An introduction to FIJIAN ART

Rod Ewins 2021

These updated introductory notes are based on a presentation given to the Oceanic Art Society, Sydney, on March 17, 1999.

Fiji is geographically and culturally at the junction of the areas long referred to as Melanesia and Polynesia, and in sea-craft design there were even connections with, and borrowings from, Micronesia.[1] Fiji had, and has, cultural continuities with each, but most particularly with Tonga and Samoa, with which groups it continues also to have kinship links. The three Groups formed a trading triangle for centuries. As Hau'ofa summarized it: "Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Niue, Rotuma, Tokelau, Tuvalu, Futuna and Uvea formed a large exchange community in which wealth and people with their skills and arts circulated endlessly. From this community people ventured to the north and into Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and New Caledonia, which formed an outer arc of less intensive exchange."[2]

Archaeology and linguistics have established that Fiji was settled by Austronesian-speaking migrants from the northwest over 3,000 years Before Present. Some of them after a relatively short time journeyed east and evolved into the cultures we think of as Polynesian. There were perhaps two or more further waves of settlement into Fiji. The emergence there of fortified sites about 800 BP (Before Present) indicates the incursion of a warlike people with different origins. Fijians' weapons of war and physical appearance at the time of first Western contact at the turn of the 18th/19th Centuries provide tangible evidence of the legacy of these people, but their language and most other cultural elements largely

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1 See Map 2.

2 Hau'ofa (2008). For more discussion see Kaeppler (1978) and Mageo (2002).

hold true to their original stock and therefore maintain most affinities with Polynesia.

The art of Fiji has been overshadowed in the eyes of Melanesian collectors in particular by the dramatic art of island New Guinea and its neighbours, and of Polynesian collectors by the rich art of the Eastern Polynesians and Hawai'ians, and the Maori descendants of Central Polynesia. Perhaps part of the reason is the Western obsession with 'primitive' figurative sculpture, of which Fiji produced relatively little, particularly compared with either New Guinea and its surrounding region, or New Zealand. There was, however, contemporary acknowledgement of the practical male arts, particularly in the areas of their construction of their houses and temples, and of their great planked, double-hulled ships or *drua.*[3] These were probably, until well after steam-engined ships had been developed, the fastest long-distance voyaging vessels in the world, capable of sustaining speeds of ten knots or more. But neither of these were collectables — though one enthusiastic collector did commission the construction of a rather small *drua* early in the 20th Century, and it resides today in the Fiji Museum.[4]

The exceptional craftsmanship, as well as the lethal efficiency, of Fijian weapons was unsurpassed in the Pacific — facts not lost on the male Westerners attempting to construct macho identities for themselves through their collections. But the richness of many other Fijian arts has been underrated in most surveys of Pacific art, in particular the female arts. Their beautiful and serviceable pandanus mats and baskets, the functionality, extraordinary diversity and sophistication of form of Fijian ceramics, and the complexity and originality of Fijian bark-cloth (widely though incorrectly called *tapa*) were both arguably second to none.

Fijian art was, and is, almost always practical. Only their jewellery and body ornamentation could be regarded as *purely* aesthetic. But aesthetics did indeed play a huge role in the production of the full range of their goods, and differing levels of meaning were assigned to different objects, over and above their practical function. The early missionary surgeon Lyth remarked perceptively that "they certainly carry their religion into everything." There was, and is, a symmetry to all relationships in Fijian society and to all cultural devices also. Their cosmology conceived of the temporal and spiritual worlds as coextensive realities. The hierarchy of gods and spirits passed down through chiefs (gods on earth, and gods in death) to the lowliest commoner. That reality has not so much been replaced by Christianity, as supplemented by it, though of course some of its practices have been displaced —

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[3] To call them canoes seems inadequate — the largest of them were longer than Cook's *Endeavour*, and with a deck area capable of carrying over two hundred fully-armed warriors into battle.

[4] The vessel is *Ratu Finau, Tui Nayau*, 13.4m long, built for J.B. Turner on the island of Vulaga, S.E. Fiji, in 1913-14. Illustrated in Clunie (1986: 16, Fig.21).

full manhood was achieved through bloodshed, which honoured the gods. That manhood was publicly ratified, however, as was chieftainship, by the donning of the bark-cloth women made. Thus while men dominated the political and economic world, formalisation of their status was dependent on female mediation.

Art has thus never been a "thing apart" for Fijians, as it is in the West today. It has always been a participating social actor, a marker of a group's identity but also essential to the rituals which rehearse the social structures and forge social bonds. The only figurative sculptures were regarded not as *depictions* of spirits, but as the vessels of spirits. As I have discussed at length elsewhere, the whale's tooth *tabua* which is the most powerful talisman in Fijian society is the embodiment of the female element — one might say, a surrogate woman. Just as women were exchanged between groups, so were *tabua.* Bark-cloth does not merely tell a story about the group's identity, it carries it in itself, along with their cosmology, their beliefs and customs. So when a chief is installed, it is said he is given the *masi*, and in fact he may be referred to from then on as *Masi.*

In looking at, and thinking about, Fijian art, therefore, it is important to look at it in its own terms, and not to attempt to "re-aestheticise" it in terms of some imagined "world art" in the manner that the music of many cultures has been blended (blanded?) into "world music". To do so would be yet another act of colonialism, not of the physical or economic resources of the people, but of their identity.

[All of the photographs of Fijian art shown during this address were taken by the author in the storerooms of museums in Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, USA, England, Scotland and Ireland, Switzerland, Holland and Germany.]

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