

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

ELIZABETH BONSHK

Anthropology, Australian Museum, 6 College Street, Sydney NSW 2010, Australia  
lizb@austmus.gov.au

**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

working at the newly founded Anthropology Department from 1926. This collection includes materials from both Aboriginal Australia and the Pacific Region. One of the first researchers in the Anthropology Department was Raymond Firth who collected 641 objects during his first field trip to the tiny island of Tikopia in the Solomon Islands in 1928 and 1929. It is this collection which I henceforth refer to as “the 1928–1929 Firth Collection” although it falls within the umbrella of the University of Sydney Collection. Firth did in fact make a second collection in 1956 while working in Tikopia with his colleague James Spillius. I refer to this collection as “the Firth-Spillius Collection”. This collection forms one component of the Australian National University Collection, which is now housed on campus in Canberra. For a considerable number of years, both the University of Sydney Collection and the Australian National University Collection were housed, as part of the National Ethnographic Collection, in the basement of the Institute of Anatomy in Canberra, home to what is now ScreenSound Australia. In the documentation used in this paper, this institution is referred to by its previous name, the Australian Film and Sound Archive. During this period the ownership of the University of Sydney Collection was ambiguous. However, in 1989 the National Museum of Australia transferred ownership of the Pacific Island components of this collection to the Australian Museum. Notwithstanding the complexities of these interactions, and the large number of objects involved in addition to the Tikopia collections, it is the 1928–1929 Firth Collection that is the central focus of this paper.

As a staff member of the Anthropology Division at the Australian Museum, my interest in this material has developed within the Museum’s positive stance on repatriation. This position has been fostered by Jim Specht who, since his career at the Australian Museum began in 1970, has worked tirelessly to build relationships between indigenous people and the Australian Museum. He has overseen the repatriation of many ethnographic objects, most of these returning to the national museums of Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, and has contributed to the literature on cultural heritage issues, collections and museums through 29 publications (Khan this volume). I am indebted to Jim for his knowledge and insights concerning issues relating to museums and cultural heritage.

This paper is divided into four sections. In the first, I recount the sequence of events surrounding the request for repatriation, how the request was handled and by whom. This information is drawn from correspondence held by the National Museum of Australia, copies of which were transferred to the Australian Museum along with the collection. The second section describes the movement of the collection between Sydney and Canberra to become part of the National Ethnographic Collection. The third section examines the relocation of the collection to the Australian Museum and considers the status of the collection as “cultural heritage”. The last section examines the social relationships mediated by the objects in the collection both in the past and in the present.

### **A brief chronology of an unsuccessful repatriation request**

In the 1960s the Honiara Museum Association was formed to find funding to build a museum and to unify the various collections scattered in colonial government buildings. This association, where members were for the most part expatriate government officials, obtained funds from the Gulbenkian Foundation, England, for a building and exhibition space (Foanaóta, 1994: 96), and the first gallery opened in 1969. Further funds were acquired through annual contributions from local councils in addition to international and local donations. In 1972 the Honiara Museum became the Solomon Islands National Museum and Cultural Centre and came under central government control. The institution’s aims were to collect cultural materials and information, carry out research, disseminate information through exhibitions and educational programs, and to entertain the general public. The collections comprised ethnographic and archaeological material, as well as natural history, geology and social history collections, including war relics (Foanaóta, 1994: 96).

In the early 1970s Anna Craven, curator at the Solomon Islands National Museum, wrote to several museums in Australia and requested the repatriation of Solomon Islands cultural heritage materials. At this time the Firth 1928–1929 Collection was stored as part of the National Ethnographic Collection in the basement of the Institute of Anatomy. Professor Firth supported Craven’s request arguing that the people of the Solomon Islands “have a right to be educated in their cultural heritage” (Firth, 1973*a*). Both focused on the importance of the collection as the national heritage of the Solomon Islands, but while Craven wanted all material returned, Firth suggested that some of his collection remain to represent Tikopia people in Australia. The National Museum of Australia undertook to investigate the legal status of the collection (Keith, 1973). In 1977 Craven, frustrated by the lack of progress, wrote again to the National Museum of Australia (Craven, 1977). Firth also wrote to the Public Affairs and Cultural Relations Division of the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1978 pointing out that the Solomon Islands now had a museum where these objects could be preserved. Against the background of independence, Solomon Islanders were interested in their cultural heritage and he felt that Solomon Islanders should have access to items of their cultural heritage (Firth, 1978*a*). Letters were also written to Dr Jim Specht calling upon his assistance in the return (Firth, 1978*a*; Specht, 1978).

In January 1979, the Firth-Spillius Collection from Tikopia, made in 1956, was brought into discussion for repatriation too. This collection was owned by the Anthropology Department at the Australian National University, and was also held in the basement of the Institute of Anatomy. While Firth supported the return of the Firth-Spillius Collection, Spillius requested that twelve items be retained for himself (Spillius, 1979*a*). Both Firth and Spillius thought some of the 1956 collection should be put on display at the Australian National University for teaching purposes (Spillius, 1979*b*). Conservators assessed the 1928–1929 and 1956 collections—some 980 objects—and made preparations for their return (Preiss, 1980). The proposed return was approved by the Department of Home Affairs in March 1980 (Ryan, 1980).

However, in April of that year, in a letter from Foreign Affairs to the Department of Health, it was suggested that "in the spirit of the UNESCO Director-General's call for the restitution of cultural property" the museum in Honiara should be consulted about which objects might stay in Australia (McPherson, 1980). The letter was addressed to the Department of Health, as the collections were in that department's area of authority through their presence in the basement of the Institute of Anatomy. Despite the labour attendant upon the conservation report of the objects, the two Tikopia collections did not go back to the Solomon Islands. The Tikopia materials remained in Canberra until 1989 when the 1928–1929 Firth Collection was relocated to the Australian Museum. At this time legal title to the Pacific components of the University of Sydney collection were transferred from the National Museum of Australia to the Australian Museum. The Firth-Spillius collection remained in Canberra, but was relocated to the Australian National University, which held title to it.

From the correspondence it is clear that both Craven and Firth believed that the objects in the Tikopia Collection were an important part of the Solomon Islands national heritage. Firth felt that the objects also had value as a teaching collection for anthropology students in Australia, and that some objects could be regarded as "duplicates". As the collector, Firth supported the return. As a representative of the new National Museum of the Solomon Islands, Anna Craven requested that all the material be returned because of its national value. The National Museum of Australia did not object to the return of the collections, or at least no readily visible obstacles, such as ethical or scientific objections to repatriation, were recorded in the files to argue against a return.

### **The Tikopia Collection as part of the Australian National Estate**

The Anthropology Department at the University of Sydney was the first home of the 1928–1929 Firth Collection. While the School was established in 1926, as early as 1928 storage of the university's collections had become a problem. Radcliffe-Brown, Chair of the Department, wrote to A.J. Gibson of the Royal Society to inform him that he had raised this problem with the Prime Minister, Mr Bruce, as well as the Minister for Home and Territories, Mr Marr. Radcliffe-Brown had suggested that there should be a National Museum of Ethnography in Canberra, to which these collections, which he referred to as the Australian National Research Council Collections, could be added. This would ensure the proper storage of the collection (Radcliffe-Brown, 1928; also Stone, 1960, 1968). In the following December, Radcliffe-Brown received a positive reply from the Australian National Research Council which supported a proposal for a national collection and a suitable home to house it (Gibson, 1928). The Australian National Research Council was consulted because this body had funded the research carried out by the University of Sydney researchers who made the collections.

The 1928–1929 Firth Collection, as a part of the larger collection at the University of Sydney, was gaining national importance. In February 1929, Radcliffe-Brown was informed that the Executive Committee of the Australian National Research Council had discussed the concept of

developing a Commonwealth Museum. The Council felt that the issue should be adopted as a matter of policy and that immediate action should be taken to set up an Anthropology section (Gibson, 1929*a*). In April 1929, a series of letters indicates that the matter was raised at the Department of Home Affairs (Gibson, 1929*b*) as well as funding sought for the preservation and storage of the collection of photographs and glass plate negatives being built up by University of Sydney researchers (Radcliffe-Brown, 1929).

However, Leonie Oakes (1988), who collated the correspondence relating to the University of Sydney Collection for the Australian Museum, noted that Radcliffe-Brown sought the relocation of the collection due to lack of interest. He suggested to G.B. Cook, Private Secretary of the Prime Minister, that the coal store at the Powerhouse in Canberra would be an alternative storage location for the objects (Tiger Wise cited in Oakes, 1988: 6). The research interests of Radcliffe-Brown and the British School of Social Anthropology did not lie with ethnographic collections but with non-material aspects of social behaviour, the identification of social institutions, social structure and social organization (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; see also Stocking, 1984, 1985).

However, Radcliffe-Brown's successor Professor A.P. Elkin, who became a Trustee of the Australian Museum in October 1946, and President of the Board of Trustees in 1962, was much more interested in the collections and in museums. In contrast to Radcliffe-Brown, Elkin supported maintaining the collection at the University of Sydney and wanted to build a small museum, or a "fixed research laboratory" but he lacked funding to achieve this (Oakes, 1988: 7). After Elkin's retirement in 1957, his successor Professor Barnes, moved the collection to the Institute of Anatomy on a permanent loan, although a few pieces made their way to both the Macleay Museum at the University of Sydney and the Australian Museum (Oakes, 1988: 7, 13–14). Barnes' intention was that it should join other collections making up the National Ethnographic Collection (Oakes, 1988: 2) which had already been placed in the Institute building soon after it was erected as the National Museum of Australian Zoology in 1931 (Stone, 1968). However, according to E.H. Hipsley (1959), Medical Officer at the Institute of Anatomy, Barnes wanted to move the collection elsewhere because he urgently needed office space and remarked that the collection had never been put on display, catalogued or used for research. There was no document outlining the loan conditions associated with this "permanent loan". The Institute building provided a storage place for a number of ethnographic collections which had been presented to or purchased by the Government over preceding years and which had been stored in various parts of the country. The site was considered to be a temporary one until a national museum was erected (Stone, 1968).

However, in 1959, Hipsley wrote to the Deputy Crown Solicitor concerning the status of the collection because the new Head of the Anthropology School at the University of Sydney, Professor Geddes, had expressed interest in having the collection returned to the University. Hipsley was seeking clarification about who owned the material and was concerned about relocation costs. The Sydney to Canberra move had cost £400. Despite Geddes request, the collections remained in the Institute of Anatomy basement for 23 years

until 1989, when the National Museum of Australia transferred title of the Pacific Region collections of the University of Sydney to the Australian Museum, while maintaining ownership of the indigenous Australian collections. This second massive relocation of objects occurred when ScreenSound Australia, then the National Film and Sound Archive, took over the Institute of Anatomy buildings, which required storage area for its own collections.

Within the 60 years between collection and transfer to the Australian Museum, the 1928–1929 Firth Collection had become in turn a teaching collection, a national collection, and an impediment to the efficient use of space. When the National Museum of Australia established its area of interest as indigenous Australia, the subsequent division of the National Ethnographic Collection between Australian and non-Australian regions effectively demoted the Firth Collection's significance. At this point, all the objects collected by University of Sydney researchers working in the Pacific Region ceased to be of "national importance".<sup>1</sup> Yet the transfer to and acceptance of the Pacific Islands material by the Australian Museum signalled an interpretation of the collection as having both ethnographic and cultural heritage significance (Bolton, 1985).

### **Tikopia cultural heritage at the Australian Museum**

During negotiations for the removal of the Pacific component of the University of Sydney Collection to the Australian Museum, Jim Specht, Head of the Division of Anthropology, and Lissant Bolton, the Collection Manager, met with Lawrence Foanaóta, Director of the Solomon Islands National Museum in Sydney on 6 May, 1988.<sup>2</sup> They met to discuss the future of the Solomon Islands objects held within that collection. While a number of objects from the Australian Museum's Solomon Islands collection had already been repatriated to the Solomon Islands National Museum to celebrate their Independence, Foanaóta had concerns about the relocation of larger numbers of objects. He was concerned that the Solomon Islands was not a signatory to the UNESCO 1970 Convention on Export of Cultural Heritage and felt there were issues regarding reciprocal relationships between Melanesian countries concerning illegally exported items. He indicated that the National Museum of the Solomon Islands was working towards national legislation to protect cultural property and to counter black market activity. Such issues have formed the basis for cultural heritage workshops for Pacific Island museums and cultural centres in subsequent years (Eoe & Swadling, 1991; Foanaóta, 1991, 1994; Lindstrom & White, 1994b). In conclusion, Foanaóta considered that it was not possible for the Solomon Islands National Museum to receive large numbers of objects from Australia at that time, adding that their storage facilities were inadequate and that the museum lacked trained collections staff. Foanaóta also felt it was important for consideration to be given to what the researchers who had made the collections might have wanted for these objects. As a result, there was minimal effort to move towards a repatriation of the Solomon Islands material, which of course, included the Tikopia material.

Foanaóta's incorporation of the collectors' opinions about the disposal of their collections is interesting. While the comment is somewhat ambiguous, it appears not to be a

reference to ownership. By this stage in the proceedings the legal status of the University of Sydney Collection, and therefore the 1928–1929 Firth Collection which is a part of it, was no longer the topic of discussion. However, the inclusion of the collectors' sentiments about the objects introduced social interaction and attachment to objects. Earlier references to collectors had been made in terms of seeking permission or advice to disperse collections.

If we recall the stated reasons for the initial request for the repatriation of the Solomon Islands collections, this revolved around the concepts of cultural heritage at a national level. An expatriate worker of the Solomon Islands National Museum, supported by Firth, initiated the original request. Some twenty years later, Foanaóta, an indigenous Solomon Islander, but not a Tikopia man, raised concern for the social relationships surrounding objects although aspects relating to cultural heritage were not insignificant. For the first time in these proceedings concern was raised about objects as the foci of social relationships and what effect this might have on how a repatriation request would be made. The issue of whether the objects were of national importance to the Solomon Islands was not prominent at this time. Was this partly because the Solomon Islands National Museum had already received objects from the Australian Museum? If someone from Tikopia had been present in these discussions, would the outcome have been different?

In recent years the interpretation of objects as material culture has been subject to re-evaluation that has particular relevance to museum collections. These new interpretations, such as contained in the book *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa* (Shildkrout & Keim, 1998), have focused on the historical complexities of interactions between people in the exchange of objects. Such studies have investigated the nature of these relationships giving consideration to the processes which may have been unfolding during these interactions. Nicholas Thomas' (1991) *Entangled Objects* is of especial interest for the Pacific Region. Also, while not concerned with museum objects per se, but with the meanings attached to objects, Gell's (1998) work on objects and agency also raises a questioning of assumptions about how objects are made, used and viewed by both the maker and the viewer. Such works raise questions about the nature of indigenous "social agency" in past transactions. In regards to this collection, what did Firth, as the collector, think of his collecting process, and what did the Tikopia think of interaction surrounding the giving and receiving of objects? I believe these two things need to be contemplated before the contemporary status of a collection as cultural heritage can be adequately assessed. It is the comparison between former interpretations of objects and those made in the contemporary setting which may reveal significant shifts in social practice.

What then was the nature of the social relationship initiated and developed between Firth and Tikopia people at the time the collection was made?

### **Objects mediating relationships**

Firth's initial training was in economics, but in 1924 he moved from New Zealand to London and trained in anthropology under Bronislaw Malinowski. As a "British Social Anthropologist", not an ethnologist, Firth made a

clear distinction between technology (objects) and the study of the organization of economic systems (social behaviour) (1939: 11–12). It is a distinction that rejected the concept (common at the time, see Stocking, 1985) that objects were associated with levels of technological development, and therefore stages of human development.

Rather, Firth concentrated on an analysis of the relationships between groups in the operation of a society, for example, collective rights in property, the distribution of these rights, and their effect on production. This approach tended to neglect symbolic interpretations of objects (Firth, 1939: 12). Firth separated objects from the bodies of knowledge relating to magic, ritual, kinship and social organization in which objects were used. In his view, the social anthropologist had to make this theoretical separation even though Tikopia people themselves may not have made the same distinction.

However, Firth was a thorough recorder of detail in his descriptions of Tikopia "ritual" and "economy" and in this sense he could not ignore symbolic interpretations of objects because the Tikopia incorporated these into their daily lives. Further, Firth gave priority to recording observed actions, that is, what people do, not what they say they do (however, see Firth, 1970a some years later, and Parkin, 1988 for comments by Firth on the distinction between psychology and social anthropology).

In acquiring objects, I suggest that Firth saw himself primarily as collecting scientific data in three-dimensional form. This approach can be seen in Firth's publications in which he addressed issues relating to material culture, for example, the manufacture and use of bark cloth (Firth, 1947), body ornaments (Firth, 1951), ritual adzes (Firth, 1959), woodworking (Firth, 1960), string figures (Firth, 1970b) and art (Firth, 1973b). These articles on material culture form a small proportion of Firth's publications, and concentrated on describing manufacture rather than symbolic meaning. Despite this there is, however, much to be learnt about material culture from Firth's detailed descriptions of objects as "wants", items of technology, capital or possessions in discussion of Western economic terminology and non-Western economic settings. Bark cloth, for example, was "...one of the most important of consumer's goods in the Tikopia economy..." (Firth, 1947: 71). Bundles of bark cloth were incorporated into important gifts to the *atua*, the gods of the Tikopia pantheon (Firth, 1947: 71). However, while Firth noted that women were valued as bark cloth makers because their cloth was used for ceremonial purposes<sup>3</sup> (Firth, 1947: 71), he provided little comment on the economic status of women.<sup>4</sup>

In 1939, ten years after his first field work, Firth played with the idea of nascent money in a non-market economy through his "purchase" of native craft items (Firth, 1965: 377–380). Firth "sold", gave away or exchanged various European items while on Tikopia (Firth, 1928; Wedgwood, 1930). These included fish-hooks, clay pipes, calico, cotton prints, cotton belts, iron blades from smoothing planes, tobacco, razors, strings of beads, axes, tomahawks, and various sized knives including sheath knives. He identified 184 items in his collection as "purchases", which represent 29% of his collection (641 objects). Over a quarter of the collection was made in the first three months of fieldwork, with events such as "bartering" evenings providing an arena in which to acquire "specimens".

In describing these acquisitions Firth suggested that the Tikopia had no concept of comparative value as mediated by a common denominator (i.e., money) but they did have an internal valuation of items in terms of a "rough scale of comparative utility of things" (Firth, 1965: 277). For example, clamshell adzes were considered more valuable than net gauges, which in turn were more valuable than sinnet beaters.

Firth suggested that his presence gave the Tikopia people the opportunity to increase their wealth and the opportunity to negotiate their "sale" price, to discuss their wants, the quality of items, as well as the opportunity to come back and complain if they were unhappy. Firth saw his position as having been a benevolent monopolist "...controlling a limited supply of goods...of great utility". Firth's "wants", the "specimens", were evaluated by him in terms of the quality of workmanship whereas the Tikopia people, he suggested, wanted the most they could get. "The Tikopia hazarded a request which he hoped I might be gullible or polite enough to fulfil" (Firth, 1965: 379–380).

Firth did not investigate Tikopia views on these transactions. His own interpretation rested on his assumption of an innate drive for "goods", rather than an indigenous pattern of inclusion or exclusion. Firth imposed an economic imperative that assumed market forces. In doing so I suggest that he ignored factors such as the documented lack of concern for the "diminishing" but "valuable" objects that Firth had to offer. For example, when Firth was running low on supplies for barter, the Tikopia stopped coming to "exchange" items with him. The scarcity of "goods" did not affect a price rise, nor were European items re-circulated amongst the Tikopia. Nor were the objects considered significant enough to incorporate into the indigenous exchange system. There was one substitution of cotton cloth for *maro*, barkcloth, in an offering in which Firth participated (1983: 424), though the items concerned were not "purchased". Also, fish-hooks formed part of a payment of mortuary obligations but "On the whole they [Firth's goods] did not feature in the elaborate native exchanges" (Firth, 1965: 380).

While Firth stated that he dictated the initial rates of exchange, "Tikopia etiquette" regarding gift and counter gift affected the final outcome of the transaction and he discovered the "price" below which Tikopia people would not enter into exchanges. (This "price" was independent of the cost incurred by Firth in acquiring and bringing the items to Tikopia.) He therefore suggested that he acquired his "specimens" and the Tikopia got very useful things they needed, at a negotiated price (Firth, 1965: 379). After a time standard rates developed, although these were never openly discussed or agreed upon. Firth acknowledged an indigenous scale of importance that dictated the exchangeability of the objects (Firth, 1965: 379–380). Some categories of items were never exchanged for others. For example, clubs, pandanus mats and bonito hooks were offered in return for calico, beads and knives. Clubs, pandanus mats and bonito hooks were never traded for metal fish-hooks.

The objects Firth took with him to Tikopia for purposes of exchange do not appear to have been included in indigenous exchange networks but were kept by Tikopia people for personal or family use (Firth, 1965: 380). This suggests that whatever items the Tikopia traded for, while

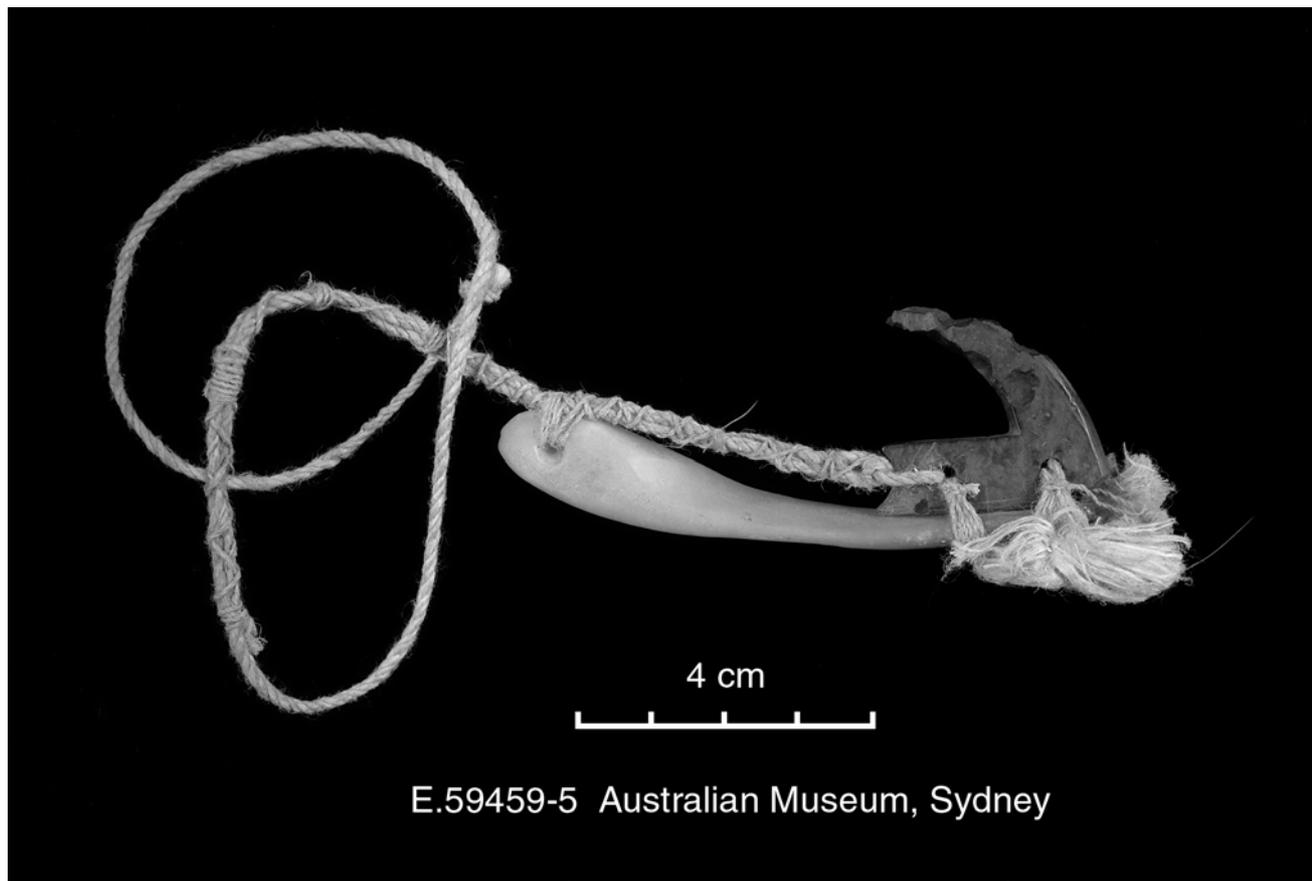


Fig. 1. Bonito hook, given to Firth by Ariki Kafika, one of the chiefs of Tikopia.

they could well have been “useful”, they remained of either peripheral cultural significance or became objects associated with Firth himself.

Firth’s attempt to determine the exact, or as near possible to exact, values of the objects he purchased, ignored qualities attributed to objects by Tikopia people which Firth himself described in his accounts of traditional life at the time (Firth, 1965: 377–380 discussed below). From Firth’s accounts I consider that many of the objects present in the 1928–1929 collection were acquired either through customary use to acknowledge the person’s status vis-à-vis the ancestral spirits, and/or to indicate the person’s social and personal associations. I propose that Firth underestimated the power of Tikopia people in determining an outcome in participating in these exchanges. After all, Firth states that Tikopia “etiquette” won out on exchange rates, despite Firth’s own position as “benevolent monopolist”.

Examination of the 1928–1929 collection using Firth’s purchase list (Firth, 1928) reveals that 29% of the collection was acquired by “purchase”, leaving a much greater percentage 71% to be acquired some other way. He does tell us that he gave seven metal adzes as gifts to the chiefs and other men of rank for “religious” and “traditional information”. He also used a supply of cotton prints as ritual offerings to canoe and temple deities while other European-made items were used to acquire “specimens of the native craft” (Firth, 1965: 377).

If we move away from what Firth says about his collecting and his “purchase price” for specific objects, and consider the types of objects Firth acquired and the people

from whom Firth acquired objects, it is apparent that high ranking “donors” are represented in the collection (Bonshek, 1999: 102–129). How these men (all named donors except one are men) interpreted the transactions being undertaken is a matter for speculation. However, Firth recorded that objects such as mats and barkcloth, sinnet rope, wooden bowls, and pearl shell fish-hooks all had specific social relationships attached to them when transacted. Some of these, such as the fish-hooks called *pa tu manga*, were associated with only the highest ranking chiefs and elders of Tikopia (Fig. 1). Such objects were not casually given away. Many of these same objects would have represented specific family relationships, mementos of their owners and makers. Still other objects, such as sacred shell adzes, were associated with the spirit world of Tikopia cosmology. To obtain such objects Firth must have been taken into a community in a manner which respected and valued his inclusion in day to day as well as ritual life (Bonshek, 1999: 70–124). While Firth saw himself as making scientific collections, I believe the Tikopia were incorporating Firth into their lives, mediating social interactions with Firth through the transfer of objects using already established patterns of exchange and reciprocity.

So, what do Tikopia people think of the collection today? Whose cultural heritage does the collection represent? The absence of Tikopia opinion about the return of this collection is noticeable throughout the correspondence concerning a return. In the history of the request as represented in the Australian Museum archives, the negotiation for the return of all Solomon Islands collections held in the basement of

the Institute of Anatomy buildings, reflected sentiments of nationhood rather than the expressed desires of the specific groups within the Solomon Islands. The Tikopia people, whose "cultural heritage" comprises a significant number of objects, are a strong minority in the Solomon Islands (Bonshek, 1999), but they were not players in the original negotiations between the National Museum of Australia and the National Museum of the Solomon Islands. The collection had been used to mediate expressions of Solomon Islands' nationhood, not Tikopia cultural identity at a local level.

In 1996, I met a number of migrant Tikopia living away from the home island in an attempt to establish the significance of the collection to them. These interviews took place in Honiara, in Kira Kira on Makira Island and in Lata in Santa Cruz. Interest in the objects was sparked off by the knowledge that family members had given objects to Firth so long ago. Also, some people were excited about the objects because they had been given to Firth. Many people did not have a detailed knowledge of designs and patterns on objects, but referred to others who did. Interestingly, most made particular reference to Firth, who was seen as the authority on traditional (that is pre-Christian) Tikopia belief. Some referred to his texts when questioned about particular aspects of Tikopia life in relation to the objects. Knowledge of the 1928–1929 collection and its existence in an overseas institution did not generate worry or anxiety about access to the objects, but people were very interested in the collection because Firth had made it.

In 1980 Judith MacDonald (1991) carried out anthropological fieldwork in Tikopia. She noted that Tikopia's history has been played out somewhat separately to the remainder of the Solomon Islands. To a large extent, the lack of exploitable resources that could become exportable products has affected this. There has been no cash cropping, no foreign trade stores and Tikopia people have not needed to "re-invent themselves culturally" to cope with European influences (MacDonald, 1991: 72–73). The Tikopia people have a strong sense of their cultural identity and it was not necessary to express this through association with the objects in Firth's collection. Some objects in the 1928–1929 collection are still made today, and were not noted by the Tikopia as remarkable. However, this opinion changed when the social relationships surrounding a particular object became known, that is, when specific family members were discovered to have made an object, or have given an object to Firth (Bonshek, 1999).

At the same time, objects remained emblematic of what it is to be a Tikopia. That is, the objects were visibly distinguishable in their form and manufacture, as having been made by a Tikopia person. In 1996 the collection was not considered vital to the continued existence of the cultural identity of the Tikopia people I met, nor was it an emblem of a nostalgic past. The people I talked to did not interpret the 1928–1929 Firth Collection held in a museum as objects severed from their cultural origins or as objects through which they could or should revive pre-Christian practices.

## Conclusion

The creation of the 1928–1929 Firth Collection under the auspices of the University of Sydney, along with the many other collections made by researchers in the Pacific region, was made in parallel with the establishment of the first school of Anthropology in Australia. At one level these collections are intimately connected to the development of a broad "scientific" research program in Australia and the Pacific. Clearly the concept of "cultural heritage" as we use it today was not one which had any currency at the time. "Science" was the engine that drove the collection process. In particular, Firth's collecting fell into this framework. However, Firth was at the forefront of his discipline, and his 1928–1929 collection mediated a complex change within anthropological theory. Objects that had previously been associated with evolutionary stages of progression were, in the School of British Social Anthropology to which Firth belonged, stripped of this interpretation. Firth did, however, maintain a descriptive functional explanation of objects. Firth's efforts to inject a more complex understanding, first of economic practices, and subsequently of social and religious practices, have added greatly to an understanding of the objects in the collection. This occurred despite his emphasis on functionalism, which downplayed an interpretation of the symbolic associations placed on objects.

The request for the repatriation of the Tikopia collections reflected the use of objects to mediate relationships between nation states, not relationships between Tikopia people and the National Museum of the Solomon Islands, nor between the Tikopia people and the National Museum of Australia through the National Museum of the Solomon Islands. The repatriation process was not completed and the files do not record any explanation for this, despite the relevant preparations for a return having been made. I suggest that the repatriation was not completed because the request lacked a social context. It was initiated by an expatriate museum worker, and not negotiated within the context of Tikopia interest in the objects. The subsequent inclusion by the National Museum of the Solomon Islands of the wishes of the collectors, in addition to the practical difficulties associated with the return, further mitigated against the completion of the repatriation process. The proposed return was not located within an indigenous Tikopia social context.

In making this last point however, I do not suggest that the inclusion of a Tikopia social context in the 1970s would necessarily have resulted in the repatriation requests being successfully completed. In using this example, I highlight the implication for museums, that not all collections are contested sites in which ethnographic and political authority is challenged. On the contrary I suggest that, with regard to the 1928–1929 Firth collection, the museum is a site holding objects which mediate specific social relationships. This collection is important because it embodies the relationships of Tikopia people with Raymond Firth. For many Tikopia people, the ethnographer's work has become authoritative and Firth has inscribed into text what it means to be "traditionally" Tikopia. His work has become canon, as yet largely unquestioned, and Firth himself is warmly embraced.

This is in marked contrast to the arena in which many museums operate, in which issues concerning ownership

and access to objects of “cultural heritage” or “cultural property”, and the nature of authenticity and tradition, challenge the authority of the curator, the museum worker and the institution of the museum as a whole (for example see Jones, 1993). Clearly the history of interactions and experiences of Tikopia with Europeans under colonial rule and with Solomon Island national government since independence, has taken a different path to that experienced, for example, by indigenous Australians in the unfolding of black-white relationships since colonization.

I am not suggesting here that the Solomon Islands National Museum is disinterested in issues concerning cultural heritage (on the contrary see Edwards & Stewart, 1980; Foanaóta, 1991, 1994; Roe & Totu, 1991; Totu & Roe, 1991; Lindstrom & White, 1994a,b). However, in this specific case, I believe that the original repatriation request reflected statements about political difference, rather than cultural difference. On the international scene, therefore, collections are incorporated into statements of nationalism, and not used as cultural markers but as political markers. In the future the relationship between Tikopia on the home island and Tikopia living in other parts of the Solomon Islands may play out a different story, and introduce another social context for the collection.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For the purposes of clarity, I have purposefully omitted mention of the Official Papuan Collection which was also housed in the basement of the Institute of Anatomy. This collection is currently housed at the National Museum of Australia.
- <sup>2</sup> As the Sydney University Collection included material from Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, the meeting was also attended by Grace Molissa and Godwin Ligo representing the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and Soroi Eoe, Director of the Papua New Guinea Museum.
- <sup>3</sup> It is not until “Rank and Religion” (Firth, 1970a) that objects were dealt with more attention to emic understanding, although Firth’s interest remained in transactional modes rather than in symbolic contexts.
- <sup>4</sup> Firth noted his lack of “access to the more intimate aspects of women’s lives” in “Encounters with Tikopia over sixty years” (1990: 242) as well as earlier in “Sex roles and sex symbols in Tikopia society” (Firth, 1978b, see also Firth, 1965: 105).

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