

# TABUA BUSINESS: RE-CIRCULATION OF WHALE TEETH AND BONE VALUABLES IN THE CENTRAL PACIFIC

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Nowadays, Tongan craftsmen import whale teeth from Fiji and cow bones from New Zealand for the artworks they make for sale in Tonga, New Zealand, Hawai'i and elsewhere in the Pacific. This practice raises a number of issues that I explore in this article. In Fiji, whale teeth are known as *tabua*, ceremonial gift objects that provide good luck and are endowed with *mana* or supernatural powers. Fiji is the only place in the world where natural whale teeth have this privileged and sacred status. In Tonga, but not in Fiji, whale bone and teeth are increasingly used for artworks, specifically, Polynesian-style ornamental sculptures and fishhooks. The raw material comes from stranded whales, from recycled bone of whales hunted long ago and from *tabua* imported from Fiji. Recent fieldwork in both Tonga and Fiji among carvers, suppliers and middlemen enabled me to trace the contemporary illegal trade in sacred *tabua* from Fiji to Tonga, where the *tabua* are carved and resold as ivory art objects in Tonga, New Zealand and Hawai'i. This contemporary circulation of whale teeth is a historical inversion; in the past, Tonga was the source of the whale teeth so highly valued in Fiji. This article focuses on whale teeth, but I also include whale and cow bone used as raw materials for contemporary art objects and markers of cultural identity. I address two major research questions: (1) Why are whale teeth a prevalent feature of Fijian culture, and (2) What is the actual circulation of whale teeth, whale bone and cow bone at present, particularly between Tonga and Fiji?

## CONTEMPORARY CARVING IN TONGA

In the Pacific, whales are hunted in a traditional manner off Camiguin Island in the Philippines and off Lambeta in the Indonesian Sunda Archipelago, and only about 30 percent of these hunts are successful (Ellis 2002:1315). In ancient Tahiti, "whales were not hunted at sea, but when one became stranded in shoal waters or on a reef men went out in canoes and killed it" (Oliver 1974[I]:286). Tongans only began hunting whales in the late 19th century, on a small-scale and in open whaleboats (see below). In Fiji, whaling was not a traditional economic activity, and whales were considered sacred beings. This tradition is still remembered by Fijians today; for example by Aisake Batibasaga of the Fisheries Department: "In the past, we Fijians looked at whales as sacred animals. From dead sperm whales, however, we take the teeth out. These are very important cultural items which represent goodwill and power. But we do not go out to kill the sperm whales at sea" (pers. comm., Lami 2005). Vuata, a Fijian woodcarver, has a slightly different point of view: "In Fiji, we don't kill whales because we don't have the special weapons to do so and not because whales are sacred" (pers. comm., Suva 2006). Foreign fishermen, however, know that whale teeth are valuable in Fiji. Ten years ago, one of my Fijian informants witnessed crew

members of a Korean fishing boat selling two cartons full of whale teeth to an Indo-Fijian man. According to this informant, there were more than 30 whale teeth in each carton and the fishermen received 700 Fijian dollars for their merchandise.<sup>1</sup> In Tonga, the killing of whales ceased in 1978, after Tonga signed an international treaty concerning whale protection (Bataille-Benguigui 1994:151). I have no indication that this treaty has not been respected.<sup>2</sup>

Ofa is a Tongan wood and bone carver who sells his work in the central market of the Tongan capital of Nuku'alofa. He mainly uses old whale bone, predating 1978, when Tonga signed the international treaty for the protection of whales forbidding both hunting and trading in whale products. I asked Ofa how he provides himself with such old whalebone for his carvings. He replied that he usually obtains it from fishermen. They find it on the reef or on the beaches of remote islands. A second source are those people, mainly in Ha'apai, who use whale bone in their fences or in their houses as decoration. Ofa does not search for whale bone himself, but if others find a piece of whale bone peeking out of the sand on a remote island, they might bring it to him. Most of it, however, he obtains from the fishermen who find it on the reef.

In 2003, I also asked a couple of woodcarvers, Feleti and Seine, from Tonga's northern island of 'Uta Vava'u, about the source of the whale bone they use in their handicrafts. When Tongans were still whaling, the whales used to be too large to take to the beach, so they were cut up in the open sea and the remaining carcass left to sink to the bottom. Old fishermen still know those places where whales were butchered in the past. Sometimes, Feleti and Seine hire a group of scuba divers to look for whale bone in such places at about 30 metres depth. When they return empty handed, they receive 20 Tongan dollars per hour, but when they return with a significant quantity of whale bone, they get between 200 and 500 dollars.<sup>3</sup> This bone has to be dried for several months before it can be carved. However, whale bone that has been exposed for too long to the open air, for example as part of a fence, may become too porous and too soft to work. In selling whale bone carvings to foreigners from North America or Australia, where import regulations are very strict, Feleti and Seine advise their customers to ask for an official document from the Ministry of Fisheries and another from the Customs Department certifying that it is old whale bone, which is an allowed export.<sup>4</sup>

I discussed these matters with the Director of Agriculture and Forestry of the Tongan Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Haniteli Fa'anunu (pers. comm., Nuku'alofa 2005). He told me that Tongan people have not been hunting whales for a long time. However, it does happen that dead whales wash ashore. He gave the example of a sperm whale that washed up on a beach in Hihifo (the western district of Tongatapu) the previous year. When he arrived there with his brother, who is the Director of Fisheries in the Ministry of Fisheries, the precious teeth had already been sawn out of its jaws.

Through other sources, I was able to trace the people who took the teeth and verify this information. Tomasi, who trades in bone carvings made by his sons, confirmed that a young sperm whale of about 30 feet died close to Ha'atafu Beach in Hihifo the previous year. When the whale was still floating on the water, some fishermen took out most of the teeth and sold them to him. Tomasi sold most of them, but still keeps five at his home. Also, when the whale was on the beach, Tomasi together with his brother-in-law, with the help of eight young men, removed the remaining teeth. He explained:

We used knives to get the teeth out of the jaws, and axes and bush knives to cut the meat from the bones. They went there at low tide at night and took out the rib and jaw bones, and left the rest. It was difficult, not only because the whale was still laying half in the sea, but also because it was night time and we had to use torches. We worked for about two hours. First we took off the top side. When the high tide came, we had to go, and come back again next morning. Meanwhile, the waves had turned the whale and now we had access to the other side. Then we were able to work another two hours. We took all the bones except the back bones and the skull. I shared the bones with my brother-in-law. With small knives, we took off the remaining meat and put the bones on top of the roof during several months, where the sun helped us to clean them. I did not sell any bones as raw material, but used them all to make carvings. (Pers. comm., Nuku'alofa 2005)

Tomasi's colleague Tevita is a well-known wood and bone carver with several well-placed outlets in the Tongan capital Nuku'alofa. He used to announce on the radio that he was willing to buy whale bone and is known to many people in Tongatapu as well as in Ha'apai and Vava'u. Tevita also buys whale teeth. He was overseas when that last whale came on Ha'atafu Beach. One year before, however, he was in Tonga when a whale beached on Nuku Island, opposite the village of Kolonga at the eastern end of Tongatapu. He went there with his boat and ten young men with chainsaws, axes and bush knives. Tevita said, "It was hard work to get the teeth and the bones out, but we succeeded in doing so" (pers. comm., Popoa 2005).

One of the most senior but still active woodcarvers on Tongatapu, Lopati, praises the qualities of whale bone for carving. He said, "I like whale bone. You can make a good design on it and carve it, and make a lot of money. The pan-bones (sperm whale lower jaws) and the shoulders are the best, but you can also use the ribs. The rest is good for carving too, even the backbone, which other carvers throw away." Lopati never carved a whale tooth, because he thinks making a three-dimensional figure out of a tooth is a waste. Instead he engraves the tooth surface. But carving a whale tooth in the shape of a fish and throwing away the dust is a waste of that material. Lopati's colleague and friend Tevita makes goddess figures. According to Lopati, "Tevita has many whale teeth and does not care; he cuts the tooth and does not feel bad about it."

I asked Lopati how he obtains his raw whale bone material. In his answer he spoke about announcements on the radio, for instance of a whale washed up on Ha'atafu Beach.

All the carvers will rush there. And whoever is there first, gets the best parts. We use chainsaws, spades and bush knives. It is a lot of work to get a bone out; you are so tired after that! The last time for me was two years ago. They had cut the meat out of a whale at the "American Wharf" and then dragged the rest of the carcass to Pangaimotu [an islet north of Tongatapu], where the people could do with it whatever they wanted. When I went there to get some bones, five carvers were already there. (Pers. comm., Maofanga 2006)

This has happened only twice in Lopati's lifetime. Otherwise, he has obtained bones from divers. When they find whale bones, they come over to sell them to him or to Tevita. Those are bones from whales killed in the past around the islets north of Tongatapu.

In 2006, Sanele, a young bone carver selling in the market hall of the Tongan capital of Nuku'alofa, asked 400 (Tongan) dollars for a small, uncarved whale tooth. A larger, scrimshawed whale tooth was for sale for 1,200 dollars. It shows a Hawaiian mask on its front side,<sup>5</sup> and Tongan tapa motifs on the back. In 2006, the prolific Tongan carver Tevita sold a whale-tooth food-hook (*tautau*), modeled on an ancient example for 2,800 dollars. The previous year, he had sold a somewhat larger whale-tooth food-hook for 3,200 dollars. In one of his shops, Tevita offered a whale-tooth sculpture of two sperm whales and a sea turtle for 860 dollars, and a sperm whale carved of whale bone (about 30cm long) for 580 dollars.

An alternative carving material is cow bone—sometimes called the “poor man's ivory”—which is much less expensive. Cow bones are imported to Tonga from New Zealand in order to make ornamental fishhook necklaces, which are then exported to tourist markets in New Zealand, Fiji, New Caledonia and Hawai'i. In March 2006, for example, I found numerous whale-bone fishhooks (about 10 x 5cm in size) for sale at a prominent souvenir shop in Queen Street, Auckland's main downtown shopping street, for prices varying between 250 and 500 NZ dollars.<sup>6</sup> A whale-bone pendant (12 x 9cm), advertised as “handmade”, was priced at 1,190 NZ dollars. An entire whale tooth of a small size, exhibited underneath the fishhooks in a glass showcase in the middle of the shop, was for sale for 1,200 dollars.<sup>7</sup> Whale-bone fishhooks and other “Polynesian sea jewelry” are at the more expensive end of this international trade.

Tomasi's sons mainly work with cow bone and shells. Tomasi says that he has problems supplying the market because he cannot find enough cow bones in Tonga, where maybe about four cows are killed every week. These are not enough to supply all the carvers with cow bone. Tomasi brings his bones from New Zealand and returns there with the carved material. Apart from New Zealand, he also exports to Fiji and sometimes to Hawai'i. In Fiji he used to deal with Jack's Handicraft shops. They put his designs in their catalogue and sometimes they order their own designs. When Tomasi is in New Zealand, he visits several butchers every day to purchase cow bones, thus competing with Māori, Tongan and Samoan bone carvers living in New Zealand. Whoever comes first gets the bones, he explains. In November 2005, he was able to send 200 cow bones to Tonga. Tomasi uses pigment from New Zealand to stain some of his cow bone fishhook pendants brown. He puts the powdered pigment in boiling water and adds the pendants. This appears to be more effective than staining with tobacco juice or tea leaves. He only brings small pieces made from whale bone to New Zealand because, as he says, “we can make big money with large whale-bone carvings here in Tonga” (pers. comm. 2006).

Kaufili is another carver who works with cow bone. He told me that Tongans living in New Zealand also collect bones there to give or sell them to their relatives in Tonga who, in their turn, sell them to the artists. Cow bones are actually more valuable than the meat per kg. A box of bones weighing about 15 kilos sells for 250 dollars (pers. comm., Pea 2006). The Morris Hedstrom Trading Company used to ship cow bones from New Zealand to Tonga, but stopped because the freight cost became too expensive.

An Indo-Fijian carver and vendor told me that he buys his cow bones from a Muslim butcher in Suva for FJ\$4 a kilo (one kilo being one or two bones). He said he is able to make six large or up to 15 small fishhooks out of one bone. However, he sighs, “you can’t always get the bones, because the Korean and Chinese fishermen buy them to make soup” (pers. comm., Suva 2006).

#### SPERM WHALE TEETH IN FIJIAN CULTURE

Before continuing my discussion of whale-tooth traffic from Fiji to Tonga, I should answer the following question: How can the crucial place of sperm whale teeth (*tabua*) in the past and present Fijian culture be explained? A first step towards an answer may come from oral tradition and the following story (derived and abridged from Sahlins 1983:72-73; see also Thomas 1991:69-70).<sup>8</sup>

A man with an elderly wife was planning to marry his three daughters when his wife died. One day, a strange man washed up on the beach and was cared for by the daughters, who immediately fell in love with him and vice-versa. The following day, the stranger, Tabua, had completely recovered, and he asked the father if he could marry them. The father, not at all pleased with the request, could not give a plain refusal, and promised to consent if Tabua would be able to provide him with a wedding gift that would be the result of a miracle, a demonstration of *mana*. Tabua tried to figure something out and remembered the dead sperm whale he had seen floating on the sea the day before. After a long walk, he found the whale washed ashore in a bay somewhat further on. In the process of extracting the teeth from the whale’s jaw, he knocked out his own four front teeth.

He burned the whale and brought the whale’s teeth as a gift to the father in exchange for his daughters. He told him that he had planted his own teeth in a yam field and that these large teeth had grown out of them. The father felt obliged to keep his promise and give his daughters in marriage to Tabua, but making the condition that future strangers washed ashore must always bring gifts of whale teeth, if they did not, they would be cooked and eaten. Also, from that time onward, a portion of the wedding gifts must always consist of whale teeth, which henceforth would be called *tabua* after the man who had introduced them.

This story not only gives an explanation for the origin of *tabua* as imperative gifts, as carriers of *mana*, but also for the transition from (intended) incestuous endogamy to exogamy,<sup>9</sup> and for the existence of cannibalism: those strangers who did not arrive with the appropriate gifts of whale teeth and the like would be killed and eaten.<sup>10</sup>

Anthropologists both recognise the cultural significance of such local explanations of social practices and seek other unspoken ones.<sup>11</sup> Another more analytical means of answering my question about the important place of *tabua* in Fijian culture may be found in regional history. The intensification of trade and marriage exchange between Tonga and Samoa in the 18th and 19th centuries was also an important factor for

socio-cultural and political change in Fiji. European contacts too had their influence, and the numerous whalers, sandalwood, *bêche-de-mer* traders and beachcombers in the region increased the number of whale teeth in local ceremonial exchange circuits.<sup>12</sup> The traffic of whale teeth towards Fiji was particularly important in the 19th century, at the peak of Pacific whaling, the same period when American and European whalers practiced scrimshaw on whale teeth, and also the same period as the sandalwood and *bêche-de-mer* trade with Fiji for the Chinese market.

Whale teeth came to be the favoured exchange objects between foreigners and Fijians, imported teeth being immediately integrated into ceremonial *tabua* gift exchange networks.<sup>13</sup> In the past, whale bone has been used for making composite tuna trolling lures, for protective breast plates and for war clubs in both Tonga and Fiji (see, for Tonga, St Cartmail 1997:101-4, 107, 135; for Fiji, Clunie 1986:24, 70-78), although those who made them were usually Tongans rather than Fijians. In Tonga, whale-tooth ivory was used for inlays of star, moon and lozenge shapes in war clubs and chief's headrests (see St Cartmail 1997:55-56, 127, 129). Such work was often traded to Fiji. In Fiji, most artefacts inlaid with whale ivory appear to have come from Tonga and Samoa.<sup>14</sup> This trade may postdate the introduction of steel tools, i.e., after culture contact with Europeans, because in order to make flat disks of whale ivory for the decoration of war clubs, chiefs' headrests and breastplates, an iron saw was needed.<sup>15</sup> During the first half of the 19th century, in both Tonga and Fiji European ships were attacked to plunder their iron, as well as acquire firearms. A well known example is the attack on the *Port-au-Prince* in the Tongan Ha'apai Group, which resulted in the young British sailor William Mariner remaining in Tonga for four years. He observed Tongans using "common shaped European chisel, or a piece of a saw, or in defect of these, a flattened nail rendered sharp". However, he also reported that "before [Tongans] procured iron from the European ships, they made use of a sharp stone" (Martin 1981:179).

In the pre-contact period, valuables made in Fiji may have been called *tabua* but would have been mostly made of shell or hardwood, or even human bone, while the few whale teeth circulating in Fiji probably originated from Tonga, where dead sperm whales were more frequent washed ashore.<sup>16</sup> Between the 1801 discovery of sandalwood in Fiji and its exhaustion in 1814, intensifying contacts in previously "war-orientated" Fiji (Geddes 1948) went more smoothly for Europeans, the more whale teeth they brought with them. Following the demise of the sandalwood trade, other products became the focus of Western interests, such as *bêche-de-mer* and hawksbill turtle or tortoiseshell for the Manila and Canton markets. Among the places where traders could obtain whale teeth were Tahiti and the island of Rotuma north of Fiji, places frequented by whalers. Here, tobacco could be exchanged for whale teeth. In the case of the *bêche-de-mer* trade, whale teeth did not so much function as a means of payment but rather as ritual offerings, along with other goods such as red paint, cloth and beads, in order to make the chiefs favourably disposed and therefore make trade possible, since "periodic high-value gifts to chiefs were a precondition for any economic engagement at all" (Thomas 1991:113). *Bêche-de-mer* and tortoiseshell were mostly traded for guns, bullets and powder, along with other goods. Western trading vessels often had hundreds of guns and whale teeth aboard.<sup>17</sup>

The discovery of rich new whaling grounds in the western and central Pacific at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, brought many whaling ships into Tongan waters to hunt humpback whales between August and October, and onto Tongan shores to replenish drinking water and fresh food.<sup>18</sup> Tongans did not actively hunt whales themselves until just over a century ago, when a European man from New Zealand named Cook settled in Ha'apai, and later on Tongatapu, and introduced a whaling technique to the local people, which was described by Vaea and Straatmans (1954:209) as follows. A crew of six to eight men would go to sea in an open, six metre long whaleboat. They would spear female and young humpbacks with imported harpoons that had detachable metal points. The harpooned whale was connected to the boat by a line to which floats were attached and the boat was simply towed by the wounded whale until it expired. The whale was then attached directly to the boat. The men would cut up the whale at sea and transport the meat ashore in outrigger canoes, where it was distributed among the people. Cook and his descendants became locally famous for courageous whaling, and they received food and other gifts in exchange for their whale meat throughout the rest of the year.

Among the older generations, the memory of this whaling period is still very much alive. I spoke about it with Ofa, whose father used to be a whaler. He did not have a boat himself, but would be asked to join the whaling crews. He would harpoon the whale and later enter the water to tie a rope around the whale's mouth, because they could not tow the whale back home with its mouth open. The dead whale's lungs would fill up with water and the whale would sink, pulling their small boat under water. Being in the water was dangerous because of the blood all around that attracted sharks. One day, in Ha'apai, Ofa's father took him out to show him how it was done.

My father speared a whale, but the point was not well in its body and the whale made a dash, pulling the boat behind him. The mast broke off. The whale took us far away from Ha'apai. A man said: "If we don't cut the rope, he may pull us all the way to Fiji." My father said: "It's better to go to Fiji and prepare the boat for our return home there, but if we cut the line here, we can't repair the mast in the middle of the ocean. We haven't got hands enough to row the boat back, and the night is close." Finally, someone did cut the line. (Pers. comm., Nuku'alofa 2003)

Fortunately, a boat had left from Ha'apai to look out for them. They were found at noon the following day and pulled back. Ofa's father was not pleased because he had wanted to show his son how they caught that whale and how he would dive into the water to pull a rope around its mouth in the middle of all those sharks. Rather than becoming a whaler like his father, Ofa chose to become a whale-bone carver.

#### AN EMERGING TRAFFIC IN WHALE IVORY

Recently, a new whale-tooth carving industry has emerged, with Tongan artists buying whale teeth (*tabua*) from pawnshops in Fiji.<sup>19</sup> Tomasi told me that sometimes his sons work with whale teeth, but it is hard to get them. The previous year (2004), he acquired

none, but two years before he had gone to Fiji and bought several *tabua* in pawnshops. After that, he only got whale bone of stranded whales in Tonga. Tomasi remarked that some carvers “have friends at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, and it is easy for them to buy *tabua* there and bring them over” (pers. comm., Nuku‘alofa 2005).

Kaufili (pers. comm. 2005) informed me that every month, sometimes twice a month, he goes to Fiji with a bag of cow-bone fishhooks, sometimes as many as 800, and sells them there. Then, he buys *tabua*. Kaufili added, “It’s only a very short flight; in Fiji they don’t carve their *tabua*”. After carving the *tabua* at home in Tonga, Kaufili takes them to Hawai‘i to sell them there. Until now, he bought 20 *tabua*, about the size of his hand. They used to be cheap, but in 2005 the price went up. A year later, in 2006, Kaufili told me that he had stopped importing *tabua* because sperm whales belong to the endangered species and Fiji put a ban on exporting *tabua*. Actually, this ban had been in effect long before 2005. A more likely reason for his changed attitude was that one of his adult daughters living in the United States was involved in the Greenpeace movement, and she had convinced her father to stop working with whale material.

Whale teeth, in the form of *tabua*, are still to be found in Fijian pawnshops. The highest concentrations of pawnshops are in the capital, Suva, and in Nausori, a town close to Fiji’s second international airport.<sup>20</sup> In April 2006, I found *tabua* for sale in three of the eight pawnshops in Suva and in all six Nausori pawnshops. The *tabua* were always hidden in a drawer of the manager’s desk or locked in a safe place and never shown to the general public. I suspect that in at least some of the Suva pawnshops where the vendors claimed not to have *tabua*, they simply did not want me to know what they had. In Nausori, I encountered no such reticence and I was able to inspect all the *tabua* offered for sale by simply asking. In these nine pawnshops I was offered 23 *tabua* for an average price of FJ\$200. Seven were very small and varied in price from 60 to 130 Fijian dollars. The 16 largest *tabua* were priced from 150 to 390 dollars.<sup>21</sup> These are considerable sums for Fijians, although in terms of their monetary economy they remain within marginal limits. For example, even the most expensive *tabua* at FJ\$390 cost less than a return air ticket to Australia or New Zealand. The price paid for *tabua* is also “symbolic” compared to what is paid for other valuables such as the larger pigs, *tapa* and fine mats. For indigenous Fijians, however, *tabua* are still expensive and represent personal and family treasures. Vuata (pers. comm., Suva 2006) explained,

When you want to marry a girl, you need to give two or three *tabua* to her father, and they cost 500 dollars a piece. So you lose 1,500 dollars. There are plenty of them in the pawnshops. I have myself three *tabua* of a good size at home, because my two sons are going to marry soon. I need some more of them and will ask my friend for it.

Fijians may sell *tabua* to other Fijians when they need money. Thus, the traffic in these items is not restricted to pawnshops. However, when people do not want others to know that they are selling their *tabua*, they take them to a pawnshop. Burglars steal *tabua* because these usually are the most valuable objects they can find in Fijian houses. These too may end up in pawnshops. After the Fiji coup in 2000, Vuata was walking

close to a large pawnshop when a gang of Fijian youths (“street-boys”) crashed a truck into the entrance of the pawnshop. They were only seeking *tabua* and came out with three or four cartons full. This may also explain the limited number of *tabua* offered for sale in each pawnshop, mostly two or three, with a maximum of five during my survey. Apparently, no pawnshop owner wanted to risk admitting that he actually had dozens or even hundreds of *tabua* in his shop, which would make it a real *fale koloa*, which is the Tongan word for shop and may be translated literally as ‘treasure house’.

All pawnshops, without exception, are both owned and staffed by Indo-Fijians. In cultural terms, the *tabua* business or gift exchange is an exclusively indigenous Fijian concern; the pawnshop mode of *tabua* trade, however, is an Indo-Fijian dominated business with openings for other buyers, such as Tongan artists and those who supply them with raw material for their trade. In pawnshops elsewhere in the world, jewellery, particularly gold jewellery, is the major trade item. In Fijian pawnshops, however, I have not seen any gold or other jewellery, only household equipment, light machinery, and shoes. Indigenous Fijians do not usually wear gold or silver jewellery, Indo-Fijians on the other hand are very fond of it.<sup>22</sup> Once again, the numerous jewellery shops dealing in gold and silver appear to all be owned and staffed by Indo-Fijians. But these shops do not function as pawnshops.

A recent Fijian law forbids the exportation of *tabua*. Exceptions may be made when one makes a declaration at the Fijian Affairs Ministry that there will be a special occasion abroad. Then, the Ministry may give a special permit allowing the export of one, two or three *tabua* overseas—three being the absolute maximum—as a ceremonial gift. Since all countries with ports of entry around Fiji (except Tonga) are signatories of the CITES agreements, this law appears to be efficient.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Fiji has bilateral agreements with Australia and New Zealand that intercepted *tabua* will be returned to Fiji. Indeed, in February 2005, Australia returned 16 *tabua*, confiscated at the border, to Fiji. But Tonga has not signed the CITES. Moreover, as Haniteli Fa’anunu, the Director of Agriculture and Forestry of the Tongan Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, told me, “Tongans and others smuggle many things into the country” (pers. comm., Nuku’alofa 2005). The problem is that Tonga does not have the technical means such as x-ray machines to detect items in incoming luggage, and thus depends on the honesty of travellers to fill in a declaration form at the border. Luggage may be controlled, but usually not those things that people carry directly on their body.<sup>24</sup> It appears that Tonga, even if it did sign the CITES, is not yet able to enforce effective control at its borders.

### ON COUNTERFEIT ANTIQUITIES

At the end of the 18th century, whale teeth carved into anthropomorphic female god figures, probably representing Hikule’o, were collected in Tonga by James Cook and other early voyagers and taken to Europe (Kaepler 1999: 22; Kaepler, Kaufmann and Newton 1993: 523; Neich 2007; Oldman 2004: Plate 48). Since the massive destruction of pagan objects by Christian missionary converts in the mid-19th century, all god images disappeared from Tonga itself. Viliami, a Tongan bone carver, recently told me about a whale-ivory carving representing a female god figure that he sold for

6,000 Tongan dollars some years ago. After carving the figure, Viliami boiled it with the roots of a *nonu* tree (*Morinda citrifolia*) for four hours, which gave it a brownish colour. Next, he made a fire with coconut shells and roasted the figure in the hearth, leaving it with cracks all over. Then he buried the figure for about four months in deep, black soil. The American buyer, accompanied by his wife, repeatedly asked Viliami whether it was old. Viliami, who did not want to lie or lose his client, said that he did not know and emphasised the aesthetic quality of the sculpture. The man bought the sculpture and took it to a Tongan specialist at a large American museum, who told him straight away that the female god figure could not be old because its posture did not correspond to that of any known female god figures from Tonga in museums around the world. Dissatisfied, the man asked the opinion of three other “specialists”, who all said that it was old because of its patina and, moreover, that these sperm whale ivory goddess sculptures did not necessarily all have the same posture. In the end, the man was very satisfied with his “antique” treasure and sent Viliami a message to this effect. Indeed, what he paid would be an extremely good price for an antique Tongan whale ivory sculpture. A review of prices for antique Polynesian art objects in international auction houses such as Christies and Sotheby’s indicates that an authentic old ivory goddess sculpture would sell for far more than a million US dollars (van der Grijp 2006b:Ch. 9).<sup>25</sup> In view of my first-hand ethnographic information the suspicions of the Tonga specialist from that large American museum were justified—although perhaps for the wrong reasons.<sup>26</sup>

Another Tongan carver, Siaosi, told me how he smuggled three pieces of whale bone of about 30 by 10cm to New Zealand. He put two of these in his socks and one in his belt, just before the airplane landed. He wore two pairs of socks in order not to hurt his ankles, and secured the bones between the socks with elastic bands. Upon arrival in New Zealand, luggage including hand luggage is routinely x-rayed, but body searches are randomly conducted. Siaosi also told me how he helped a Tongan friend in Christchurch, who had smuggled a larger piece of whale bone (from the pan-bone) from Tonga to make a *patu*, the short Māori ceremonial war club. He paid for Siaosi’s trip from Auckland to Christchurch, where he was living, plus an extra amount for the carving. This friend was an unusual one for a Tongan; he was Muslim. Once his whale-bone *patu* was finished, including a fine “antique” patina, he sold it to the owner of a large shop in Christchurch. He had no qualms in explaining his personal strategy to Siaosi. “The owner of that shop is a Muslim too. Every Friday, he is sitting in the temple behind me, making the same ritual gestures as me. He assured me that he would only buy and sell carvings from me, and not from anyone else” (Siaosi, pers. comm. 2006). I suggest that we may see these as illustrations of Tongans today choosing out of a multitude of cultural options, and this apparently not always in conventional ways. For centuries, counterfeiting antiquities has been (and still is) a lucrative activity all over the world paralleling the history of private and public collecting. Tonga is no exception when it comes to art counterfeiting. For example, the traditional method of giving *lalava* ‘braided sennit’ necklaces a reddish colour is to burn sugarcane and hold the *lalava* in the smoke. The same technique has been and still is applied to whale teeth. I saw reddish *tabua* (*tabuadamu*) in Fijian pawnshops. A more common practice is to boil whale teeth in tea to give them a brownish colour.

This same technique is also applied to fishhooks made from cow bone. Brownish fishhooks sell better than white ones, although this is not really fraudulent as long as the seller does not claim that the brown ones are antique and thus more valuable than the white ones.<sup>27</sup> Dark colours do suggest age and in wood carving, for example, either the artists or the sellers may use varnish, furniture wax or shoe polish to make the sculptures look older.

\* \* \*

Having addressed the question about whale teeth as ceremonial gifts in Fiji, I now address, by way of conclusion, the other question about the contemporary traffic in whale teeth. Today, whale teeth are exported from Fiji to Tonga, carved in Tonga, and then sold as artwork in Tonga, New Zealand and Hawai'i. In the transmission from Fiji to Tonga, however, we observe a de-sacralisation of sacred *tabua* into raw material for sculpture. In this transition process, the passage through Indo-Fijian dominated pawnshops plays a major role. Raw whale bone mainly comes from Tonga and is usually carved within that country, although sometimes abroad (as in the example of the *patu* war club). A major market for carved whalebone is in Tonga itself, but also in other Pacific countries. Raw cow bone comes mainly from New Zealand, is carved in Tonga and sold in Tonga as well as Fiji, New Zealand and other Pacific countries. Both cow bone and whale bone are often carved in the form of Polynesian fishhooks, an identity marker for Polynesians as well as people of European or Asian ancestry wishing to identify with the Pacific.

I also discussed the historical connection between the circulation of *tabua* in Fiji and Tonga. Early European and Euro-American traders, using *tabua* for their own ends, extended the circulation and significance of *tabua* for Fijians. In Fiji, *tabua* are thought of as being quintessentially Fijian. My discussion is controversial in the sense that it highlights the diverse persons and practices involved in *tabua* circulation, which differs markedly from the common Fijian representation of this circulation as an authentic and original Fijian practice. The analysis of contemporary Tongan use of Fijian *tabua* based on recent ethnographic research adds support to my argument.

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## NOTES

1. One Fijian dollar was worth €0.46 on 25 March 2007.
2. Fiji has some 840,000 inhabitants. In recent decades, about half of the population has consisted of descendants of Indian immigrant labourers who arrived at the end of the 19th century. Between 1874 and 1970 Fiji was a British colony. In 1997, Fiji signed the CITES (the convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora).  
Tonga has a population of about 100,000 in the islands. About 50,000 more Tongans live overseas. Tonga is an independent state and has never been colonised, but was a British Protectorate between 1900 and 1970 (van der Grijp 1993, 2004). Tonga never signed the CITES, although Tongans are confronted with its consequences in all ports of entry around their borders.
3. One Tongan dollar was worth €0.37 on 25 March 2007.
4. Recently, a New Zealander bought a carving made by Leonati in the shop of the Moorings yacht charter in Vava'u. The carving was accompanied by a document made by Leonati himself. The New Zealand Customs did not accept it and confiscated the carving. The man called the Moorings' shop manager, who asked the Ministry of Fisheries to provide an official document. With the latter, the New Zealander was able to recover his carving from Customs.
5. The only evidence we have that ancient Hawaiians ever had such a mask is a many times reworked image by Webber, which may or may not be "authentic". No other original image is known, nor any archaeological finds. However, in an interesting turn on the construction of tradition, this mask has now become a symbol of the Hawaiian renaissance and resistance movement (Eric Pearthree, pers. comm. 2006).
6. One New Zealand dollar was worth €0.54 on 25 March 2007.
7. A small billfish sword (about 40cm) with a female goddess carving at its hilt was for sale for NZ\$285. Carved billfish swords up to one metre long are to be found for similar prices (up to several hundred US dollars) in Honolulu souvenir shops. In Tonga, such carved billfish swords sell for about 10 percent of the prices asked abroad. Prospective buyers are advised to smell test these (unprotected) fishbone products before putting them in their luggage.
8. Nicholas Thomas (1991:80) believes that the myth of *Tabua* summarised below only dates from the 18th or 19th century.
9. Fergus Clunie (1986:160-61) described *tabua* as symbolic women; Nicholas Thomas (1991:225) sees them as signifiers of "alliance, exchange and exchangeability" rather than directly representing women.
10. According to Marcel Mauss, *tabua* have the same role as the Trobriand *kula* shell valuables made famous by Malinowski: "Fijian money, cachalot teeth, is the same as that of the Trobrianders. [They are] known as *tambua*" (1954:29). Nicholas Thomas (1991) contradicts Mauss' thesis by observing that *tabua* are permanently circulating and never kept by any one person for a long period and "are not 'inalienable' in any strict sense" (p.65). He compares the gift of a *tabua* to a stone thrown in the water; at the moment, the size of the stone and the splash

caused by its action are very impressive, but the memory of its action has a short life after the stone sinks out of sight (p.67). *Tabua* may be distinguished by size, colour and patina. The latter is seen as an indication of age, and the older they are, the more prestige they provide. Individual *tabua* do not have proper names and the history of their circulation is not remembered. *Tabua* are given to enforce or reinforce particular decisions or to underline a request, but do not create a debt, in contrast to the gift systems analysed by Mauss. What is important in *tabua* exchange is the lasting social relationship created at the moment of the gift.

11. See Marcel Mauss's (1954) explanation of the *hau* of the Māori gift and critiques by Firth (1929), Godelier (1996) and Sahlins (1972).
12. On 16 May 1809, for example, the sandalwood trader William Lockerby wrote in his journal: "I went about ten miles up the river Embagaba to a village where I was told there was a large lot of Sandalwood [*sic*]; but the owners wanted a large whale's tooth for it, and I had not one to give" (Lockerby 1925:62-63). Traders quickly learned what they had to bring to Fiji in order to procure sandalwood.
13. The fact that some *tabua* bore scrimshaw images (see Clunie 1986:98) did not give them supplementary value, although it certainly does among collectors today.
14. This holds also for carved human figures. "Ivory images were carved, generally from whales' teeth, by Tongan craftsmen, working either in Tonga or in Fiji" (Parke 1997:211).
15. A 19th century florescence of whale ivory artefacts is in line with Raymond Firth's (1992:34) notion that "modern studies have revealed that the alleged 'traditional' has often been a product of an early contact with Western industrial influences, including steel tools".
16. William Mariner gave an example of a large sperm whale that drifted onto a reef in Vava'u and the way it was used by Tongans.

Immediately all the chiefs ordered their canoes to be launched, that they might witness this unusual sight; and Mr. Mariner went along with them. They found the whale in a very bad state, half decayed, and sending forth a disagreeable odour. This however they did not much regard: for although some of the lower orders managed to make a meal of it, their chief object was the teeth, of which they make a kind of necklace, by cutting it into smaller pieces, each preserving the shape of whale's tooth, from an inch to four inches long, having a hole in the broadest part. Through this hole they are closely strung, and put round the neck; the largest being in front, and the others decreasing in size on each side, up to the back of the neck; so that, when drawn close, their pointed extremities spread out, and form a very agreeable ornament upon their brown skins, which is much prized by them, on account of its scarcity as well as beauty. (Martin 1981:179).

17. Mariner, for example, was aware of the fact that "in the Fiji Islands, whale's teeth are held, if possible, in still greater estimation [than in Tonga, where they discovered whale's teeth buried under a traditional God's house]; for it would [be] dangerous there for a man, unless he be a great chief, and even then, if he were a foreigner, to be known to have a whale's tooth about him. The personal possession of such valuable property would endanger his life" (Martin 1981:180).

18. This was noted in 1830 by one of the earliest Wesleyan Methodist missionaries, Nathaniel Turner, who wrote in 1830: “Tonga is now becoming a place of resort for shipping, especially whalers, and we may expect it will be much more so” (cited in Lātūkefu 1974:37). The missionaries worried that the whalers would consort with Tongan women, who had only recently converted to Christianity.
19. Pawnshops are where people can bring family jewels and other valuables in order to obtain a loan when they are in need of money. If they pay back their loan in time (plus a commission), the valuables are returned, if not, they are sold and the money kept by the shopkeeper. An indigenous Fijian explained to me that “here, pawnshops are only second-hand shops. You deposit your valuables and, after one month, you can buy them back with 10% interest. If you don’t have the full amount after one month, you can pay the interest only and come back after one more month. If you don’t pay at all, they will sell your stuff” (pers. comm., Suva 2005).
20. According to the 2006 *Yellow Pages*, there were seven pawnshops in Suva, four in Nausori, one in Labasa, one in Lautoka and one in Nadi. The actual number was larger, since I was able to visit eight pawnshops in Suva and six in Nausori.
21. In the first pawnshop in Suva, I was offered three *tabua* for sale, two for FJ\$170 and the other for FJ\$190; in the second two were priced at FJ\$280 and FJ\$300; and in the third five ranged from FJ\$75 to 390 FJ\$. In the first Nausori pawnshop, I was offered two *tabua* for FJ\$60 and FJ\$100; in the second again two for FJ\$130 and FJ\$180; in the third also two for FJ\$150 each; in the fourth three, one for FJ\$150 and two for FJ\$250; in the fifth only one for FJ\$300; and in the sixth three, one for FJ\$75 and two for FJ\$350. I have been told of *tabua* in pawnshops being priced up to FJ\$600 dollars, but no vendor asked me for anything like this sum.
22. A Fijian informant also observed: “Indians [= Indo-Fijians] have jewellery and they have the money. They don’t give their jewellery to the pawnshops. Not many [indigenous] Fijians wear gold, only some people who can afford to buy it. It is not our custom to show off. When we see a Fijian woman with much jewellery, we ask her: Are you a Fijian or an Indian?”
23. For an analysis of CITES related issues in Tonga and Fiji see van der Grijp (2006a).
24. Haniteli Fa’anunu remarked, “We are mostly confronted with Tongans who bring back apples, other fruits and seeds from New Zealand. We pay special attention to Asians, Indians in particular, who bring all kinds of herbs and spices for their curries” (pers. comm., Nuku‘alofa 2005).
25. One American dollar was worth 0.75 Euro on March 25, 2007.
26. Later, the Tonga specialist told me that the doubts arose not so much from the posture of the figure but the question of whether the material was really whale ivory. The specialist took the advice of a marine biologist, who inspected the sculpture and answered that it was very difficult to be sure about this matter.
27. Throughout much of Polynesia (in New Zealand, Hawai‘i, Samoa and Tonga, for example), necklaces or pendants of drilled or carved dolphin or whale teeth were used in the past as markers of sacred chiefly status among other things (Neich and Pereira 2004). Contemporary fishhook pendants made from bone or other

materials may refer to the pan-Polynesian myth about the ancient god or culture hero Maui, who pulled up the islands from the sea bottom with his fishhook. For technical aspects of bone carving see Myhre (1987); for biographies and ideas of contemporary New Zealand carvers see Salt (2001).

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