

Outsider curiosity, indigenous agency, and cultural imperialism. The trade in Fijian objects.

Rod Ewins
University of Tasmania

The original version of this paper was presented at the conference
“Imperial Curiosity: Objects, Representations, Knowledges”, Hobart, Tasmania, June 27th-29th 2007

© R.Ewins 2008. Not for citation or re-publication without specific permission of the author.

Outsider curiosity

It is well understood that from the time of first contact, Europeans have been intrigued by the different appearances and practices of Pacific islanders. The most portable indicators of difference were drawings and paintings done by ships’ artists, visitors, and finally photographers, and the material products of Pacific people. In the case of Fiji, tens of thousands of objects were collected through the course of the 19th and 20th Centuries, ending up in museums and private collections all over the world. Few objects are well provenanced, and of the dozens of museums with significant Fijian collections, only two (Fiji and Tasmania) have published detailed descriptions and contextualisations of their holdings.¹ Collection objects generally remain detached signifiers of their originating culture.

In the market, though, their increase in value soars, and perhaps because of this monetary focus their initial acquisition is often viewed as imperial exploitation, even theft. This assessment should be examined more closely, first because it may be a rewriting of history, and second because it may aim at the wrong target.

Pacific islanders had long been accustomed to exchanging their products with other groups, either through ritual exchange or non-ritual direct barter. They were keen to obtain Western goods, and eagerly, even aggressively, extended this trade to Westerners. The following passage is from the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-42 in Fiji:

Captain Hudson [’s ship] ... stopped at the small village of Vatia [actually Vutia, on the Rewa River] to purchase some earthenware; this is a village of potters. They were at once surrounded by several hundreds of the inhabitants, all pressing their wares on them, of which they bought several specimens, but not enough to satisfy the venders [*sic*], who, when they found that the officers did not intend to purchase more, hooted and shouted many offensive epithets, that only became known through the interpreter’s report.²

Already by the time of Fiji’s Cession to Britain in 1874, many ships enroute between the US and Australia were regularly calling into Fiji with passengers keen to obtain souvenirs. Also, most settlers used, and often collected, local products. Fijians responded enthusiastically to the new trade, not

¹ Fergus Clunie, *Yalo i Viti* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1986), Rod Ewins, *Fijian artefacts: the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery collection* (Hobart: Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery, 1982).

² Captain Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition during the years 1838-1842, v.1-5, vol. 3 Fiji* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1845).

merely selling objects they had been using themselves, but producing simulacra of them, specifically for this burgeoning market. This is from an early tourist brochure, written shortly after 1900:

Fijian weapons are ... nowadays generally forgeries. The country was drained of the genuine arms long ago, and a lively trade is now carried on by the mountaineers in sham ones cleverly dyed. A year or two ago, a Government official, passing through a remote and primitive village at high noon when all the inhabitants were away in their plantations, peeped into a house, and saw rows upon rows of clubs and spears suspended from the roof. For the moment he thought he had discovered a secret plot against the Government, but an aged crone who sat blinking in a doorway enlightened him. They had been made the week before, and had just been dug up from the black mud of the marsh, where they were dyeing for the white tourists in Suva.³

It was not only weapons that were reproduced, nor only the mountaineers who were happily producing these objects. In the 1880s one observer wrote: "the honest 'beachcomber' of the Fiji provinces ... is not at all above manufacturing relics for Levuka, Sydney, or 'home.' " ⁴ It would be interesting to know how many objects appearing on eBay today (or even reposing in museums) were produced by these enterprising characters.

Despite the imbalance in power in colonial relationships, in this particular market it can be argued that Fijians were both responding to and influencing demand, and that they retained a considerable level of agency in transactions. They managed to quarantine certain objects of especial importance to themselves, as well as the activities associated with them,⁵ showing that they were able to weigh the value attached by others to Fijian material productions against their own needs and wishes. To portray them as victims ignorant of the nature of trading is inaccurate and patronising. They had long carried on a relatively impersonal barter trade alongside their more celebrated ceremonial exchanges. It is true that in Fijian/European trading the participants on either side were not dealing in a common currency on which each placed the same value, but each got from the transaction the quite different things that they wanted. A doctor/settler (who was not a trader) wrote in 1871:

It is still said that natives are 'cheated' and 'imposed upon' by white men. Missionaries, as a rule, have not been slow in taking up the same cry. In their case this is scarcely to be wondered at, as the advent of the trader destroys much of their influence, and nearly all of that portion of their income represented by the vague term 'offering'. But so far as my experience goes I believe the average South Sea Islander is habitually cautious and canny to a degree, and will never pay a fraction more than he thinks the wares are worth to himself.⁶

Thus when Fijians sold their possessions they weighed up what these were worth to themselves, in comparison with the money or goods they coveted. In this calculation, many of the objects most keenly sought by collectors were precisely those whose utility to their owners was either diminishing or had already disappeared. The owners of these (and of course the manufacturers of simulacra) were quite prepared to part with them. It was the rapid social and cultural change caused by colonisation that accelerated the alienation of much of Fijians' material culture. They have never been an archival

³ Basil Thomson, *Fiji for tourists* (London: The Canadian-Australian Royal Mail Steamship Line, n.d. c.1910).

⁴ H. Stonehewer-Cooper, *Coral lands* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1880). p.129

⁵ Rod Ewins, *Staying Fijian: Vatulele Island barkcloth and social identity* (Adelaide & Honolulu: Crawford House Publishing Australia & University of Hawaii Press, 2007).

⁶ Litton Forbes, *Two years in Fiji* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1875).

people, and little value, sentimental or economic, is even today attached by them to objects on the basis of age or beauty alone. Had functionally obsolete goods not been traded they would probably have been merely discarded or trashed. I have seen, for example, ancient barkcloth beaters in areas where this manufacture has ceased, virtually pulped by using them to beat washing, split by hammering nails, and cut down to make cane-knife handles, even though the destroyers' own mothers had used these regularly for the purpose for which they were made.

But even if we accept that outsider curiosity may have saved obsolete articles from being destroyed or simply thrown away, once they *were* preserved, the question becomes, does possession then impart unlimited rights to the collectors? I suggest that issues of stewardship and moral rights are unavoidable and important, though often overlooked despite breast-beating about inequities in the original acquisition, about which we can now do nothing even assuming they occurred.

Whatever control over transactions Fijians may or may not have been able to exercise up to the sale of objects, at that point they certainly lost ALL control, not merely of the objects themselves, but of their moral right to the authorship, identity signs and cultural connotations carried by these objects. Western artists today rightly assert their moral rights to works they have produced, irrespective of how many times those are sold and re-sold, and those moral rights continue to vest in their heirs. The inappropriate or demeaning use of an artist's work can be challenged in court with a good chance of success. But few indigenous societies have been in a position to assert such rights, particularly for objects produced by their ancestors. Fijians certainly haven't.

The overwhelming numbers of Fijian weapons in collections are a case in point. For centuries these were not merely crucial to survival, they signified the manhood of every adult male in Fiji, and could become shrines in the temples, much as swords and armour could in Japan, in that role long outliving their original owners. Being so widely used, with every adult male possessing at least one large double-handed club and a pair of throwing clubs to stick in his waistband, as well as one or more fighting spears, weapons numbered tens of thousands. But with the cessation of the previously constant warfare under the imposed *Pax Britannica* and the submergence of the old religion under Christianity, they became functionally obsolete, and thus in practical terms cast-offs.

They were more often than not splendidly-made and handsome objects, which better than most things conveyed the bloodthirsty society from which they came, so sailors and collectors sought them out as ideal keepsakes. Though first missionaries and later colonials were notionally committed to stamping out the sanguinary practices of the Fijians, that did not stop them thrilling to tales of these, and they delighted in these physical reminders. Most collectors in pre-Colonial and Colonial Fiji were males, who saw possessing these grisly objects not only as interesting, but as a means of personal identity-construction, vicariously adopting the manliness and warrior *personae* the weapons signified.⁷

Collecting cultural objects became a fashionable pastime among early settlers. For a time attached to the household of the first British governor was Baron Anatole von Hügel, a highly educated natural historian and gifted artist, who went on to become the first curator of the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. On far-reaching field-trips, he collected methodically and documented much of the culture in writing, drawings and photographs.⁸ He seems to have

⁷ See a discussion of this in Rod Ewins, "All things bright and beautiful, or all things wise and wonderful? Objects from Island Oceania in The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery," *Pacific Arts*, no. 15 & 16 (2000): 71-87. Online at <http://www.justpacific.com/pacific/papers/allthings.pdf>

⁸ Jane Roth and Steven Hooper, eds., *The Fiji journals of Baron Anatole von Hügel* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1990).

“infected” the governor’s household with his collecting passion, if not his anthropological insight. The Governor’s cousin, the intrepid Constance Gordon-Cumming, gushed that

...we are each trying who can make the very best collection ... Our daily delight is to ransack the stores in Levuka, where the natives may have bartered old things for new, and great is the triumph of whoever succeeds in capturing some new form of bowl or quaint bit of carving. All our rooms are like museums, adorned with savage implements, and draped with native cloth of beautifully rich patterns, all hand-painted.⁹

Whether their example provoked it, collecting became something of a local craze, and like all crazes, bumped prices up. A contemporaneous writer observed that

The trade in ‘curios’ is a very important one all over the Pacific, and there are several shops in Levuka devoted almost entirely to their sale. Curios fetch bigger prices at Levuka than they do in London; and an enterprising traveller who thinks he can make a ‘good thing’ of a ‘spec’ in clubs, spears and whales’ teeth will be bitterly disappointed when he receives his account of sales, or interviews personally the leading London dealers.¹⁰

This says a lot not only about the trade in Levuka, but also about the large number of Fijian artefacts that were already at that early date circulating in London and setting the price.

However selective or skewed the range and type of objects European collectors had alienated from Fijian life, once removed from the country and taken overseas, these objects have almost universally been reinterpreted in terms of not merely the initial collectors’ values and preconceptions, but those of a succession of other collectors or curators. At the beginning of this paper I referred to them as “detached signifiers”. The chain of signification would have been easy to sustain had the initial collectors had any sense of responsibility to the originating culture. But most were solely satisfying a collecting urge and/or were intent on their own projects of personal myth construction. The loss to the parent culture has often been permanent.¹¹

A bizarre modern example of collectors’ arrogation of absolute rights, and total disregard for any vested moral rights, comes, unsurprisingly perhaps, from Hollywood. A particularly famous type of Fijian club, the beaked battle-hammer or *totokia*, may still be found in prop cupboards there. So fearsome is its appearance that its design was appropriated by George Lucas to arm his Tusken Raiders in Star Wars. He merely stuck a finned metal spike in the butt and renamed it a *gaderfii* or *gaffi stick*. You can even get instructions online to make your own model out of pvc pipe and plumbing fittings!¹² Of course no Fijians ever received any royalties or acknowledgement, it would probably have never even entered the film-makers’ minds that what they were doing was an arrogant and contemptuous appropriation of a Fijian cultural icon.

⁹ Constance F. Gordon-Cumming, *At home in Fiji* (Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, (1888)1901). The products of most of these collections are now in the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology — see Fergus Clunie and Anita Herle, “Fijian collections research at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology,” *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 16 (2004): 101-110. Much of Gordon-Cumming’s own ethnographic collection is in the Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh.

¹⁰ Stonehewer-Cooper, *Coral lands. op.cit.* pp.129-30

¹¹ Rod Ewins, “The perils of ethnographic provenance; the documentation of the Johnson Fiji collection in the South Australian Museum,” in *Hunting the collectors; Pacific collections in Australian museums, art galleries and archives*, ed. Susan Cochrane and Max Quanchi (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 34-66.

¹² Google “gaffi stick” to find many sites with instructions.

Having been “saved” from oblivion by their collectors, the vast majority of Fijian objects have ended up sitting on dusty shelves in museum storerooms, unseen and unsung. Fijian artefacts have gone out of fashion in Museum displays (though not with collectors, to judge by sale prices), and few display more than one or two objects. The corollary is that little is spent on restoration or curation, and they are apt to deteriorate or disintegrate, particularly fibre objects. When they become too fragile to be used even for research, of what use are they, and what price “saving” them?

Objects entering museum collections devoid of clear provenance and description, have usually simply become absorbed into the myths of initially, exotic curios, and later, primitive art. Paradoxically, the 19th Century museological approach of grouping all Fijian objects together, an outgrowth of the displays in collectors’ homes, was arguably less injurious to their function as markers of their originating cultures. A rich clutter of objects from one place often has a strong overall impact, and may convey something of the social and cultural themes and practices, and aesthetic values, of the originating society.

Following the vogue for comparative anthropology, objects were grouped by type rather than source, placing together all fans, all pots, all clubs etc. from varied sources. More recently, even modern objects have been imported into the mix, Coca Cola bottles placed beside ancient gourds and ceramic waterbottles. The rather trite and just-so message, that most human societies share certain needs and may meet these in ways that bear a family or at least functional resemblance, makes it difficult to perceive the more subtle matter of how societies tend to carry themes and ideas through every aspect of their lives, social, cultural and material.¹³ Maintaining these strong themes has often provided societies with the resilience to sustain identity and agency in the face of colonial and postcolonial imperialism, even while they adopt global agendas.¹⁴

When the interest of Western artists elevated some objects to the status of “treasures” of what, throughout the 20th Century, was referred to as “Primitive Art”,¹⁵ objects came to be displayed according to the same principles as masterpieces of Western art. There is no question that many are indeed powerful and imposing. But even when they are identified clearly (not always the case), the labels that identify them cannot possibly provide the viewer with the sort of cultural capital they bring to the contemplation of Western art. So, isolated from their functional or relevant aesthetic context, they are reduced once again to being curiosities like those in the 17th Century *Wunderkammer* or “Cabinets of Curiosities” – strange and incomprehensible things that the viewer can only regard with wonder or attempt to judge by totally inappropriate Western aesthetic yardsticks.

Two museums that have been opened in recent years, the San Francisco de Young Museum and the Paris Musée du Quai Branly, though they dodged the words “primitive” or “art” in their titles, perpetuate this approach. In the former, only one object from Fiji’s rich material culture made it to the main gallery space, an anthropomorphic priest’s *kava* dish. This small object, culturally most important and wonderfully crafted, cannot by itself begin to suggest Fiji’s rich material cultural heritage. It sits lonely on its stand, with no purpose other than to titillate. The galleries are elegant and enticing, even amazing, but provide little hint of the breadth of any the originating cultures. MDQB provoked controversy when it was opened. The New York Times commented:

¹³ Roderick Ewins, “Symmetry and semiotics: the case of Fijian barkcloth figuration,” in *Embedded symmetries, natural and cultural* (Amerind New World Studies Series), ed. D. Washburn (Albuquerque (NM): University of New Mexico Press & Amerind Foundation, 2004), 161-183.

¹⁴ Rod Ewins, *Staying Fijian: Vatulele Island barkcloth and social identity* (op cit.)

¹⁵ Shelly Errington, *The death of Authentic Primitive Art and other tales of progress* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

If the Marx Brothers designed a museum for dark people, they might have come up with the permanent-collection galleries: devised as a spooky jungle, red and black and murky, the objects in it chosen and arranged with hardly any discernible logic, the place is briefly thrilling, as spectacle, but brow-slappingly wrongheaded. Colonialism of a bygone era is replaced by a whole new French brand of condescension. ... The place simply makes no sense. Old, new, good, bad are all jumbled together without much reason or explanation, save for visual theatrics.¹⁶

Rather than the Marx Brothers, perhaps a better allusion might have been to Barnum and Bailey, given the emphasis on ethnographic spectacle and display. Whether modern ethnographic museums should, or ever could, see themselves as agents acting on behalf of the cultures when they display their artifacture, is an important issue. Virtually all such displays are inevitably mute witnesses to colonial histories. But in the very act of acquiring these objects, did museums not take on a responsibility to not merely preserve them and treat them with respect and dignity, but by corollary do the same for their originating makers and cultures? Distorting their cultural markers to suit totally inappropriate ends is not according the cultures the appropriate respect, indeed it is a particularly insidious form of neocolonialism, masquerading as appreciation.

It is arguable that the answer does not lie in asking living representatives of those cultures what should be done with the objects or how they should be housed or displayed. As mentioned earlier, few of the cultures are archival and at this distance in time it is questionable whether the knowledge, values and intentions of present members could be relied on to reflect those of their forebears, even if they are interested (which cannot necessarily be assumed, certainly in Fiji). However, it does seem reasonable that whenever and however presented, everything possible should be done to treat the objects with genuine regard for their originators' purposes and values, and as far as possible let them speak in their own voices. That would seem to be best done by providing a sufficient body of culturally related material to carry some weight, and accompanying this with as much accurately researched information as possible. A start would be to first use the best available experts and publications to catalogue and contextualise the material. Then update and correct the plethora of incorrect labelling in permanent displays. And finally, even if they assume that most visitors don't really want a didactic display, could at least the wealthier museums not provide a small gallery that holds regularly-changing exhibitions featuring the objects of a single culture at a time (especially those poorly represented in the permanent displays), fully described and documented and where possible supported by photographs, sound and film? In these days of digital technology those are neither as daunting nor as costly to provide as they were in previous eras.

Some cultures hold the belief that when you save a person's life you become responsible for it forever. Perhaps we should apply that thinking to "saving" material culture too.

Clunie, Fergus. *Yalo i Viti*. Suva: Fiji Museum, 1986.

Clunie, Fergus, and Anita Herle. "Fijian collections research at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology." *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 16 (2004): 101-110.

Errington, Shelly. *The death of Authentic Primitive Art and other tales of progress*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.

¹⁶ Michael Kimmelman, "A heart of darkness in the City of Light: Musée du Quai Branly," *The New York Times*, July 2, 2006, 3 pp.

- Ewins, Rod. "All things bright and beautiful, or all things wise and wonderful? Objects from Island Oceania in The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery." *Pacific Arts*, no. 15 & 16 (2000): 71-87.
- . *Fijian artefacts: the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery collection*. Hobart: Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery, 1982.
- . "The perils of ethnographic provenance; the documentation of the Johnson Fiji collection in the South Australian Museum." In *Hunting the collectors; Pacific collections in Australian museums, art galleries and archives*, edited by Susan Cochrane and Max Quanchi, 34-66. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.
- . *Staying Fijian: Vatulele Island barkcloth and social identity*. Adelaide & Honolulu: Crawford House Publishing Australia & University of Hawaii Press, 2009.
- Ewins, Roderick. "Symmetry and semiotics: the case of Fijian barkcloth figuration." In *Embedded symmetries, natural and cultural (Amerind New World Studies Series)*, edited by D. Washburn, 161-183. Albuquerque (NM): University of New Mexico Press & Amerind Foundation, 2004.
- Forbes, Litton. *Two years in Fiji*. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1875.
- Gordon-Cumming, Constance F. *At home in Fiji*. Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, (1888)1901.
- Kimmelman, Michael. "A heart of darkness in the City of Light: Musée du Quai Branly." *The New York Times*, July 2 2006, 3 pp.
- Roth, Jane, and Steven Hooper, eds. *The Fiji journals of Baron Anatole von Hügel*. Suva: Fiji Museum, 1990.
- Stonehewer-Cooper, H. *Coral lands*. London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1880.
- Thomson, Basil. *Fiji for tourists*. London: The Canadian-Australian Royal Mail Steamship Line, n.d. c.1910.
- Wilkes, Captain Charles. *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition during the years 1838-1842, v.1-5*. Vol. 3 Fiji. Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1845.

© 2008 Rod Ewins

