

# Indigenous perspective on the collection of traditional Bougainville culture and art: past, present and future

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## Resumo

Este artigo discute diversos assuntos relacionados com a posse e a protecção da propriedade intelectual de obras de arte e cultura tradicionais. Em particular, a aquisição e saque histórico de grandes quantidades de tesouros e de obras de arte tradicional levados a cabo nos últimos duzentos anos por colecionadores privados, comerciantes, entidades coloniais e missionários. O actual acesso a estas obras, na sua maioria preservadas nos museus ocidentais constitui um factor de grande preocupação para os povos indígenas. Muitas culturas hoje ameaçadas de extinção ignoram os locais onde as colecções se encontram e como lhes aceder. Com efeito, o processo de 'ocidentalização' não se limitou apenas a desgastar as culturas indígenas, tendo igualmente armazenado em locais inacessíveis (nem sempre em exposição) os seus vestígios materiais. A exposição *Yumi Yet* [apresentada na Galeria de Arte da Universidade de Macquarie, Nova Gales do Sul, Austrália] baseou-se em objectos da arte e cultura tradicionais da ilha de Bougainville para construir um discurso expositivo que estabelecesse o diálogo entre o passado e o presente. As peças pertenciam ao Museu Australiano (Sydney) e nunca tinham sido expostas anteriormente. Esperamos ter suscitado um diálogo frutuoso entre diversas instituições, entidades culturais e povos, por forma a facilitar a futura restituição de muitas peças aos seus legítimos proprietários. Neste tipo de negociações complexas, as associações profissionais como o ICOM e o UMAC, bem como os conservadores das colecções universitárias e de outras colecções públicas, têm um papel muito relevante. Do ponto de vista das comunidades indígenas, a questão dos legítimos proprietários é problemática. Sob que condições deverá o processo de restituição ser gerido? A quem deverão as peças ser devolvidas? Deverão ser os estados e as instituições culturais a assumir a responsabilidade ou, pelo contrário, poderão estas ser reclamadas por clãs, tribos ou inclusivamente a título individual? Apesar das sociedades tradicionais serem prósperas do ponto de vista artístico e cultural, é igualmente verdade que as suas instituições culturais ficam frequentemente atrás das suas congéneres ocidentais no que diz respeito a conhecimentos e padrões de preservação e conservação dos objectos. De que forma se poderá materializar uma transferência de *know how* que possibilite a preservação e o desenvolvimento das artes e das culturas dos povos indígenas, como por exemplo o de Bougainville?

## Abstract

In this paper issues of ownership and protection of intellectual property of traditional art and culture are scrutinised. In particular, it addresses issues surrounding the historical lifting and acquisition of huge volumes of traditional art and treasures within the last 200 years by various collectors, including traders, colonial officials, missionaries and private collectors. Access to traditional art and artifacts now preserved in western museums is of critical concern to indigenous peoples. Today, many cultures that are threatened in their survival are unaware where significant collections are kept and how to access them. Westernisation has both eroded indigenous culture and stored its material evidence in inaccessible places. Indigenous peoples around the world are wondering what has happened to collections, which are often not on display. Our attempt with the *Yumi Yet* exhibition to examine today's Bougainville culture in the light of the never before exhibited Bougainville art from the Australian Museum raises a discussion between past and present. We wish to open up a meaningful dialogue between institutions and various cultural bodies and peoples to facilitate the future return of significant art to their rightful owners. Bodies such as UMAC and ICOM and the curators of university and public collections could become vital facilitators in the establishment of such dialogues and negotiations. Under what safeguards and conditions should these collections be managed and returned? From an indigenous perspective, arguments within countries as to who are the rightful owners and custodians for the return of such treasures emerge. Is it for the state or cultural bodies within the indigenous culture to take on the responsibility for the preservation, acculturation and future of the collections, or will the works be claimed by clans and tribes or individuals? Whilst traditional societies are rich in art and culture, knowledge of preservation and curatorial skills lag behind western institutions. For the preservation and development of art and culture now and in the future, how can knowledge transfer from more advanced countries be made accessible to indigenous peoples such as Bougainville?

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## Introduction

Whilst the mission statement of the International Committee for University Museums and Collections (UMAC) is clear, one of its aims that strikes a good chord with me is Article 3 of its Constitution which states:

“facilitate international and regional collaboration to stimulate networking, partnerships and research, and to initiate exchanges of artefacts, exhibitions, standards, practices and other information”<sup>1</sup>.

It is indeed stimulating to see UMAC include in its aims ‘the preservation of academic, scientific, technological and cultural heritage’, etc.; but also its aim to ‘stimulate international and regional networking’ in the field of exchanges of artefacts and exhibitions. It has been my pleasure, as part of the team with Professor Di Yerbury<sup>2</sup> and the Australian Museum, to have installed in time for this second international UMAC conference the ‘Yumi Yet Bougainville This is Us’ Exhibition. It is a striking and diverse historical and contemporary display of cultural objects from Bougainville, a culture that has never before – in its own right – been on public display.

Yumi Yet: ‘This is Us’ features a selection from some of the earliest works held in the Australian Museum’s Pacific collection, dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These are exhibited alongside contemporary artworks, ceramics, photographs and videos. The cultural objects and artworks are presented through the personal stories and experiences of the Havini and Sirivi families, reflecting the vibrant culture of this recently autonomous island group.

The content of this second international UMAC conference is most educative and innovative. As I checked the website of the ICOM and UMAC, I was particularly struck by an abstract of a paper by Carol Mayer on ‘University museums – distinct sites of intersection for diverse communities’ (MAYER, this issue). It tries to re-asses the ‘politics of domination’ that had

supported the policy of western museums in exhibiting ‘non-western cultures’, often described as the ‘other’ (MAYER, this issue). Two years ago we were guests of the First Nations of Vancouver and were given a personal tour of their precious heritage, situated at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology. We also visited the Khowutzun Native Village in Victoria, which is hailed as the world’s largest carving house of native motifs. I also want to mention that Macquarie University places a strong emphasis on indigenous Aboriginal art and culture; as an appreciation of the indigenous land on which it stands. It is satisfying to know that a new thinking is emerging within university museum collection philosophy of “re-evaluating the motivations that have driven the collecting, classifying, and displaying of material culture” (MAYER, this issue). Dialogue between museums and indigenous or First Nations Cultures as to the collection of indigenous art objects and intellectual property has become a serious issue in this period of a more enlightened United Nations agenda of ‘decolonisation’. I intend to highlight this very point, that wholesale lifting of indigenous works of art was undertaken in huge volumes as early as the first contacts made by western voyagers. These established civilizations of the West had developed an appreciation of the arts that ignited this kind of passion. The so-called ‘primitive art’ of the indigenous peoples was somehow seen as ‘exotic’ by explorers, who collected such primitive treasures as interesting trophies to bring back home. Unwittingly, these practices led to cynical exploitation by following expeditions that bartered mercilessly with ‘the natives’. One wonders if the receiving museums and places of learning in the West were aware of the impact (a form of cultural rape) such practices had on indigenous peoples.

## Traditional culture and colonisation

Interest in traditional art within the Pacific region became more pronounced with the advent of colonisation in the last rush for colonies by the west

<sup>1</sup> Constitution of UMAC, Article 3 (<http://www.lib.mq.edu.au/mcm/world/icom2001/constitution.html>).

<sup>2</sup> Di Yerbury is Curator/Executive Director of the Macquarie University Gallery and was Chair of the Organising Committee of UMAC’s Conference in Australia.

## Bougainville art work

in the nineteenth century. For the First Nations, however, this was actually the beginning of the systematic fleecing of their 'intellectual property'. More extensive than the loss of precious traditional art and treasures that can be replaced, western domination and subjugation of our peoples forced our ancestors to stop making such artworks. They were seen as expressions of independent culture that posed a threat to the colonisation of our bodies, our minds, our beliefs and our societies.

Artists from the West started to sniff around for something that was different and exotic. As Pablo Picasso responded to the expressive strength of African art and Monet was inspired by flat stylistic Japanese prints; so Paul Gauguin recognised light, pattern and abstraction of shape and colour of the Pacific. It seems that so-called 'primitive, non western art' was not so primitive after all – it liberated the art movement of the twentieth century.

In our post-modern world, the creation of art admits to an eclectic mix of cultural quotation, appropriation and reinterpretation. Indigenous art, notably here in Australia, is leading the revival of revisiting cultural roots and art practice. This movement has inspired other Pacific artists, Bougainvilleans among them, to access artworks of the past that lie stored or unexhibited in the university collections and museums of the world. Revival of culture in a non-threatening, multicultural environment is an enriching, positive role for institutions of learning to initiate and foster in society. I suggest that now is the time for institutions that hold such artworks to redress the past. The benefits from such action can work both ways. The sharing of knowledge and the profile that the Yumi Yet Bougainville exhibition has generated is pioneering for our own Bougainville people's positive cultural outcomes. We have embarked on an interaction between two cooperating and enlightened institutions, the Macquarie University Gallery and the Australian Museum. Both institutions have acknowledged the colonial past, but seek to redress it in positive ways.

Besides the Australian Museum's examples on exhibition, works of my ancestors lie, tucked away, in museums and universities in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and America. In Bougainville's case, the intricate pattern work and stylized abstraction had obviously failed to justify popular theories of 'primitivism' and therefore Bougainville art was never selected for exhibition as examples of primitivism in art. Closer to home, in the Port Moresby Museum in the early 1970s, we were shocked in the early seventies to find only a single Bougainvillean item in the Papua New Guinea Collection, a solitary Upe hat on display (similar to the one depicted in Fig. 1). Why have we suffered this obvious discriminatory preference within the nation that claims Bougainville as one of its Provinces? No doubt the answer lies in the colonial attitude of the then Australian Colonial Administration towards Bougainvilleans and the definition and value of our art objects as assessed against western art by early colonialists and zealous missionaries.

Many Bougainvilleans have asked this question, including Jim Griffin, my former senior history lecturer (University of Papua New Guinea, 1971), who began to plow through documents of the period of German colonial rule in Nuigini and Bougainville during the nineteenth century, finding some startling materials. The Germans were of course 'curious human beings', wherever they went. Griffin confirmed that Bougainville art objects were not only depleted for commercial value, but simply rated very low in terms of popular exotic primitive art (GRIFFIN & GRIFFIN *sine anno*). Another inference was that Albert Hahl<sup>3</sup> was more interested in his brew of coffee than in the conservation of Bougainville art.

Not only were Germans serious entrepreneurs, they were also dedicated anthropologists, ethnologists, and linguists, who carefully recorded the history of the people wherever they went, including Bougainville. They were 'addicted' collectors of native artifacts more

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Hahl was German Neu Guinea's last Governor (1902-1914).

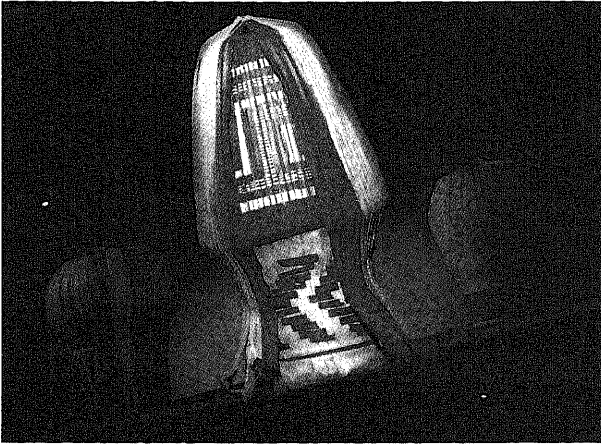


Fig. 1 - Bougainville male Upe initiation headdress. The Upe is an initiation hat worn by each of the tribal boys during their initiation period. This practice is unique to Bougainville in the whole of the Southwest Pacific. The boys are taken in batches from about age 12-17 years and are interned in jungle camps for as long as three years. During this period the boys are taught their oral history, customary laws, warrior training, preparation for marriage and adulthood, training in hunting, fishing, gardening, etc. During the entire time the boys are interned they wear their Upe hats. Each of the hats carries the sacred designs, meanings and patterns of the boy's clan/tribe that he must also learn to weave. The shape and style of Upe distinctly varies by region in Bougainville in their shapes, patterns, size and colour. Culturally this ceremony symbolises the process of the youth coming of age; where they can leave their mothers and establish their own families. It adds value to the boy as a person and as a useful member of his village, clan and tribe. The Upe hat is conical in shape and the base is round to fit comfortably on the boy's head. The frame is made out of cane, the dried leaves are from the acacia palm, painted and decorated in red, ochre and black (Photo: Carl Bento, Nature *focus*/Australian Museum).

than promoting or conserving it. Among those who were heavily involved in art collecting in Bougainville were Richard Parkinson and Captain Farrell. From 1882 onwards, Parkinson and Farrell contributed their fair share to the 4,000 pieces at the Australian Museum. Captain Farrell apparently set up a tidy little business between Bougainville, New Britain and New Ireland provinces of Papua New Guinea, where he collected hundreds of artefacts which were shipped to museums in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. In

1910, a certain Thurnwald tallied 3,150 items from Bougainville, the Bismarck Archipelago and Micronesia (GRIFFIN & GRIFFIN *sine anno*). The collection was so lucrative that even the natives started to freely trade their artifacts for modern tools and other sundry items. Governor Hahl was so inundated with natives pressurizing him to buy more artifacts that he is recorded as throwing his hands up in the air in frustration and shouting, 'tomorrow' telling them 'me cookim coffee' (GRIFFIN & GRIFFIN *sine anno*). A present day translation would be 'tomorrow, your objects are only good enough as firewood for boiling my pot of coffee' or words to that effect.

By about 1914 the German E. Frizzi, while travelling through Bougainville, found that artifacts were already disappearing. The discouragement by missionaries who saw some of our practices and artifacts as 'unchristian' or 'evil' may have also contributed to the disappearance of artifacts and art practices. For instance, missionaries resolutely discouraged carving of 'naked figures' that may have led to the disappearance of such art objects (BLACKWOOD 1935). Outside influence in terms of 'superior' tools and other merchandise may also have contributed to the use of European goods in preference to local ones.

## Access

Access to own traditional art and artifacts now preserved in western museums is of critical concern to indigenous peoples. Many cultures that are today threatened in their survival are totally unaware where and how to access significant collections. Westernisation has eroded their culture, yet stored examples of it in inaccessible places. Indigenous peoples of the world are wondering what has happened to collections in storage – often unappreciated, forgotten or never on display. Unless indigenous peoples are informed of the whereabouts of their cultural heritage, they can never hope to access or retrieve it. To bring the truth closer to home, during the first 40 years of my life I had no idea that over 4,000 art objects of my own Bougainville cultural heritage were in storage in the basement of the Australian Museum. I cannot remember any occasion when dialogue was

established with the people of Bougainville regarding these 'hidden treasures', let alone dialogue through the Port Moresby Museum about the possible return of that collection to Bougainville, and much less of the collections in German and other European museums.

The Pacific Projects Officer of the Australian Museum is currently working on several initiatives with the Bougainville Cultural Committee. We are planning a catalogue that will unite the text and images from this exhibition with an overview of all 4,000 Bougainville objects held in the Australian Museum and intend to set up a Bougainville Cultural Foundation for the proceeds from the catalogue to be used for the purpose of rebuilding cultural and art centres in Bougainville. Our aim is to inspire and facilitate the next generation of Bougainville artists.

### **Meaningful dialogue**

We wish to open up a meaningful dialogue between institutions and various cultural bodies and peoples to facilitate the future return of significant art to their rightful owners. The curators of university and public collections and, more generally, bodies such as UMAC and ICOM could become vital facilitators in the establishment of such dialogues and negotiations.

Under what safeguards and conditions should these collections be managed and returned? From an indigenous perspective, arguments within countries as to who are the rightful owners and custodians for the return of such treasures emerge. Indigenous leaders must take responsibility to open public dialogue within home communities and properly plan for the consequences of returning artworks from western institutions and museums. Intellectual property and cultural knowledge must be democratically preserved for a whole community with respect for traditional practice observed. Sometimes issues of great sensitivity must be respected. We cannot be ignorant of retained concerns for restricted use of clan totems or sacred or gender based knowledge and practice. Is it for the state or cultural bodies within the indigenous culture to take on the responsibility for the preservation,

acculturation and future of the collections, or will the works be claimed by clans and tribes or individuals? Such discussions need to be resolved within communities before the return of precious, rare or significant objects is effected.

### **Curatorial skills, preservation and co-operation**

Whilst traditional societies are rich in art and culture, knowledge of preservation and curatorial skills lag behind western institutions. For the preservation and development of art and culture now and in the future, how can knowledge be transferred from more advanced countries to indigenous peoples such as those of Bougainville?

The South Pacific Cultural Heritage Program based at the Australian National University has launched a programme to incorporate "distance education in cultural heritage management" into the school curriculum of the South Pacific (SUMMERHAYS 2001: 1). Among the objectives are the training of Pacific Islanders in the "development of cultural heritage management policy and develop cultural heritage databases" (SUMMERHAYS 2001: 1) and for the people to become more familiar with the importance of their own artefacts and art. Whilst this is some beginning in the right direction, a wider campaign towards other academic institutions to provide expertise and assistance will be needed.

### **Conclusions**

The 'Yumi Yet – Bougainville Exhibition' is hoped to be the beginning of a Bougainville 'fight-back' programme to reclaim and protect the intellectual property of our past, strengthen the present and plan for the future. Our attempt with the Yumi Yet exhibition to examine contemporary Bougainville culture in the light of the never before exhibited Bougainville art from the Australian Museum, raises a historical discussion between past and present. To what extent have our past culture and practices survived westernisation and the modern world? How can we integrate the rebuilding of a modern Bougainville, recently ravaged by civil war

(1988-2002), with the rediscovered unique designs and symbols that we want to incorporate into our contemporary culture as a celebration of our newly found autonomy?

Our home-grown recipe or antidote to colonialism comprises a plan of action that we have embarked on in collaboration with the Australian Museum. In response to this exhibition, we have interested Australians from the local community. I acknowledge the support that Macquarie University has given us in hosting this very first solo exhibition of Bougainville Art and Culture. It is only a beginning, but actions that have been generated by Yumi Yet already include:

- a) transparency: contact with indigenous peoples has been established and we have let our Bougainville Reconciliation Government and cultural leaders know what is in 'safe-keeping' within at least one particular institution;
- b) access: we have encouraged visits and tours of the collection by visiting Bougainvilleans and other indigenous peoples. Guest lectures were given on open days at the Australian Museum and have brought the general public to the collection;
- c) publication: we intend to produce texts, catalogues, lists of objects, photocopies and CDROMs of items and their data base files available to Bougainville people;
- d) exhibit: the current exhibition at Macquarie (Yumi Yet) will be followed by another at the Australian Museum and possibly Canberra;
- e) partnering museums and learning institutions with indigenous cultural centres: we seek to build links between peoples and institutions for mutual benefit;
- f) negotiate: safe return of artefacts and artworks in responsible ways to peoples/institutions who show genuine respect for and interest in their culture in Bougainville. This is a future and long-term plan that will take effect as and when places are built to care for them.

We also intend to establish formal dialogue with museums all over the world to begin the retrieval of some of these precious art treasures. Our intention of

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returning them safely to cultural centres in Bougainville will bring great joy to the people, who have begun to re-value once discarded knowledge and cultural objects. During the war years (1989-1997) and a 10-year blockade, there has been a cultural revolution quietly taking place, as the people had to return to ancient practices to survive totally off the land. Previously discarded and despised knowledge is now treasured. Our younger generation is now ready to listen to their elders as part of the search for peace and harmony within our borders. Cultural objects are incorporated into the solemn peace making and reconciliation ceremonies are conducted throughout Bougainville today.

There could not be a better time than this ICOM/UMAC conference to table our concerns – for Indigenous Peoples and First Nations to have the ears of the learned members of this gathering on the issue of indigenous art and art objects that are gracing or being tacked away in museums all over the world. On how we can begin to enter into meaningful dialogue and begin to “facilitate international and regional collaboration to stimulate networking, partnerships and research, and to initiate exchanges of artefacts, exhibitions, standards, practices and other information”<sup>4</sup>.

I suggest that now is the time for institutions that hold such artworks to redress the past. The benefits for such action can work both ways. The sharing of knowledge and the profile that the Yumi Yet Bougainville exhibition has generated is pioneering for our own Bougainville people's positive cultural outcomes. We have embarked on an interaction between two cooperating and enlightened institutions, Macquarie University and the Australian Museum. Both institutions have acknowledged the colonial past and seek to redress it in positive ways. I should like to extend this message to the rest of the world.

<sup>4</sup> Constitution of UMAC, Article 3 (<http://www.lib.mq.edu.au/mcm/world/icom2001/constitution.html>).