

# From Field to Museum Studies from Melanesia in Honour of Robin Torrence

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# The Longgu Community Time Capsule: Contemporary Collecting in Solomon Islands for the Australian Museum

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**ABSTRACT.** The *Longgu Community Time Capsule* was a collaborative project to acquire a contemporary collection from the Longgu community in Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands for the Australian Museum, Sydney. It built upon an earlier engagement of Longgu community representatives, Steward Bungana and Florence Watepura, with the Ian Hogbin collection from Longgu made in 1933. Bungana and Watepura reported back to their community and through the *Longgu Community Time Capsule* project, Longgu people formulated the subject and methodology for the creation of a contemporary collection. This paper describes aspects of their engagement with the Museum, its collections, and researchers, which formed the basis for making ceremonial feasting bowls for the Museum. Through interaction with the historical collection the Longgu decided that carving manifested cultural knowledge but carving skills were endangered. The project provided an example of the process of value production described by Howard Morphy in which museum collections are continually re-contextualised, re-examined, and made relevant in the present. The project also supported the view that museum collections are cultural resources that allow for distinctive collaborative methodologies for interrogating both the past and the present in a process described by Nicholas Thomas as the ‘museum as method.’

## Introduction

The *Longgu Community Time Capsule* was an innovative and collaborative research project to acquire contemporary collections in an ethical fashion from Solomon Islands for the Australian Museum, Sydney (Torrence and Bonshek, 2013). Longgu is the name of the language spoken by some 1500 people living on Guadalcanal Island approximately six hours combined trip by car and motorboat from Honiara, the nation’s capital (Fig. 1). I visited Nangali, one of the Longgu villages, between 10 and 24 January 2013, and acquired thirteen items including carved food bowls and woven baskets (Table 1). I also recorded carvers making the bowls using digital video and photographs.

The selection of the objects to make this collection was built upon the response of the Longgu people to the Australian Museum’s existing collection from their villages that was made in 1933 by anthropologist Ian Hogbin (1964).

During his career Hogbin acquired collections from the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea (Beckett and Gray, 2007) that are now housed at the Australian Museum in Sydney as part of the University of Sydney Collection. He also deposited an extensive photographic collection with the University of Sydney Archives (Conway, 2012).

Through making objects as part of the *Time Capsule* project the Longgu people recognised aspects of social change in their contemporary practices. Their reflection on the historical collections influenced their decisions about what to make. The project provides an example of the process of value production described by Howard Morphy in which museum collections are continually re-contextualised, re-examined, and made relevant in the present (Morphy, 2020: 32). This research supports the view that museum collections are cultural resources which, while disconnected from contemporary communities by the passage of time (Morphy, 2020: 116), may not be completely disconnected

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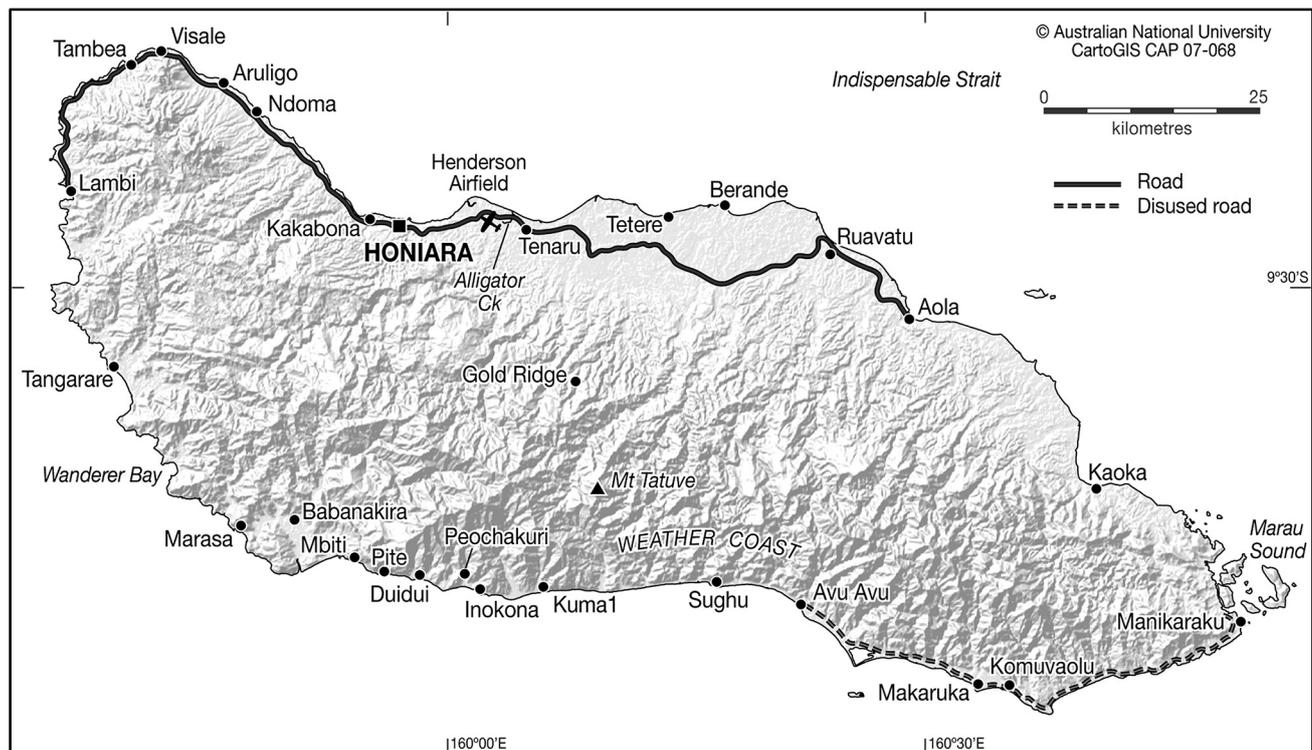
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**Figure 1.** Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. Nangali village is located inland from the area marked Kaoka, the name used by Hogbin to refer to the Longgu (Hill, 2002: 538). Map reproduced with the permission of CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, Canberra.

from contemporary cultural production—although, as the Longgu discovered, they may be in danger of becoming so. The process of engaging with the Museum, its infrastructural elements such as registration documents, labels, photographs and archives, as well as its collection objects, provided a distinctive collaborative methodology for interrogation of both the past and the present which Nicholas Thomas (2010) has described as using the ‘museum as method.’

The strength of the collecting strategy of the *Time Capsule* project lay in having the Longgu people decide what was important to them for the Australian Museum to acquire, preserve and house in Australia. At the same time, the strategy maintained the aims of the Museum to build upon its existing collections (Bonshek, 2015). As reflected in its collection strategy (Australian Museum, 2008) the Museum sought to extend the time-line represented by its current collections through the acquisition of a

highly coherent set of modern material ... In this approach a “time capsule” comprised of material items is selected by community members to represent how they represent their contemporary lives and their identity and place in the modern globalized world (Australian Museum Archives, 2011).

In the case of the Solomon Islands, the Museum’s collection had seen few additions since the 1930s.

This contemporary collecting project is therefore distinguished from conventional practice in that the Longgu themselves decided which types of objects and accompanying digital images and video records could be acquired by the Museum, rather than having them selected by Museum staff or researchers. Through this process the Museum enhanced its collections through an understanding of how the Longgu community viewed itself within a global world while simultaneously supporting the Museum’s contemporary collecting strategy.

The success of the *Time Capsule* project rested upon an earlier engagement between Longgu people and the Museum’s collections during *The Kaoka Speakers Revisited* project of 2012 (described below). This resulted in interactions that confirm Thomas’ (2019: 3) observation that museum engagements are both ‘revelatory and inspiring.’ The *Time Capsule* project extended these earlier engagements, and led to a plan by the Longgu community for the creation of new things and memories (Bonshek, 2016) that would ensure continuity in the knowledge of specific techniques of cultural reproduction (see Thomas, 2015: 19).

### A foundation for the Longgu Community Time Capsule

*The Kaoka Speakers Revisited* project established the foundation for the *Longgu Community Time Capsule* by bringing together the Longgu community, the author and Deborah Hill, a linguist and long-term researcher with the Longgu, to examine Hogbin’s collections at the Australian Museum, his photographs held by the Chau Chak Wing Museum in the University of Sydney and his field notes in the University of Sydney Archives. The project cemented the support of the Nangali residents for the ethos of preserving objects and social practices, which is a core focus of museums (Thomas, 2019). This resulted in Steward Bungana and Florence Watepura (Fig. 2) being selected by the Longgu villagers and their chiefs to travel to Sydney in 2012 to see the collection and to report on their findings. At the completion of the visit the Australian Museum expressed interest in making a new Longgu collection through the *Longgu Community Time Capsule* project. Bungana and Watepura discussed this new project with the community, which resulted in Bonshek’s visit to Nangali village in 2013 to initiate the project.



**Figure 2.** Steward Bungana and Florence Watepura reading Ian Hogbin's field notebooks held by the University of Sydney Archives. Photo: E. Bonshek, 9 February 2012.

### Talking about collections

One of the central issues for museums holding cultural collections concerns representation: who has the authority to speak about collections? The Longgu community resolved this matter in their preparations for the *Kaoka Speakers* project through the appointment of Bungana and Watepura by the *Suloma* (House of Chiefs). The selection of Bungana, who was also an advisor to the *Suloma*, and Watepura, a mother then residing in Honiara, meant that they carried a great responsibility. The two delegates represented the 'authorised voice' (Bourdieu, 1991) of the Longgu community. Deborah Hill explained that the *Suloma's* decision was based upon Bungana and Watepura holding the appropriate knowledge to deal successfully with the task at hand, and also their fitness to withstand the journey to Australia. Success in dealing with the trip involved having cultural knowledge about Longgu culture; knowledge of how to deal with non-village ways of doing things; ability to deal with the demands of the project itself; and the life experience to deal with the strains of living for one month in a distant country. Bungana and Watepura were fully empowered by the community, through the chiefs, to undertake not only an arduous physical journey from Solomon Islands to Australia, but also to take an intellectual and emotional journey on their behalf. In this sense they can also be seen as 'cultural brokers' (Jacobs, 2014).

### Encountering museums and collections

A significant part of dealing with the demands of the project and non-village ways of doing things involved engagement with the phenomena of museums, cultural heritage, and the concept of museums having a role in society. This required an understanding of Hogbin's collection within the broader perspective of the Western intellectual tradition that emphasises the importance of museum collections as history. Western museums and archives manifest preoccupations with the preservation of material objects from the past, and concerns for the role of the past in the present and future. While some have argued that Western museums represent a wholly alien practice for indigenous people, others have argued for indigenous forms of curation to appropriate the museum—especially the colonial museum (e.g., Stanley, 2007).

Some of these ideas were given physical presence for Bungana and Watepura through the structures of the Australian Museum and University buildings, as well as through the collections. They wanted to see where Hogbin had worked, and we took them to see the lecture room in which he delivered his talks and presented his slides, including those taken during his visit among the Longgu. Watepura used the term 'network' (Bonshek, 2016: 40-41) to refer to the resources she perceived to be connected and linked across the collections, involving the Museums, their staff, and researchers.

To access Longgu objects physically, we walked through the Australian Museum's storage area in which the Guadalcanal material was stored. This amounted to some 20 or so shelves of objects on open shelves and in pull-out drawers. In this way we identified 13 additional items that were either from the Longgu area or were familiar to Bungana and Watepura. As they looked, discussed and explained the objects, it was not immediately evident what their thoughts about the collection were. Time was needed for them to digest what they were seeing and experiencing. After the first survey of the Longgu and Guadalcanal collections we moved to a more in-depth examination of the objects that the delegates had chosen to speak about; we started with their choice, two wooden bowls. It became clear later that carving was significant to Watepura and Bungana because contemporary carving knowledge rested with the carvers of Nangali (see Bonshek, 2016). A process of recognising social practices while engaging with historical objects was in train; perhaps these two bowls were the inspiration for the idea to make feasting bowls for the Museum's collection.

**Table 1.** Objects acquired for the *Longgu Community Time Capsule*.

AM reg. no.	object	maker
E095488	Round wooden bowl	Reuben Vigane
E095489	Long wooden bowl, with frigate bird design	Isaac Pegoa
E095490	Square wooden bowl	Gabriel Ropovono
E095491	Wooden mortar	Paul Zugia
E095492	Double wooden bowl	Peter Mette
E095493	Woven tray, tightly coiled	Peter Mette
E095494	Disposable food plate made from coconut frond	Danial Seka
E095495	Basket made of coconut frond	Danial Seka
E095496	Basket <i>pera</i> with white rim made from plain and dyed coconut fronds	Alice Mary Wotaiya
E095497	Large basket with 'flower of vine designs' made from plain and dyed coconut fronds	Alice Mary Wotaiya
E095498	Basket with brown rim; a very strong and sturdy basket	Alice Mary Wotaiya
E095499	Spoon, made from coconut endocarp	Margaret Arumana
E095500	Spoon, made from coconut endocarp	Amos Voua



**Figure 3.** Steward Bungana holding a mortar collected by Ian Hogbin, held by the Australian Museum. Photo: E. Bonshek, 8 February 2012.

### Recognising feasting

Bungana and Watepura commented that Hogbin's photographs had repeatedly captured scenes and activities relating to ceremonial feasting (Bonshek, 2016: 36-38). Knowing this, perhaps it is not surprising that he collected items used in food preparation and prestation. These included *lali* (square shaped food bowls), a mortar for pounding food into a mash (Fig. 3), a 'shaping bowl' for moulding it, and cooking tongs. The women of Longgu continue to use mortars (Fig. 4) and cook with hot stones (rather than on wood fires) for which tongs are essential. Every household kitchen, a small covered structure located apart from the sleeping area, is constructed with a large square or rectangular fireplace where stones are heated. When the stones are hot enough, parcels of food are placed amongst them to cook. Once cooked food has been mashed, it must be reheated. The cook picks up a hot stone with a pair of tongs, plunges it into a bowl of water to cool it slightly, and then places it into the wooden serving dish containing the mash to warm it up. When the food is hot enough the stones are removed. A head pad (an example is also in Hogbin's collection) is used by women for carrying heavy loads including items such as food bowls.

At the end of their visit Watepura declared that Hogbin had 'captured the heart of the Longgu' (Bonshek, 2016: 42-43); and it was from this observation, perhaps, that the focus on

feasting in the *Time Capsule* project emerged. The scenes of carvers working in 2013 (Fig. 5) echoed those captured by Hogbin in 1933, such as his photograph of Steward's grandfather, Mete, making four bowls (Bonshek, 2016: 41, fig. 2.7). In the photo Mete sits amongst bowls in various stages of construction. We see him chipping out a bowl with an adze while using his feet to stabilise the work in front of him. Behind him there is a gouging tool for hollowing vessels, placed inside a *lali* (a square shaped food bowl), and a roughly shaped bowl stands in front of him, with what appears to be a 'blank' placed to his left. There are three different sized adzes in view, and perhaps a second gouging tool to one side, resting on the blank.

Through the process of interacting with the Museum collection the Longgu, through Watepura and Bungana, came to realise that the material knowledge practices demonstrated in the photographs and manifest in the objects were compromised in contemporary village life. While memories of how objects were used and made were re-activated by seeing the collections, Bungana and Watepura became aware of the next generation's inability to draw upon similar memories. Engaging with the collection generated contemplation of the impacts of social change in Longgu and consideration of the fragility or longevity of customary social practices, their preservation or loss. Connerton (2009) suggests memories are maintained and preserved through



**Figure 4.** Alice Mary Wotaiya in her cooking house pounding *yangi* made from sweet potatoes in a *tabili* (mortar). Her stone oven is to her left. Photo: E. Bonshek, 16 January 2013.



**Figure 5.** Carvers at work. Photo: E. Bonshek, 17 January 2013.

familiar objects and places and disconnection from these is the means by which ‘modernity’ causes a break with the past, and both social practices and values are forgotten. In carrying out the *Time Capsule* project, Bungana and Watepura decided to create memories for the next generation and maintain connections with a re-valued past.

### Difficult heritage

However, not all objects in the collection were easy to speak about. There was one object, a small segment of ‘shell currency’ used in traditional exchange throughout the Solomon Islands, which evoked something akin to ‘difficult heritage’ (MacDonald, 2010) and a reminder of something best forgotten (Connerton, 2009, 2011).

From my perspective as a researcher, this object raised an opportunity to explore the local context of shell currency as an object of complex meaning, as ‘money or not money’ (Szabó, 2018: 36)—particularly in terms of a search for the significance of museum examples—and stemming from my reflection on the contemporary role of money and other valuables (Bonshek, 2009). See also a broader context provided by Akin and Robbins (1999) and Burt and Bolton (2014). The presence of shell money in the Longgu collection was, from the point of view of the life cycle of a particular object type (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986), potentially valuable in providing a commentary on exchange networks from the Longgu viewpoint. For these reasons I drew the delegates’ attention to the shell currency with a sense of anticipation, but they made no comment to me, switching from English to a near whisper in Longgu. My inability to speak Longgu transformed their choice not to communicate with me about the object into a silence.

However, there are reasons why, from an emic perspective, speaking out might be problematic. The silence that might accompany the viewing of objects from Melanesia in museums may have many meanings. To speak about an object that does not ‘belong’ to one’s group, or which may not be recognised as such, can be a delicate matter. This might be because a speaker does not have the authority to speak about a particular object; or the object itself may be known to be dangerous; or the object may be dangerous because its use is unknown (e.g., Barker, 2001; Bonshek, 2008, 2009; Haraha, 2007).

Later that day Bungana and Watepura’s response was made clear. An understanding of the civil unrest in Solomon Islands in 2000 provided the reason for their discomfort. The unrest had been the culmination of tensions between Guadalcanal islanders, the customary landowners, and people of Malaitan descent living on Guadalcanal. The Longgu, living in the southeast of Guadalcanal, are in close proximity to Malaita and have ancestral and linguistic connections with Malaitans. During the unrest they did not want to re-affirm this connection. This sentiment emerged in the museum stores some 13 years later. Hill referred to this hesitation as the ‘blocking’ of cultural information and its dissemination where this might touch upon the complicated relationship between Longgu, other Guadalcanal people and the people of Malaita (Hill, 2012: 275; Kwa’ioloa and Burt, 2007).

Apart from the single item of shell currency and the silence that surrounded it, which in itself denoted great significance, Bungana and Watepura were most forthcoming about the other objects in the collection, including items not collected by Hogbin. The identification of an additional 13 objects clearly represented territory into which it was safe for them to venture.

Watepura and Bungana returned home to Solomon Islands and reported on their visit and their findings. Once the idea of making a contemporary collection was raised by the Museum, the Longgu suggested that wood carving would be an activity that the broader community would be interested to explore and have recorded. The engagement with the collection had provided the means through which an idea to carve new feasting bowls was conceived. This became the central aim of the *Longgu Community Time Capsule*.

### The creation of new things

I sent money for the purchase of carving tools to Watepura that she was to forward to the carvers. The intention was that prior to my arrival in Nangali the carvers would have bowls available for sale and that during my presence there I could also record the process of manufacture of additional examples. My assumption was that the process of carving bowls would be a lengthy one and likely stretch beyond the period of my visit. However, for various reasons, the tools did not arrive in Nangali ahead of my arrival and as a result I was able to record the manufacture of the bowls now in the collection.

Five carvers, Isaac Pegoa, Peter Mette, Gabriel Ropovono, Reuben Vigana and Paul Zugia, worked intensively for seven days and produced four types of food presentation bowls, expanding the range represented in the Museum’s collection. The carvers also made a *tabili*, a mortar used in the preparation of food, and a *lali* (Bonshek, 2016: 36, fig. 2.1). *Lali* are used on important ceremonial occasions such as brideprice prestations, and in former times they were traded for shell currency. This occurred when the Longgu were middle-men in an extensive exchange network that saw shell money move from the neighbouring island of Malaita into exchange networks on Guadalcanal.

These trade networks have ceased, and the knowledge of carving wooden bowls now remains with only the five carvers in Nangali. Of these, Isaac Pegoa, who holds the reputation of being the most experienced carver, took on the role of mentor to the other four. At the establishment of this project several of these men, including Gabriel Ropovono, decided to take up carving again after several years of inactivity. Rather than carve individually and close to their homes, the five men decided to work together near the primary school where villagers could congregate and watch them. Over seven days a number of spectators gathered to watch, many of whom were unfamiliar with carving and the types of trees utilised, as well as the plants used for colouring and finishing. Many of the observers over the period included children and youths.

The nature of the work was physically demanding, commencing with chopping down the tree in the bush and carving out suitably sized segments (Figs 6 and 7). The five men helped one another in various aspects of the work. Their sons, nephews and grandchildren also came to their assistance. While the carvers’ favourite pop music played and they banded jokes with one another, they passed on their skills to their contemporaries and their juniors. When specific techniques were to be pointed out, they were not spoken about, but enacted. Isaac Pegoa drew my attention to what he was about to do and directed me to film specific actions, saying: I am going to show you how to do this. He performed the action accompanied by minimal, and often no commentary. The other carvers watched. The purpose was to demonstrate an action: in this sense, doing was knowing and doing was learning. The Longgu carvers used the Museum’s acquisition project to play an important role



Figure 6. Preparing the blanks from which to carve. Photo: E. Bonshek, 18 January 2013.



Figure 7. Blanks ready for carving. Photo: E. Bonshek, 18 January 2013.



**Figure 8.** Alice Mary Wotaiya weaving a *pera*, basket. Photo: E. Bonshek, 16 January 2013.

in their intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge through the act of carving.

Other items were acquired in parallel to the carving project. These were offered by individuals and included woven baskets called *pera*, made by Alice Mary Wotaiya of Nangali (Fig. 8) and an undecorated basket for everyday use made by Daniel Seka, a senior member of the community who was keen to demonstrate his own weaving skills.

### **Creating heritage and preservation: implications for Nangali villagers**

At the end of the visit to the Australian Museum both Watepura and Bungana were video-recorded reflecting upon their experience. They had consented to participating in these recordings, as well as to audio recordings of discussions in the Museum's stores prior to the commencement of the project. Watepura stated that Longgu feasting was a recurring theme in Hogbin's photography. Also, she said that through the course of the visit she realised that there was a network of institutions focussed on preservation; she felt that people of her own generation should not 'leave our culture out, but we should stick with it' (Bonshek, 2016: 43).

Watepura, and people of her generation, especially those living in town, were no longer in daily contact with village

life and customary ways of doing things. But while they had memories of this way of life, their children have neither these experiences nor memories of them. So, the Longgu decision to make feasting bowls was generated by their desire to keep younger people in touch with village traditions.

The Longgu were not ignorant of 'preservation' programs *per se* as they have been involved in language documentation work for over two decades. The Australian Museum project extended this concept to embrace the documentation of aspects of village life for Longgu people of today and for future generations. The Museum's acquisition of the carvings and the recording of their manufacturing process fostered interest in revitalising and reaffirming traditional values for contemporary generations, especially among young people. Carving emerged as significant because this knowledge is now restricted to the carvers in the village of Nangali; none of the other Longgu villages have carvers.

In an attempt to establish an interest in preservation and re-valuing of local knowledge with a life beyond the project, the project donated a camcorder, computer, external hard drive for storage, and film editing software to Nangali (the villagers have the capacity to generate electricity to power this equipment). This equipment was formally accepted on behalf of the village by Watepura, who used the camcorder to record one of the weavers and generated interest amongst those watching her (Fig. 9). One youth displayed great commitment and determination to learn how to use the equipment and commenced recording the carvers as they worked. Later he moved on to make short recordings of daily activities in the village.



**Figure 9.** Florence Watepura with video camera. Photo: E. Bonshek, 16 January 2013.



**Figure 10.** Isaac Pegoa, carver, with bowls made during the *Longgu Community Time Capsule* Project. Australian Museum registration numbers, from right to left (see Table 1): *tabili*, mortar (E95491); *rambo losingu*, long bowl (E95489); *lali*, for gifting of cooked food on ceremonial occasions (E95490); *rambo o nigurai*, round bowl, for presentation of food (E95488); one round bowl not acquired; one double bowl not acquired; *rambo*, double bowl, for serving cooked food (E95492). Photo: E. Bonshek, 21 January 2013.

### **The dangers of commodification: the problem of payment**

In contrast to the amounts paid to the weaver for her baskets, the payment of cash for the wooden bowls was problematic. While the weavers had established a pricing structure for their *pera*, the ‘purchase’ of the carved bowls using cash challenged individual perceptions. While I had set aside a sum equivalent to that given to the School Board, I had no clear idea how this would be distributed. From the commencement of the project, discussions with Watepura about prices for the bowls remained unresolved (Bonshek, 2015). It was not until the night before the carvings were completed that a decision was made: Hill, Watepura, Gabriel Ropovono and I were present, and differing views emerged.

One felt strongly that each carver should be paid individually but would not name an amount for each carving. Another commented that the project had contributed so much to the community already and assiduously avoided the question of price. Another was reluctant to set a price and wanted me to do this. However, while I felt I simply could not set a price, not knowing local expectations, I broke the stalemate by declaring the budget. Watepura immediately commented that the amount was too much; and repeated that it was important that a fair price was paid, but that it should not be excessive. She was particularly concerned that the price for the carvings should not drive down the quality of future carvings and insisted that Longgu people should make such things for themselves, not just for the cash that they might generate. She was fearful of the development of an ethos

that would associate the production of traditional objects with commercial expectations rather than the affirmation of traditional values. She suggested a pricing methodology based upon the division of the budgeted sum by the number of objects, followed by re-jigging these fractions in light of the amount of labour that each object manifested. The latter was arrived at by Ropovono and me, as the others had not been present during the manufacturing process. We all waited for the last word from Ropovono. In the end, the agreed amounts, which were to remain undisclosed, were handed to the carvers individually once they had completed their work. The carvers also made a statement to the camera (in Longgu and in Solomons Pijin) about the use of the bowls (Fig. 10).

## Conclusion

Bungana and Watepura used the *Time Capsule* project to refocus Nangali villagers' attention on feasting bowls and the possibility of their falling into disuse. The carving workshop attracted Nangali villagers, young and old. Many watched, and some gave hands-on assistance. The carvers' sons, especially children, remained close by to help their fathers. Bungana and Watepura created a public event in which the transmission of *kastom* knowledge could be witnessed by the community. Hill (2014: 23) has since reported that the project has provided impetus for community members to commission bowls from the carvers and the Paramount Chief of the Longgu area also commissioned a large *lali* from the Nangali carvers.

In this sense, the *Time Capsule* project can be viewed as a success for the Longgu community. It resulted in the positive revaluing of customary practices against a background in which people have increasingly come to view their own cultural practices as in some way of less importance to life outside the village, a view expressed by Watepura while she was in Sydney. Watepura used the project to energise and reaffirm traditional values for contemporary generations and awakened a concern that young people should witness the enactment of traditional values.

The Longgu Community Time Capsule was a success for the Museum, confirming Morphy's statement that museum collections are continually recontextualised and made relevant. The museum also obtained an ethically acquired collection. The project had the full support of the Longgu community, who made substantial inputs into deciding what would be collected for the Museum, and how they would be acquired, and who would benefit from the project. The Museum maintained its core collection development requirement, to extend the existing collections to embrace material of contemporary significance in Solomon Islands. Through a process of collaborative research, the Museum's historical collections were transformed from things from the past, into the 'evidentiary accumulation' (Thomas, 2015: 18) of the multiple relationships that surround collections, their making over time and their significance in the present. This transformation was facilitated largely through Bungana and Watepura's experience and understanding of the Museum's aims together with their methodology to affect change in their community: while making feasting bowls for the museum, they illuminated endangered cultural practices at home, and through this promoted changes to ensure the preservation of precarious material knowledge.

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