

INTRODUCTION

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‘Presentation whale teeth’ (*tabua*), deriving from the sperm whale (*Physeter catodon*), are extremely important in Fiji today and their cultural importance is well-attested since the early 19th century. In Tonga, the contrast could not be greater. ‘Ivory shrines’ (*tapua*) have not been used since the mid-19th century, but their absence masks their former significance.

The two papers in this volume supplement the relatively limited scholarly attention given to whale ivory in the region (in the case of Tonga, practically none). The essay by Hooper aims to provide insights into the contemporary use and meanings of *tabua* in Fiji since the 1970s, before tracking accounts of their use through the 19th century and into the 20th century. Combining the ethnographic and historical material, the author develops an understanding of the enduring value of *tabua* and their association with chiefs, and originally with gods. The essay by Clunie takes a Tonga perspective, uncovering evidence for the great importance of *tapua* in the pre-Christian period, when they were explicitly embodiments of gods. He also reviews other forms of godly embodiment, notably in shell and wood, and proposes that the terms *tapua* and *tabua* have their origin in crescent-form offerings, notably plantains, in ancient Polynesian fertility rites. Each essay, while centred on Fiji and Tonga respectively, takes account of the historical relationship between the two groups and a clear picture emerges of Tonga as an original source for Fijian *tabua*—materially and cosmologically—as is the case for other aspects of eastern Fijian culture over the last few centuries.

The other main group in Western Polynesia, Samoa, is not covered in this volume, and although a focus on Samoa and other smaller Western Polynesian islands would no doubt reveal further information, whale teeth do not appear to feature strongly in Samoan history and practice, except for a period in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when necklaces made from split teeth, mostly made in Fiji, became popular (Sperlich 2006). These appear to be the only whale ivory items with a Samoan provenance that occur in museum collections, notably those in Germany, which was the colonial power in Western Samoa between 1899 and 1914. Nevertheless, the study of whale ivory—and by extension of marine-sourced materials such as shells and turtle-shell—would benefit from being placed in a wider Oceanic perspective.

To take one example, fish hooks would merit attention as treasured valuables, though they are usually little-considered. In Tonga, hooks with

a whale-bone shank, pearl-shell reflector plate and turtle shell point were prestigious exchange gifts partly analogous to *tabua* in Fiji (and to composite breastplates). Hooks of this kind were collected in the 18th century (see Kaeppeler 1978a: 235-36), and in Fiji in 1875 the Tongan chief Ma'afu presented one as an act of fealty to the recently arrived Governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, with these words: "You have got the land, I bring you the water, as land without water is useless. Here it is with all the fish and living creatures in it" (von Hügel 1990: 120).

Raymond Firth's work on Tikopia also supplies evidence for the great value of fish hooks on that Polynesian Outlier. He described them as "items of supreme importance in the native exchange system, as in the acquisition of a canoe, or indemnity for wrong" (1965: 380), and was told: "...the bonito-hook, it is alone, in the forefront"; it is "the property of the chiefs" (p. 338), attributes that parallel those of Fijian *tabua*.

There are clearly ancient and deep roots in Oceanic cultures that privilege certain marine, forest and avian species as embodiments of divinity, their material substances—including ivory, shells, wood, leaves, feathers, bones—being adapted for important cultural work, which has led, among other things, to the creation of great works of art.

The authors are only too aware that their essays herein will inevitably lead to more questions than answers, and to further research. This is part of the excitement of research that combines museum and archival resources with contemporary perspectives on historical and cultural processes.