

## Ownership and a Peripatetic Collection: Raymond Firth's Collection from Tikopia, Solomon Islands

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**ABSTRACT.** The ethnographic collection made by Sir Raymond Firth in Tikopia, Solomon Islands, in 1928 and 1929 is used as a case study for the examination of the different meanings and interpretations attributed to museum collections. This collection is now housed at the Australian Museum in Sydney. In the 1970s the collection was subject to a repatriation request by the National Museum of the Solomon Islands, but the collection was not returned. In examining the progress of this request the history of the collection is traced, including acquisition in the field and subsequent re-locations between university, state and national bodies in Australia. I suggest that the reasons for the failure of the National Museum of the Solomon Islands to successfully negotiate the return of this collection lie in the nature of the repatriation request as an expression of political difference at a national level rather than cultural difference at the local level, and in the specific social relationships, past and present, surrounding the collection. However, the contemporary attitudes to the collection identified in this study should not be assumed to remain constant, as future generations of Tikopia may well reassess the cultural value of this collection. I conclude that museums are sites which mediate specific social relationships, at specific times in history.

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In the 1970s, twenty years prior to its transfer to the Australian Museum from the National Museum of Australia, the Firth Collection was earmarked for repatriation to the Solomon Islands. However, despite being partially funded for return, the collection remained in Australia. In this paper I examine some of the meanings of this collection in its Australian contexts by drawing upon documents and correspondence transferred to the Australian Museum along with the objects. In doing so I seek to shed light on why the return was not completed. In addition, I draw upon information gathered by Leonie Oakes (1988) in her survey

and summary of papers relating to the University of Sydney Collection. In presenting a brief and necessarily partial history of the Firth Collection in Australia, I argue that it is people who attribute potency to objects and without a social context for repatriation, objects in museum collections remain simply “things”.

Throughout this paper I refer to a number of different collections. For the purposes of clarity I will identify these now before embarking upon the main body of the paper. The Tikopia material forms one component of the University of Sydney Collection, which was made by anthropologists