LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION & CONSERVATION

Vol. 4 (2010), pp. 22-33
http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/ldc/
http://hdl.handle.net/10125/4465

Trust me, I am a linguist! Building partnership in the field

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Although language documentation calls for linguists, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and other scholars to work with each other, as well as with language communities, graduate students in linguistics often miss out on both parts of this enterprise: they have little opportunity to work on such teams and spend most of their fieldwork as "lone wolves." In this paper, we reflect on our experiences as first-time fieldworkers and discuss how we managed to rid ourselves of the "lone wolf" label. We first discuss some of the challenges we faced in gaining the support of the communities we worked with. We then isolate the factors which facilitated our social integration and the benefits this had on our overall documentation projects.

1. INTRODUCTION. The aim of documentary linguistics is, according to Himmelmann (1998:166), "to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community."[1] Given the daunting scope of this task, the consensus is that scholars (linguists, ethnographers, anthropologists, etc.) working with a single language community need to collaborate in order for a documentary project to be as comprehensive as possible.[2] In addition to following best practice in documentary linguistics (see for instance Crowley 2007:34 and Bowern 2008:7–9, among others), scholars need to work with language communities to establish a partnership beneficial to both parties. It seems, however, that the current practice of student researchers falls short on both parts of this collaborative endeavor.

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[1] Parts of this paper were presented at the First International Conference on Language Documentation and Conservation (ICLDC), March 12–14, 2009, Honolulu, Hawai'i. We would like to thank Piet Lincoln for his invaluable help on an earlier draft, as well as two anonymous reviewers and Ken Rehg for their insightful comments and suggestions. All remaining errors are our own. Note that throughout this paper, "we" refers to both authors, "VG" to Valérie Guérin, and "SL" to Sébastien Lacrampe.

[2] According to a reviewer, Himmelmann's definition of documentary linguistics is problematic, because it does not accurately define what it means to "provide a comprehensive record" of "a given speech community." Although we agree with the reviewer on this issue, revisiting the goals of documentary linguistics is beyond the scope of this paper.

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E-ISSN 1934-5275

From a student's point of view, there are at least two difficulties associated with adopting a collaborative approach to documentary linguistics. The first is that graduate students do not, in general, participate in large language documentation projects involving several scholars: they are "lone wolf" linguists, as Austin (2005) puts it. Although there exist projects involving both students and established researchers—such as the *Iquito Language Documentation Project* in Peru, or the *Vüres-Vera'a DOBES Project* in Vanuatu—these are exceptions rather than the rule. The second problem is that student fieldworkers rarely seem to attempt to establish projects valuable for language communities. Alone in the field and with limited time, students often start their research with the completion of their degrees as the primary goal.

> My initial aims, before I went to visit this community for the first time, were to write a descriptive grammar of the language for my Ph.D. thesis (Terrill 2002:210).

> I thus departed for Nigeria with the immediate goal of studying the perception of foreign sounds and nativization of Hausa borrowing in Nupe and Gwari (Hyman 2001:23).

As a result, language communities often perceive fieldworkers as seeking "one-way" relationships meant only to fulfill their own academic goals rather than collaboration benefiting the language community as well.

Reflecting on our own experiences as first-time fieldworkers, we recall that this is also how we started out our projects: individuals working towards our degree requirements with small subsets of speakers. Describing the speech of a single or a few speakers seemed enough for us to achieve our targeted academic goals.[3] We soon discovered, however, that the one-way relationships we had established had tagged us as "social lone-wolves," that is, outsiders with little interaction with the community, which made it hard to find speakers interested in our projects. How we broke through this social barrier is the main theme of this paper. In §2, we briefly present the language communities we worked with. In §3, we describe some of the challenges we faced as "lone-wolf" student fieldworkers. These challenges, we believe, are likely to be faced by many apprentice fieldworkers. In §4, we identify the factors that helped us to evolve from outsiders to socially integrated members of the community, and the benefits this had on our projects.

2. THE LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES. We both worked in Vanuatu. VG's project took place on Mavea Island, located to the east of Espiritu Santo in northern Vanuatu, and SL's project on Lelepa Island, off the west coast of Efate, in central Vanuatu.

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[3] See Dimmendaal 2001:60 and Everett 2001:174–75 for problems associated with this practice.

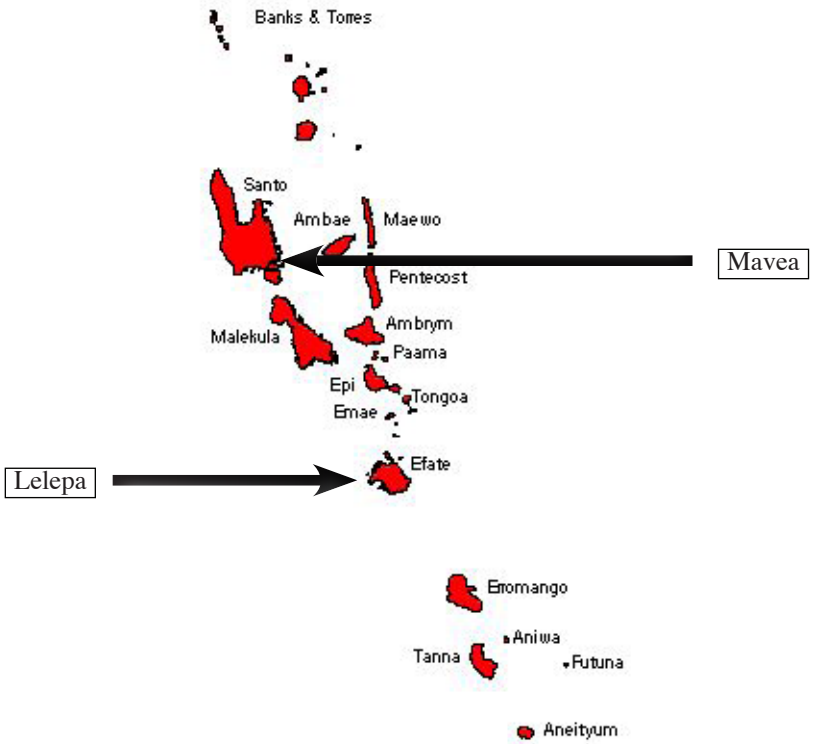

Figure 1: Map of Vanuatu[4]

In order to determine the state of endangerment of both languages, we applied the framework from Brenzinger et al. 2003. This framework lists nine factors used to evaluate the vitality and sociolinguistic situation of a language (2003:13). These factors are:

F1: Intergenerational language transmission
F2: Absolute number of speakers
F3: Proportion of speakers within the total population
F4: Trends in existing language domains
F5: Response to new domains and media
F6: Materials for language education and literacy
F7: Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and use
F8: Community members' attitudes towards their own language
F9: Type and quality of documentation

[4] Map made in MapInfo by Nick Thieberger, available at: http://www.linguistics.unimelb.edu.au/thieberger/vanlangs/index.html (Last accessed 10 March 2010)

Except for F2 (which is the raw number of speakers), these criteria are graded from 0 to 5, with a higher number denoting a healthier situation. The results for Mavea and Lelepa are summarized in Table 1.

	MAVEA		LELEPA	
Factors	**Rating**	**Comments**	**Rating**	**Comments**
F1	**2**	The language is no longer transmitted.	**4**	The language is actively transmitted in most families.
F2	**32**	Various levels of fluency. The fluent population is aging.	**450**	Native speakers are found in all age groups.
F3	**1/2**	15% of a total population of about 210 speak Mavea.	**4**	90% of a total population of about 500 speak Lelepa.
F4	**2**	Limited/dwindling domains: some households, private conversations.	**4**	Multilingual parity. The language is spoken in most domains: home, social interactions, chiefly meetings, traditional ceremonies, but not in church.
F5	**0**	The language is inactive.	**2**	The language is somewhat active: e.g., words coined for modern items (cars, planes, etc.).
F6	**0**	The language is not used in school.	**2**	There are a few SIL literacy materials, not used in schools nor diffused throughout the community. No stable orthography.
F7	**5?**	Policies of equal support exist but are not currently implemented. As written in the constitution: "The Republic of Vanuatu shall protect the different local languages which are part of the national heritage, and may declare one of them as a national language."[5]		
F8	**1**	Few speakers concerned with language loss.	**4**	Language seen as an integral part of identity, to be transmitted to future generations. Other languages (Bislama, other Efate languages, English, and French) are viewed as threats.[6]
F9	**1/2**	Trilingual dictionary, ABC book, unpublished descriptive grammar, and annotated texts with audio recordings.	**2/3**	Unpublished MA thesis on possession, two hours of annotated texts, a few SIL children books.

Table1. Language endangerment in Mavea and Lelepa

[5] http://www.parliament.gov.vu/constitution.html (Last accessed 10 March 2010)
[6] Bislama is the national language of Vanuatu and is used as a lingua franca throughout the country.

Based on this framework, Mavea is considered moribund; the language is not learned anymore by children and is spoken only in a few homes on an irregular basis (see Guérin 2008). The situation is different for Lelepa, with a notably larger number of speakers and active transmission of the language. However, Lelepa is largely undocumented and not taught in the community schools. The language is thus not critically endangered but could be in the near future.

3. PROJECT SET-UP: SOME CHALLENGES FOR THE STUDENT FIELDWORKER. Preparing for their first fieldtrips, student fieldworkers must first get clearance from their universities' Ethics Boards to work with human subjects.[7] Once in the field, student fieldworkers must (1) adjust to new lifestyles often very different from their own (see e.g., Crowley 2007:80–84); (2) set up their projects; that is, obtain the communities' approval and commitment; and (3) tend to the administrative tasks of sustaining their projects (e.g., get consultants' consent and agreement on compensation, schedule meetings, record sessions, etc.). These three steps are essentially the same in any fieldwork situation. However, for the apprentice fieldworker, they can soon become challenges. We concentrate here on step (2), the project set-up. During this crucial phase, we faced our biggest challenge: boosting community involvement in the project.

3.1 INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY. As stated in the introduction, a fieldworker often establishes a working relationship with a rather small subset of the language community.[8] We recall that this is also how we began our documentation work. In the Mavea project, VG started working with a few members of her host family. The rest of the speech community (fewer than 30 speakers) was only mildly supportive of her activity, and she found it hard to recruit more participants. Some community members—suspicious that her project was a ploy to purchase land—were distrustful of her motives and refused to participate. Others thought she was financially tied to the host family. They were reluctant to come forward and share their knowledge, concerned that they would interfere with the host family, and/or not get recognition for their work. Clearly VG's role and goals as a linguist were misinterpreted, and she spent much time during her first site visit explaining her objectives and trying to convince members of the community that the project was financially attractive,

[7] Note that researchers planning to work in Vanuatu must be approved by the Vanuatu Cultural Center as well. First-time fieldworkers should thus find out if any other work authorization is needed in the target country.

[8] A reviewer expressed some concern about the use of the term "community." As shown in Table 1, we dealt with small speech communities (30 to 450 people speaking the target language), who lived in close-knit villages on the same island. It was therefore possible for us to involve all (or most) of the community in our projects. As we discussed below in §4.1, community members agreed on what should be done with the language, so that we could also integrate the communities' goals into our projects. We realize that these are uncommon situations. However, we believe that student fieldworkers should in general try to establish a partnership benefiting a larger group (e.g., an entire village) rather than individuals.

genuinely harmless, and worthy of their attention (as some outcomes of the documentation could, for instance, be used to teach the vernacular in the future). After the first fieldtrip, her role and motives had become clearer and during her subsequent fieldtrips, she managed to involve more participants in the project.

While working on his project, SL was tied by strict time constraints and could not partake in fieldtrips to Lelepa for more than a few weeks at a time. As a result, only a few people, at first, were interested in his research or even knew what he was doing there. Luckily, he received assistance from a local fieldworker from the Vanuatu Cultural Center (VCC) who had experience with foreign researchers as well as with the language community. He was rapidly able to put SL in touch with people he knew would be interested, as well as speakers who were trusted and respected in the community.[9] This was extremely valuable considering the limited time SL had to gather data and get the project going. Thanks to the VCC fieldworker's involvement, SL received support from all the relevant local authorities, including village chiefs. Slowly but steadily, the whole community became more aware and accepting of his project. During his second fieldtrip, SL organized village meetings, with the help of the local authorities, to formally present the project. During one of these meetings, a speaker stood up and declared that SL was sent by God and that, therefore, the project should be supported by the community. No clearer message of acceptance could have been wished for!

3.2 INVOLVING INDIVIDUALS. As any textbook on field methods will indicate, finding the right consultant for a project is one of the most important tasks of the linguistics fieldworker (see e.g., Dimmendaal 2001:60). This can become a real challenge if the language community is reduced to a handful of speakers.

On Mavea, most fluent speakers are elderly. The youngest fluent speaker is in his late twenties, and he is one of the few speakers in that age range. During her first fieldtrip, VG's host family assigned her this young speaker (who happens to be their youngest son) to work with. Her objective was to try and make connections with more speakers and record a wide range of speech samples (male and female, older and younger) in order to probe for any sociolinguistic variation associated with age or gender. Given the total size of fluent Mavea speakers (about 30) and the fact that few speakers were interested in the project, this was no easy task. VG was fortunate, however, to become acquainted with two exceptional speakers towards the end of her first trip, and by the end of her project, she had supplemented her data collection with the recordings of about twenty speakers.

Finding speakers can be further complicated by existing cultural practices (see e.g., Dimmendaal 2001:60 and Bowern 2008:133–34). In Vanuatu, gender-related restrictions (e.g., the strict avoidance between persons of opposite sex linked by in-law relationships)

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[9] Fieldworkers of the VCC are ni-Vanuatu (i.e., nationals of Vanuatu) volunteers working in their own cultural and linguistic areas. They are chosen by their communities and their role is to document their own culture. The material they collect is archived at the VCC. For more information, the reader can consult the following webpage (Last accessed 10 March 2010):
http://www.vanuatuculture.org/site-bm2/fieldworkers/050517_fieldworkersprogram.shtml

are deeply rooted in the local traditions. Such restrictions may not affect the researcher, who is, in most cases, an outsider. However, milder gender restrictions also apply in many communities. For example, throughout Vanuatu, it is not appropriate for two persons of the opposite sex to stay in a room alone, unless they are married to each other or are siblings.

Despite these gender-related restrictions, VG had to work mostly with male speakers on Mavea, and it was difficult to organize recording sessions devoid of an (often noisy) audience. Throughout Vanuatu, exogamy is practiced. Women usually marry outside their community and, afterward, go on to live in their husbands' communities. As a result, most women on Mavea come from other islands, and only a few elderly women speak Mavea as a second language. VG had the chance to find two female Mavea speakers: one who never left Mavea Island and the other from Deproma, a Mavea-speaking community on mainland Espiritu Santo, who had married a Mavea speaker. Towards the end of her first trip, VG was also fortunate to get to know a fluent male speaker in his late thirties. Thanks to his wife's unconditional support and trust, they managed to work in close collaboration during the entire project, despite the existing taboo.

On Lelepa, despite the practice of exogamy, the speech community is large enough to contain fluent female speakers. However, due to restrictions similar to those mentioned above, at first, SL was not granted permission to record women, but was directed to male speakers only. After several subsequent fieldtrips, the community considered him trustworthy and allowed him access to female speakers.

As our projects progressed, we noticed that members of the communities became increasingly welcoming, responsive, and involved. It became evident that the reason behind this change of attitude was the fact that we had finally gained the communities' trust. In the next section, we detail how we managed to establish and maintain trust and the ripple effects this had on our projects.

4. KEY INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL FIELDWORK. As mentioned above, after our first fieldtrips, the communities' attitudes toward us and our research evolved positively. This was a result of our conscious efforts to free ourselves from the label of "social lone wolf." In this section, we describe the steps we took to achieve this and to facilitate our progress toward being socially integrated researchers.

4.1 INTEGRATING THE COMMUNITY'S GOALS. Best practice in documentary linguistics requires integrating the language community's goals into the overall documentation project.[10] One reason that "lone wolf" student fieldworkers may fail to accomplish this task is that they work with only a handful of speakers and are thus unaware of larger community goals. This practice feeds an unproductive cycle: if (at least some of) the community's goals are not addressed, involvement in the project is likely to be low. To avoid this, the

[10] According to a reviewer, incorporating the language community's goals into the overall documentation project is desirable, but not required for a Ph.D. student. We believe that (student) fieldworkers should strive to fulfill at least one of the community's documentary needs (i.e., one that it is "attainable" and does not derail the student's documentation project) in an effort to establish a collaborative partnership.

linguist and the community must establish a collaborative project, the outcomes of which will be beneficial to both parties. The challenge is then to find a compromise; that is, to negotiate which of the community's objectives to integrate in the documentation project. This is especially challenging when some of the community's needs are beyond the fieldworker's expertise (e.g., the translation of religious material).

Problems also arise if, conversely, the language community does not have any particular goals. On Mavea, most of the community were not concerned with language loss and did not see the point of documenting their language—except, maybe, its financial aspect. People were not really interested in the project and had no specific documentary goals in mind. VG's role was then to try and engage some members of the community to work on a project that would be useful for both the community and linguists. They agreed on the development of an orthography and worked to establish spelling conventions. Subsequently, copies of a dictionary and some traditional narratives were distributed among the community, and some texts were read aloud, attesting to the readability of the orthography.[11]

The community involved in the Lelepa project, on the other hand, set clear goals for the fieldworker: create a dictionary and translate a hymnal. Given that a practical orthography already existed for Lelepa and that SL had already planned to compile a dictionary as part of his documentation project, it was easy enough to comply with this part of the community's request. As for the translation of the hymnal, details of its realization are still being negotiated. SL consented to provide technical support, if members of the community agree to translate the hymnbook themselves.[12]

Integrating the community's documentation objectives into our projects was the first step out of the "lone wolf" label. However, to gain support and trust, social integration was the key.

4.2 SOCIAL INTEGRATION. The main challenge documenters face when they arrive at a field site is to find ways to integrate socially into the language community. Accomplishing this is, we believe, of utmost importance for at least two main reasons: (1) for the well-being of the researcher (see e.g., Macaulay 2004) and (2) for the documentation project to be accepted by the language community (see e.g., Dimmendaal 2001:58).

Documentation projects usually involve several consecutive months of fieldwork, often in a foreign environment. For graduate students to "survive" the first fieldtrip, it is

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[11] We agree with the reviewers that establishing an orthography is a delicate and time-consuming process that requires a lot of community consultation and thus should not be rushed into. Keeping in mind that (1) recommendations about a standard orthography should not be made until one has a good understanding of both the structure of the language and the dynamics of the speech community, and that therefore (2) agreeing on an orthography may not be feasible during the course of one's fieldwork, student fieldworkers can nevertheless start discussing orthography design with the community in order to initiate the process. Note that the orthography fieldworkers will develop for their own work need not be the same as the community's orthography.

[12] See also Terrill 2002:211 for a similar request from the community.

essential that they form a bond beyond a working relationship with the community. This will not only help them avoid loneliness and isolation but will also enormously enrich their experiences and give them important cultural perspectives. Social integration, additionally, has invaluable benefits for the documentation project. It allows the researcher to meet with a variety of speakers and, above all, to witness and/or record a wide range of communication practices (see e.g., Everett 2001:170–71 and McLaughlin and Sall 2001:202–3). This is no easy feat, since the language to be described is often initially a barrier that prevents the researcher from taking part in all social activities. The first step is, then—obvious as it may look—to acquire a conversational competence in the language (see e.g., Newman and Ratliff 2001:6).

4.2.1 BECOMING A SPEAKER. Speaking the lingua franca can help the researcher blend into the community as long as its use is widespread among speakers, especially during social events. Learning the vernacular language allows the researcher to penetrate the community on a much more intimate level. The lingua franca is spoken with community outsiders, whereas the vernacular is for fellow community members. Sprinkling your conversation with vernacular words (even before you can entertain a whole conversation in the vernacular) will certainly remove some of the barriers that make you an outsider.

For her first fieldtrip on Mavea, VG had had only about a week of informal training in Bislama. This lack of command and understanding of Bislama made it difficult for her to communicate with the community. It also took her some time to distinguish whether Bislama or Mavea was being spoken in routine exchanges. She was regarded as a stranger, and the only interactions she had with the community were that of a linguist working —on a more or less regular schedule— with a single consultant. Needless to say, she was not able to blend in during this first fieldtrip. For subsequent trips, VG had gained enough knowledge of the lingua franca to participate in the social life of the community and to interact with more speakers. At that point, she was also able to develop another kind of relationship—that of a friend.

In Lelepa, SL was told that he was "making history" by being the first non-indigenous person—besides a missionary stationed in the area more than a century before—to learn the language. The project became highly valued, regarded as a means to protect the language, and, in turn, SL gained respect and trust.

4.2.2 TRUST AND LIABILITY. Establishing honest and dependable relationships with speakers was a major breakthrough for both of us during the course of our projects. The principal factor that helped us to develop and maintain trust was undertaking several fieldtrips that lasted from one to four consecutive months. Spending progressively longer periods of time in the communities allowed us to familiarize ourselves with the speakers and their routine, and to adjust to their customs. In turn, these longer periods of contact gave the communities the opportunity to make similar adjustments to us.

The other factor that helped us to maintain trust was liability. As mentioned in §4.1, one challenge we faced was to incorporate the community's documentary goals into the documentation project. Once these goals are defined, they are integral parts of the project, and it is essential for researchers to honor any promises made, that is, to fulfill their part of a contract In that respect, student fieldworkers should be careful not to promise too much!

For instance, we both agreed with the communities to compile dictionaries of their languages. Such work is considerable, and it is important for the community to realize that it takes several years and numerous drafts before a dictionary can reach a satisfactory stage (even though there no such thing as a "finished" dictionary). We found it important to present successive drafts of our dictionaries to the speakers, not only to show that compiling a dictionary is a long process, but also to show that we were "doing our part" to honor our commitments.

4.2.3 THE TIME FACTOR. Social integration and trust stood out, in our experience, as the fundamental aspects of successful fieldwork (see e.g., Yamada 2007:276–79 and references therein). This was achieved through much hard work on our part but also simply through the passing of time. Undertaking several fieldtrips assisted us significantly in building trust—although it increased our overall project expenditures. On the other hand, as fieldwork is demanding for both the researcher and the language community, leaving the field site gave everyone much-needed time off. Additionally, it allowed us to process the data collected, to discuss them with our academic colleagues, and to plan our next investigation in the field. Returning to the field sites also helped us consolidate our relationships with the communities. The more time we spent in the field, the more trust the communities conferred on us.

4.2.4 INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL ACTIVITIES. Fieldwork is not just about recording conversations or wordlists. It is crucial not to limit your relationship with the community to the mere hiring of language consultants, but rather to be engaged beyond linguistic matters. By participating in the community's activities, documenters will not only learn the language, form a bond with the community, and become an integral—although temporary—part of it, they will also observe various communication practices that will enrich documentary research. Taking part in communal or recreational activities (a trip to the garden, a fishing trip, a soccer game, a fundraiser, the building of a house, etc.) allows researchers to witness naturally occurring language activities. It is important to learn to tap into these resources even without a recording device.

Helping the community in ways that may not be closely related to the documentation project will be appreciated by the language community; whether it is by helping pupils with their homework, buying construction tools for a communal project, or paying the local team's fee to participate in a soccer tournament. SL was able, for example, to arrange for a Lelepa canoe carver to volunteer at the Vanuatu National Museum. For two weeks he came to the museum and built a canoe on site, providing an interesting activity for the museum's visitors. SL arranged for students from town schools to come and view the last stage of the canoe's assembly—when all the canoe parts are lashed together—and to interview the carver on this traditional skill. This was not directly related to linguistics or to his project. However, this activity boosted the community's self-esteem and, in turn, it showed his dedication beyond strict data gathering.

4.3 SUSTAINED INVOLVEMENT ONCE OUTSIDE THE COMMUNITY. "Out of site" should not equate with "out of mind" for a fieldworker. In order to maintain trust and social integration, it is important to create extended exchange relationships (see e.g., Dobrin 2008).

For the Mavea project, VG conducted about eleven months of fieldwork spread out over three years. To date, she phones the community between fieldtrips and sends or brings back linguistic material (such as the printouts of stories, an alphabet book, etc.) and pictures taken while on the field, as well as personal pictures. Community members were actually eager to see pictures of her family, her house, etc. These pictures gave her substance (a past, a lineage, a life outside of theirs) and were instrumental in establishing a sociable relationship with her host family and other members of the language community.

The Lelepa project is ongoing, and SL tries to alternate his work visits with recreational visits. He sometimes vacations near the research site with his spouse and children, goes diving or fishing with Lelepa speakers, or attends weddings on the island. These recreational visits have enabled him to establish a relationship with the community well beyond the working arena.

5. CONCLUSION. According to Hyman (2001), fieldwork is "a state of mind." And following Crowley's (2007:158) recommendation, to find out whether you have the right state of mind to be a good fieldworker, simply go to the field, and try! However, beyond that lies a state of affairs that needs to be attended: for a project to be successful, researchers have to gain social acceptance from the community they work with. In view of our experiences, social integration is the main challenge fieldworkers will face, but it is also the key to productive fieldwork. In this paper, we isolated several factors that facilitated our integration and helped us to establish a collaborative partnership with the communities: time, involvement in communal activities, sustained involvement once away from the field site, and the creation of documentary derivatives valuable to both the language and academic communities. Although no two fieldwork situations are exactly the same, we hope that our experiences can help other apprentice fieldworkers avoid being "social lone wolves."

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