

The Effect of Objects: The Return of a North Vanuatu Textile from the Australian Museum to the Vanuatu Cultural Centre

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ABSTRACT. In 1995 a plaited pandanus textile was repatriated from the Australian Museum to the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. During the process questions about the textile's specific place of manufacture arose. The Australian Museum records indicated that it was a girl's dress collected from the northern part of Pentecost Island. However, through discussions with women fieldworkers from the Vanuatu Cultural Centre about variations in methods of manufacture and designs in different parts of Vanuatu it became clear it was a special type of textile called *baru* from Maewo which was no longer made. The return of the *baru* stimulated redefinition of what was known about such objects. For the Cultural Centre fieldworkers it drew attention to items in danger of being no longer made, of loss of skills and knowledge. Accounts of transactions such as this demonstrate both the complexity and the importance of the relationships that can flow through and around museums.

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The return of objects from museums to their communities of origin has often been controversial, with focus usually on issues about ownership: about the rights of museums to own objects, and the rights of communities to demand them back. Such controversies have tended to obscure one of the most crucial features of the return of objects to their communities of origin, that is, that this movement is above all about relationships. Return can be about relationships between nations, between institutions, between individuals, or, more usually, some complex combination of them all. The return of an object is always a kind of exchange: exchange as compensation, exchange as debt repayment, exchange to mark changes in comparative status, to affirm an existing relationship, or to open a new relationship. The

degree to which the return of objects is a matter of the making and remaking of relationships has begun to be recognized, as indicated in the title: “we deal with relationships: not just objects” (Kelly *et al.*, 2001).

In this paper I tell the story of an object returned—from the Australian Museum, Sydney, to the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. This is a small story, not one of great moment. However, in tracing the return of this object and the consequences that flowed around it, it is possible to demonstrate both the complexity and the importance of the relationships that can flow through and around museums, and the way that key individuals in museums can act in ways that have far-reaching effects. As such, this paper is a tribute to Jim Specht. Jim's investment in relationships with