally spotless record. This is poor solace when we are no longer asked our opinion or sought for our expertise, since we have communicated our unwillingness, or proven our inability, to adapt our knowledge to the level of the knowledge seeker and have chosen fastidiousness over influence. Then we will not only have forfeited on the scholarly obligation of conveying research insights to a wider public; we will also have made Pacific anthropology less applicable and consequently sidelined ourselves and, worse, our younger Oceanist colleagues, who will have an even harder time finding permanent positions, either inside academia or in the wider world. Our fear of cementing the Pacific’s status as one of the “savage slots” has, ironically, done exactly this, by leaving the field open to people who are not weighed down by an inflexible scholarly ethos. We need to systematically address the way we conceive “popularization” and “public engagements” in order to demystify what this entails. It is not essentially different from our time-honored ways of conveying insights, namely the trade-off that is intrinsic to every act of representation, which involves the scaling down of complexity from real-life engagements to fieldnotes to ethnographic text to analytic concepts to theoretical debates. It is both in our interest and in the ASAONET character to pedagogically challenge insufficient or derailed representations of the Pacific rather than lash out at perpetrators, real and imagined. And even though I know that ASAO members have been grossly mistreated by someone like Jared Diamond, I still recognize how his writing has drawn attention, and consequently students and research money, to matters

Pacific. I must admit that I sometimes find myself suspecting that our taking down of Diamond and other “popularizers” is informed not only by scholarly meticulousness, taking issue with ethnographic inaccuracy, but also by a measure of intellectual parsimony. Attention is a pedagogical opening that should be treasured, no matter what kindled the interest in the first place. This is where we will do well to take our cue from the spirit of ASAONET, which is even greater than the considerable sum of its parts.

## Notes

1. I am very grateful to Mike for so generously sharing this account, with the tongue-in-cheek title “ASAONET: The Untold Story for Those Who Can’t Afford the *National Enquirer*.” His expressed wish not to be acknowledged as the source is of course blatantly disregarded—if for no other reason than a rare bout of dedication to historical accuracy. I am also very grateful to Jan Rensel and Alan Howard for organizing what turned out be a fascinating series of sessions (much to my surprise, I embarrassingly admit). Far from being parochial, the ASAO stories showed clearly how the evolution of the organization was tightly interwoven with epistemological developments within our discipline, both theoretically and politically. A special thanks to Jan for her encouragement and generous advice.

2. See the ASAO website page about ASAONET: <https://www.asao.org/asao-listserv.html>

3. I have made some more general points on this topic in two recent contributions (Kolshus 2017, 2018).

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