

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



Fig. 1. Plaited pandanus textile from the collections of the Australian Museum, Sydney, returned to Vanuatu in 1995. The textile was collected by A.R. McCulloch in 1910 on Pentecost Island. Research in Vanuatu after 1995 demonstrated its stylistic origins in the central area of Maewo island. AM registration E.18864. Photograph by Australian Museum, reproduced with permission of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre.

indigenous communities in Australia and in Melanesia, and his willingness to bring about the return of objects to them, has been of very considerable importance for cultural programs in the region. James Clifford has suggested that museums can be viewed as “contact zones”, arguing that museums can and perhaps should see themselves as “specific places of transit, intercultural borders, contexts of struggle and communication between discrepant communities” (Clifford, 1997: 213). Jim’s gift to the Australian Museum has been to make that suggestion real, long before it was proposed, and to teach those of us who worked with him to be open to the possibilities of such permeabilities.

The object which is the subject of my small story is a plaited pandanus textile. It was returned from the Australian Museum to the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in 1995, to mark the opening of a new Cultural Centre building. Appropriately enough, this story has several distinct strands, which I discuss in turn, showing how they gradually join together. I first provide some background on textiles in Vanuatu, discussing next the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and its relationship with the Australian Museum, then move on to consider the return itself, and the consequences which flowed from it.

Strand one: North Vanuatu textiles

To begin with, there is the textile itself. It was collected in 1910 on the island of Pentecost in north Vanuatu (then the New Hebrides) by an Australian Museum biologist, A.R. McCulloch. It was registered the same year as a “Girl’s Dress” and given the number E.18864 (Fig. 1). McCulloch was not an ethnologist, and he was not in the New Hebrides for long. I hope I do him no disservice if I suggest that, probably, he collected the textile rather as he might have collected a biological specimen, with interest, but not expecting to need to know much more about it than what it was and where it came from. He must have engaged in a transient relationship of some kind with the person from whom he acquired the textile, but he didn’t document that relationship for posterity. McCulloch recorded the textile as coming from Raga (the local name for the northern part of Pentecost), but with no more specific provenance. The textile is a small (L: 84 cm, W: 24 cm), with a raised design of five large diamonds plaited into the fabric, and highlighted with red dye.

North Pentecost is one of three places in Vanuatu where women produce a distinctive style of pandanus textile, dyed red using the stencilling technique unique to north Vanuatu (log-wrap stencil dyeing). Although Speiser illustrated a number of textiles in his survey of the material culture of the then New Hebrides (Speiser, 1923), and although quite a few exist in museum collections internationally, until recent decades very little has been known about them. Research by Annie Walter (1996) and myself (Bolton, 2001, 2003) has begun to disentangle their complexities.

The three places which produce these distinctive textiles are north Pentecost, Ambae, and Maewo. These islands are geographically close in the Vanuatu archipelago, meeting together like the petals on a three-leaf clover. In the past, there was extensive trade between them, so that although each place produced its own textiles, men often sought to acquire textiles (especially certain clothing textiles) from other areas in order to enhance their status in rituals in their own places. Since the early 1990s, these three islands have linked administratively as a province of Vanuatu, known as

Penama. Other styles of red-dyed textiles are produced elsewhere in the archipelago, in Malakula, Ambrym, and also in the Banks Islands, but they are different again (Deacon, 1934; articles in Bonnemaïson *et al.*, 1996), and do not have the similarities in appearance and use which characterize Pentecost, Ambae and Maewo textiles. Borrowing the recent administrative terminology, the Pentecost, Ambae, Maewo textile complex can thus be termed the Penama textile complex.

Penama textiles are most usually described as “mats” in museum catalogues, in publications, and also in Bislama, Vanuatu’s lingua franca. However, “mat” in the English sense is hardly an adequate term for them, for there are many different kinds of textile, and they are used for diverse purposes. There are textiles used as exchange valuables, textiles that are domestic furnishings, and others used in specific ritual contexts. In the past there were also textiles worn as everyday clothing. To the uninitiated, all these textiles are similar in appearance, but in fact each different type has its own characteristics, name, use and meaning, and each is subject to a number of rules about who can make and use it. These different types of textile are so distinct that they are treated as fundamentally different kinds of objects, in the way that, for example, Australians would generally regard a cotton tea towel and a cotton bed sheet as quite distinct kinds of thing (Bolton, 2001). The textiles are physically distinguished from each other by size, by the kinds of selvages, fringes and tassels appropriate to each, by the decorative features plaited into them, by whether or not they are dyed, and often by the appearance and the name of designs stencilled onto them.

The differences in north Ambae pandanus textiles are not just a matter of the variety of types, but also of the places where they are made. In north and central Pentecost, three kinds of textile are made. Annie Walter has recorded the language terms for them in the Apma language of central Pentecost. There they are known as *sese*, *tsip*, and *butsuban* (Walter, 1996). *Sese* are up to 4 m long, and are stencilled along their whole length. *Butsuban* are undyed sleeping textiles. *Tsip* are small (only about 120 cm long) and are also stencilled. The Raga language term for the smallest mat is also *tsip*, and McCulloch’s textile would thus appear to be a *tsip*. The system on Ambae is more complex than on Pentecost: there women make many distinctively named types of textile, which are grouped together into four categories, three of which are named. In east Ambae these categories are: *maraha*, large exchange valuables (the most valuable of which can be up to 100 m long); *qana*, which are smaller exchange valuables also used as domestic furnishings and which are similar to the Pentecost *sese*; clothing textiles, which today have no category name; and *singo*, textiles used mostly in ritual contexts (Bolton, 2003). One type of *singo*, *singo tavalu*, is quite similar in size and appearance to the Pentecost *tsip*, although a well-trained eye can readily tell them apart. On Maewo, women make nine different types of textile, which are not grouped into categories, but each of which has specific contexts use. Their names are: *qan seresere*, *qan melomelo*, *tavalu*, *qan rururu*, *qan somsombei*, *qan qanariringi*, *malo*, *ban tavalu*, *qana tutuhu* and *baru*. Of these only one type is dyed. These are the small textiles known as *baru*, which are particularly close in appearance to the Ambae *singo*, and to a lesser extent to the Pentecost *tsip*.

Strand two: the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and the Australian Museum

In total, Vanuatu comprises about eighty islands, with a population at the turn of the twenty-first century of about 200,000 people. There is immense cultural diversity in the archipelago; in every small area people speak a different language (113 in total), and have different knowledge, beliefs and practices. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre, which was founded in 1956, attempts to both document and promote this cultural diversity. It is renowned, in the Pacific at least, for the programs which it operates throughout the archipelago, programs designed to enable local people to document and revive their own practices, and to negotiate local belief and practice in the face of ongoing changes to their lives. These Cultural Centre programs rely on a network of extension workers, known as fieldworkers, who are volunteers, and who work in their own villages and regions to document and sustain local practice (Tryon, 1999). The fieldworker program was initially developed in the late 1970s, becoming established with the introduction of annual fieldworker workshops in 1981. Until the early 1990s, the project was directed solely at men, and there were only male fieldworkers. In 1994 a women’s group was founded.

At the annual fieldworker workshops, fieldworkers present the results of research on a nominated topic, which they have been preparing through the preceding year. They share knowledge—about architectural styles, about pigs, about ritual cycles—and at the same time document it, exchanging ideas and encouraging each other in their common goal of keeping their distinctive local knowledge and practices alive through the massive social changes that have followed the achievement of independence in 1980. Individual fieldworkers are thus both knowledgeable about the cultural practices of their own areas, and are often deeply committed to the documentation and revival of those practices.

The curator of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre from 1977 until 1989 was an Anglo-American ethnologist, Kirk Huffman. Kirk had been good friends with Jim Specht for many years, their friendship dating back to before Kirk became the Cultural Centre curator. This friendship created strong links between the Australian Museum and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and has generated a number of joint programs and other connections between the two institutions. One of these was a cataloguing and staff training project at the Cultural Centre, which began in 1989, and in which a number of Anthropology staff, myself included, were involved. An outcome of this was an invitation made to me by the Board of the Cultural Centre to assist in developing the women’s fieldworker program at the Cultural Centre. I spent 14 months in Vanuatu in 1991 and 1992, training Jean Tarisesei, who now co-ordinates the women fieldworker program.¹ During that period, Jean and I undertook a documentation and research program on Ambae, which focussed on women’s production of plaited pandanus textiles.

The Ambae program is a good example both of the collaboration between the Australian Museum and the Cultural Centre, and of the degree of local commitment to cultural revival which the fieldworker program generates.

When I was planning the Ambae program, Jim Specht suggested that the project should include a workshop held on Ambae for women from across the island, at which they could share and discuss their knowledge about textiles. At Jim's suggestion, the Cultural Centre and I obtained funding for the workshop from the Australian National Commission for Unesco. The workshop was held in June 1992, and was attended not only by women from Ambae, but by observers from adjacent islands, from Pentecost, Maewo, Santo and Malo.

At this workshop delegates shared public knowledge about textile types and uses, learned with interest about differences in textile use and classification from district to district around the island, and in adjacent islands, and thus recognized that their knowledge about textiles was not just a matter of everyday ordinariness, but something distinctive and special to their places. This recognition of difference was actually quite important. Trade in textiles, as in other resources, was almost completely eradicated in the archipelago as a result of various expatriate pressures from the late 1920s (Huffman, 1996: 187). Moreover, trade had been generally conducted by men, so that women never had as much opportunity to see different textile forms. In the early 1990s neither men nor women on Ambae were able to identify textiles as coming from Maewo or Pentecost.

By 1995 quite a number of other Australian Museum staff had developed personal connections with the Cultural Centre, through running training and other assistance programs both in Sydney and in Vanuatu, so that, early that year, matching the temper of the times, the two institutions formalized their relationship by signing a Memorandum of Understanding.

Strand three: the return of the textile

Later in 1995, when the Vanuatu Cultural Centre opened a new building, Jim suggested to the Australian Museum Trustees that, especially given the Memorandum of Understanding, it would be appropriate for the Australian Museum to mark the occasion by returning an object to Vanuatu. This was not the first return of an object to Vanuatu by the Australian Museum, but the fourth. The museum had returned a drum from Mele village in 1981, a bark cloth from Erromango in 1985 and a bark cloth from Ifira island in 1988. Given my ongoing involvement with the women fieldworkers program and with the Ambae textile project, Jim suggested that I act on behalf of the Cultural Centre in choosing a textile to be returned.

I had already established that all the Ambaean textiles in the Australian Museum were types which were still being made. I chose what I thought was a rare but well-documented textile produced within the north Vanuatu red textile complex, of a type not represented in the Cultural Centre collections. I chose the McCulloch textile from Pentecost.

The new Cultural Centre building was opened in November 1995. Jim Specht attended the opening and announced the presentation of the textile to the Cultural Centre. Several weeks later it was formally received for the Cultural Centre by two male fieldworkers from northern Pentecost, Richard Leona and Columbas Toa. Carefully mounted in an insect resistant box, the textile was put on display in the new Cultural Centre exhibitions.

Strand four: the effects of the return

When Richard Leona and Columbas Toa received the textile, they were a little bewildered by it. They didn't recognize it. Annie Walter, the Pentecost textile specialist, was also puzzled. She also saw the McCulloch textile when it was presented, and later said to me she didn't think it was from Pentecost at all. I, naively secure in the certainty that McCulloch had collected the textile there, was not too worried by these doubts. It seemed to me that the diversity of the red textile complex and the probability of changes in it over the years since 1910 might explain why neither Richard, Columbas, nor Annie especially recognized McCulloch's textile.

In 1994, following the completion of the Ambae project, the Cultural Centre had inaugurated annual workshops for women fieldworkers, following the model of the men's workshops. In 1996 Irene Lini and Rachel Ngotiboe, who are the two Cultural Centre women fieldworkers from Maewo, the third island in the red textile complex, saw the McCulloch textile when they came to Vila for the third women's workshop. (They had not been present when the textile was presented the year before). Irene immediately identified the textile as coming not from Pentecost, but from central Maewo.

In 1999, Jean Tarisesei and I travelled to Maewo specifically to study textiles. We took with us photos of textiles from north Vanuatu in various museum collections, including the McCulloch textile. Irene Lini, on her own initiative, organized about sixteen women from a number of villages in central Maewo to meet with us for an informal five-day workshop in Kerebei, central Maewo (the home of the male Maewo fieldworker, Jeffrey Uliboe). From Irene's point of view, the workshop was all about sharing knowledge to encourage the maintenance and revival of textile skills. For Jean and myself, it was an invaluable opportunity to learn about Maewo textiles, which had never been previously documented.

It was at this workshop that I learned that only one of the Maewo textile types is dyed. All the other textiles made on Maewo are left undyed. (This doesn't mean that they are completely plain: some Maewo textile types are decorated with beautiful openwork designs). The dyed textiles are a special type known as *baru*, and are associated with descent groups; or rather, the designs worked into and stencilled onto them are descent group designs, which are used on other media. The workshop delegates were no longer confident in naming all the descent group designs as they appeared on the *baru* or in identifying which design belonged to which descent group, but they recognized the McCulloch textile (of which we had a photograph) as one of them.

The kinship system in central Maewo is organized on the basis of matrilineal moieties, Liu and Asu. Lynne Hume, who undertook research on Maewo in 1981, reports that each moiety contains four main descent groups (which she describes as clans), and that sub-groups to these also exist (Hume, 1982: 34). In my visits to Maewo, I found the situation somewhat less clear. However, I did establish that there are descent groups (*laen* in Bislama), and these descent groups have exclusive rights to certain designs. Descent group membership is not exclusive. By tracing links back through a family, individuals can claim the right to use

different descent group designs. These designs are used on specified media in specified contexts. They are used on *baru*. They are used as face painting designs at a certain stage in *lengwasa* (a Maewo women's status-alteration ritual). The same designs are also used on men's head-dresses in the linked male status-alteration rituals, *kwatu*. (There are four *kwatu* rituals: *kwelu*, *kwatbarungu*, *kwatu takombio* and *kwatasmori*). The designs also appear in rock art: the male Maewo fieldworker, Jeffrey Uliboe, regards some rock engravings in central Maewo as descent group designs. The importance of these designs, and the way in which they can shift from medium to medium, is characteristic of north Vanuatu. On Ambae, for example, certain important designs are used on specified textiles, were used as women's tattoo designs, appear as rock engravings, and are worked into armbands and belts worn by men in the *huqe*, the principal Ambae male status-enhancement system.

Baru utilize a special plaiting technique which marks out a design in the weave is subsequently highlighted through the stencilling process. In this technique designs are plaited into the body of the textile using a mixture of float weaves and tied loops, producing a raised surface, like a kind of bas-relief. I call this technique "overweave", for want of a better term. This technique is also used on Ambae *singo*, but it is not used on Pentecost *tsip*. Thus the McCulloch textile, which incorporates an overweave design, could not have been produced on Pentecost. On Ambae there is a strictly limited range of named designs which can be worked using overweave. The McCulloch textile design, with its five large diamonds, while structurally similar to the Ambae *singo* designs, is nevertheless not one of these. It is, as it was to Irene and to Rachel, recognizably a Maewo descent group design.

Kirk Huffman has published a map of exchange routes in north Vanuatu which notes a trade in pigs and textiles between Maewo and Raga (north Pentecost) (Huffman, 1996: 184). It seems likely that McCulloch, thinking he was collecting a girl's dress from Pentecost, had actually collected a Maewo *baru* which had been exchanged in this trade between Maewo and north Pentecost.

As the Maewo textile workshop progressed, women began to produce carefully preserved examples of *baru* from the rafters of their houses and other safe storage places. These textiles were kept to be worn occasionally to mark achieved status and descent group membership at rituals and other special times. Beautifully and finely made, these *baru* were nevertheless old, and sometimes rotting. The very fine plaiting technique necessary to making them was a skill no longer practised, although several older women, notably Rachel Ngotiboe, still remembered the highly restricted and ritualized techniques for dyeing them. When people needed to wear *baru* they would use these old ones, but increasingly people had been no longer made the effort to wear them for rituals. Thus, for example, women would perform *lengwasa* (the women's status-alteration ritual) without attempting to wear the correct textiles.

My assumption that the textile might not have been recognized by either Richard Leona, Columbas Toa or Annie Walter, because of changes in textile production over time, was thus proved entirely wrong. Instead, the consistency of the Penama textile traditions, and the maintenance of knowledge about them, was more than amply demonstrated. If I was amazed to find that there were many *baru* still on

Maewo, the point for Irene Lini, who had organized the 1999 Maewo workshop, was that the skills and knowledge necessary to make them were nearly forgotten.

One of Irene's objectives for the Maewo workshop was to revive the necessary plaiting and dyeing skills, and to make *baru* again. Here the threads of this story begin to form a yet more complex pattern. When Jean and I organized the Ambae textile workshop in 1992, Irene had not yet become involved with the Cultural Centre. The delegate sent from Maewo to the Ambae workshop was a woman called Perpetua Lini. The Ambae workshop made a deep impression on Perpetua, and when she returned to Maewo she talked about it to other women. She had concluded that it was very important to keep the practice of making *baru* alive, and she had spoken so persuasively about it that one of Irene's daughters, Doreen, a notable plaiter of textiles, had been persuaded to make an attempt. Doreen had copied one of the *baru* on Maewo, and after much trial and error, had succeeded in making one. Rachel Ngotiboe had dyed it.

Irene was thus speaking about a revival that had already started when she urged women at the 1999 Maewo textile workshop to try to make *baru* again. Doreen brought her *baru* to the workshop; the comparison between it and the older ones was very clear. Despite her very considerable achievement in making it, Doreen's *baru* was neither as finely-plaited nor as well-dyed as the ones still kept in the rafters. There was a feeling among the women at the workshop that more effort needed to be made. More women needed to try to make *baru* and they needed to try to achieve the fineness of the older textiles. It was also well-understood that it would have to be young girls, whose eyesight is still sharp, who took up the challenge. Irene hoped that the discussions of the workshop would stimulate some of the participants to follow Doreen's lead.

Conclusion

On the day the new Cultural Centre building opened in 1995, many thousands of people visited it, and when a section of the Swiss French touring exhibition, *Arts of Vanuatu*, came to the Cultural Centre the next year, over a third of the population of Port Vila, the capital, came to see it. In general, however, the new Cultural Centre building, which is opposite the Parliament House on a hill above the town, not in the main street, is not much visited by ni-Vanuatu. Probably, especially for the many young people living in poor settlements around the town, the building seems intimidatingly smart. It could not be said that the McCulloch textile is, or ever was, the focus of visitor interest. The effects of the return were brought about as news of, and ideas about, the textile were communicated to the people in Vanuatu who could bring their own knowledge to bear upon it.

The controversies surrounding the return of objects to their countries of origin often involve a discourse of rights—the right of the originating community to take possession of, or to exercise authority over, objects identified as part of their cultural heritage, and the rights of museums to continue to hold objects. Thus in this discourse, rights are often opposed to rights, and an analysis of the return of objects framed in terms of rights is thus generally oppositional, pitting the one against the other. The effect of this kind of discussion is to focus particularly on the object and on its physical ownership. Objects, however, exist in,

and have effects upon, relationships between people, and these effects are often as dependent upon knowledge or information associated with the object as with the object itself.

In the case of the McCulloch *baru* there was no debate about rights; the Australian Museum initiated the textile's return to Vanuatu. Ownership was not the issue. It was rather knowledge about the textile, and the knowledge-sharing stimulated by it, around which the story of the McCulloch *baru* turned. The physical return of the textile to the Cultural Centre was a stimulus for a redefinition of what was known about it: no longer a Girl's Dress from Raga, it was recognized as a central Maewo *baru*. And for fieldworkers such as Irene Lini, the return of the actual textile was all about Cultural Centre goals of documentation and revival, drawing attention to something in danger of being no longer made, of the loss of skills and knowledge.

An analysis of return in terms of relationships thus opens up a wider series of interconnections and consequences. The return of the McCulloch textile is part of the ongoing relationship between the Australian Museum and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. In presenting it at a key moment in the Cultural Centre's development, the Australian Museum gave substance to the Memorandum of Understanding which had been signed the year before, demonstrating the ongoing relationship between the two institutions. It was not just the relationship between the Australian Museum and the Cultural Centre which was important, however, but the relationships between Kirk Huffman and Jim Specht, between Perpetua and Doreen, between Irene, Jean Tarisesei and myself, and between Irene and other people on Maewo. All of these relationships were woven partially around the McCulloch *baru* and knowledge about it. And all these relationships, as well as the object, made the difference to Maewo women, and developed what is, I hope, now an ongoing project to make *baru* again on Maewo.

Notes

¹ During this period I was on unpaid leave from the Australian Museum, doing research for my doctoral thesis, and simultaneously working as a volunteer for the Cultural Centre.

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