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L'histoire de deux figures : savoir lié aux objets dans les collections des musées

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A tale of two figures: knowledge around objects in museum collections

by

Lissant BOLTON*

ABSTRACT

Museum collected objects can be a rich resource for understanding the societies that made and used them, and their history. In Melanesia there has not been much of a tradition of using objects to understand history, not least because not much is often known about the objects now preserved in museum collections. By considering two unrelated and poorly documented female figures from the Lower Sepik region, this paper considers the kinds of research that can be used to deepen our understanding of such objects, and thus to extend our understanding of the history of the societies from which they derive. Specifically the two figures are identified as deriving from the Murik Lakes, and from the Bosmun area of the Ramu River, and as both being representations of a major culture hero in the Lower Sepik region.

Keywords: Museum anthropology, history, material culture, female cults, Lower Sepik PNG

RÉSUMÉ

Les objets collectés par les musées peuvent être une abondante source pour comprendre les sociétés qui les ont produits et utilisés. Dans le domaine mélanésien, il n'existe pas de tradition de lecture des objets afin de comprendre l'histoire. Ceci est dû notamment au fait que peu de choses sont connues sur les objets conservés dans les collections. En examinant deux figures féminines pauvrement documentées et sans corrélations de la région du Bas Sepik, notre étude examine les différentes recherches que l'on peut entreprendre afin d'approfondir notre connaissance de ces objets et ainsi accroître notre connaissance de l'histoire des sociétés dont elles sont originaires. Ces deux figures sont plus spécifiquement dites être originaires du Lac Murik et de la région de Bosmun sur la rivière Ramu. Elles seraient la représentation d'une héroïne de la culture du Bas Sepik.

Mots-clés : musée d'anthropologie, histoire, culture matérielle, cultes féminins, Bas Sepik, PNG

This paper takes two similar small female figures as a starting point, one in the musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris and one at the British Museum in London.[1] In both the figure squats on her haunches, arms folded across her belly, her feet grasping the sides of a small cone, which acts as a base. Both have a small shell ring attached to each arm by a plaited band, have two holes pierced in each ear, and beads inserted for the pupils in their eyes (white beads for the Paris figure, blue in London). Both figures have painted faces, and each wears a hood that hangs down her back. The Paris figure has a hook rising from the top of her hood, and circles incised above her breasts. The cone on which the London figure stands is incised. They are close in size: the height of London figure is 25cm, the Paris figure stands at 24.5cm high. Neither figure arrived in Europe accompanied by much information. They have never been linked to each other in any way.

1. The Paris figure is registered as 71.1960.112.18. It is reproduced in Peltier and Schindlbeck, 2016: 223, fig. 106. The London figure is registered as Oc1936,0720.171. It is reproduced in Bolton, 2013a: 115, fig. 102.

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Photo 1. – Female figure. Wood, fibre, shell, beads and pigment. H: 25cm. Ramu River. British Museum, collected and donated by Walter E. Guinness, 1st Baron Moyne 1936. Registered as Oc1936,0720.171 (© The Trustees of the British Museum)

Photo 2. – Female figure. Wood, fibre, shell, beads and pigment. H: 24,5cm. Attributed to the Lower Sepik Ramu region. Field collector unknown. Paris, musée du quai Branly, donated by Claudius Côte. Registered as 71.1960.112.18 (© musée du quai Branly)

Museum anthropology collections often contain objects collected in the nineteenth and twentieth century in places such as the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea, as these figures were. Collectively, all such objects represent a rich record of the material culture of the places they come from, but the degree to which they can illuminate the history, knowledge and practice of their makers and users is dependent on how much is known about them. When they were first collected they were enough, in themselves, to indicate other places, other lives, other aesthetics. Now the more information is associated with them the more valuable they are, including exactly where and when they were collected and how they were made and used. In museums, and especially in anthropology collections, the work of object-focused research has become increasingly important. It adds to and enhances a collection not by adding new objects to it, but by adding to what is known about the objects already in it.

I have been interested by such small female figures from the Lower Sepik for many years, researching and publishing very short articles about two such in particular (Bolton, 2012 and 2013). This paper results from new and further work on them, focusing on the Paris and London figures. At the same time, I use research about these figures to draw together and reflect on the burgeoning interest within anthropology in studying collected ethnographic objects, focusing mainly on research on objects from Melanesia.

Background

There are specific challenges around researching collected objects. Antony Forge argued in a 1979 essay drawing on mid-twentieth century field research in the Sepik region, that it was rarely possible to obtain an exegesis that addressed the meaning of an object. Forge's focus was on art, but his argument holds good at a more general level. He reported that in the field, questions about objects were usually answered with names, and that names are a "peculiarly intractable source of information" (Forge, 1979: 279). He observed that

> "we live in a culture dedicated to the proposition that language, and more particularly the written word, can encapsulate all knowledge." (Forge, 1979: 282)

By contrast he argued that what art-objects communicate for those who make and use them is a performance of significance that would actually lose power if it was made explicit. He commented,

"if they could and did make explicit the meanings, the systems would no longer work – the extra emotional charge received in creation and beholding in the ceremonial context would be dissipated in a conscious decoding of a visual message." (Forge, 1979: 285)

There have been several significant theoretical approaches to objects in recent decades. Famously Igor Kopytoff proposed, and Arjun Appadurai emphasised, the idea of the biography of things, that is that objects pass through several different contexts and thus have, in effect, life histories (Kopytoff, 1986; Appadurai, 1986). This idea has been much taken up in writing about museum objects – the life history of an object is made particularly clear when it moves from the place where it was made and used (such as the Sepik/Ramu coast) to a museum. Janet Hoskins took a different perspective on the idea of biography, in a book about "biographical objects" (Hoskins, 1998). With the subtitle "how things tell the stories of people's lives", Hoskins argued that the Kodi in Sumba, Indonesia, had a "cultural propensity" to talk about themselves indirectly, and "to use objects as a metaphor for the self" (Hoskins, 1998: 3).

In a different trajectory, a more recent argument instantiated by the British Museum's A History of the World in 100 Objects (MacGregor, 2010), is that objects are a point of access to history, or, as the classicist Mary Beard puts it in her review of that book: "we decode our past through objects as much as texts" (Beard, 2010). In other words, we can also use objects to tell social histories, indeed global histories. Objects can be a portal through which history can be accessed. For Melanesia, where so much history is unrecorded, objects can potentially provide access to moments, to knowledge and to practice for which there is now little other evidence. However in Melanesia, to date, there has not been much of a tradition of using objects to understand history (however history is understood).

There are many ways to research objects. A focus on collectors: their intentions, interests, travels and relationships, can open new information about where and when and how an object was collected. Object comparison, learning about one object by analogy with another, in a form of art historical analysis, can also provide new information. Anthropological research with, and in collaboration with, source communities (the people from whose antecedents the objects were acquired) opens another approach. Such research can retrieve understanding about how those objects were originally made and deployed. Or, in the most common contemporary form of object focused field research, the focus can be on the community's knowledge and practice today as it bears on those objects, on what an object means now. And there are yet other approaches and disciplines: scientific research into the materials from which the objects are made, such as wood analysis; linguistic consideration of the language terms used to describe them and so on. All these different approaches re-make the object by bringing new light to bear on it.

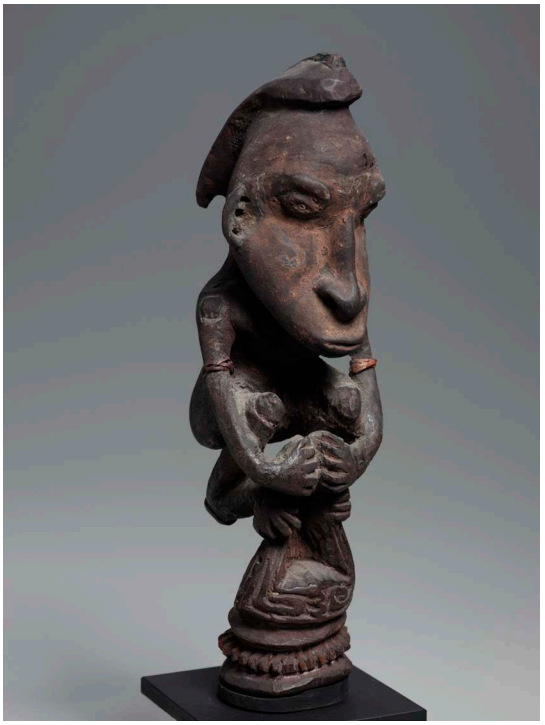

Photo 3. – Crouching female figure. Lower Ramu or Sepik River. H: 25cm. Provenance: Walter Bondy collection, Berlin and Paris, Louis Carré, Paris, Charles Suydan collection, New Jersey, John Friede collection, de Young Museum, San Francisco, private collection (© de Young Museum)

In an era of museum work when returning information about objects to source communities is becoming a widespread practice (and a widespread expectation),[2] consideration of the kinds of information that different research approaches can bring to bear on material seems useful. It is also important to acknowledge that different communities have different interests and investments in collected objects (Thomas, 2013). Research into historic ethnographic objects is an evolving field, especially for material from Melanesia. In this paper I set out the different research approaches I have brought to bear on these two figures, as a way to think about object-focused studies.

2. There is now an extensive literature about the return of information about collections to source communities, including for example Clifford, 1997; Peers and Brown, 2003; Basu, 2011; Bolton *et al.*, 2012; Thomas *et al.,* 2016.

Collectors

The Paris figure came to the Quai Branly from the musée de l'Homme, having entered the latter collection in 1960 as part of the collection Claudius Côte. Côte was based in Lyon, and from 1895 amassed what seems to have been an encyclopedic collection, including for example, coins, rings and mounted bird specimens. It seems that he was an armchair collector, based in Lyon and acquiring what he could from that location. When he died in 1956, Côte left legacies to several museums in Lyon and in Paris, including the Louvre, the musée d'Orsay, and the Bibliothèque nationale.[3] Côte acquired this figure from Charles Ratton, in Paris: it is not clear by what route it came to France. The Quai Branly catalogue identifies it only as a figure from the East Sepik Province.

The London figure has a clearer collection history, but not one that provides substantially more insight into the original provenance or significance of the object. It was collected by Walter Edward Guinness, the First Baron Moyne, in 1936 when he visited the Ramu River on his cruising yacht. Moyne, as much as Côte, acquired the object without much attention to what it might have meant to its makers and users, nor indeed even to exactly who those makers and users were. He used a small drawing of the figure on the title page of his memoir of his expedition, a volume published in the same year as the voyage itself (Guinness, 1936), but merely describes it as a "carved figure from the Ramu Delta" (Moyne, 1936: v).

Research into collectors is sometimes a productive way to learn more about objects. Apart from collector's own records, traces of their movements and associations can be retrieved from newspapers, letters and other archives, and sometimes those connections can reveal significant new details about a collection or object. Collector research is a burgeoning field of study, one that inevitably tends to focus on the makers of significant collections and on the significance of collecting as an act, rather than on individual objects (O'Hanlon and Welsch, 2000; Cochrane and Quanchi, 2007). In the case of the London figure, Nicholas Stanley has studied the collector, Lord Moyne, in relation to his collections from the Asmat region of West Papua, although this research adds a little to what can be known about this particular object (Stanley, 2016). Moyne, who was very wealthy, refitted an old channel steamer as a cruising vessel, the *Rosaura*, and made several voyages in it, six in the Pacific, including one in 1936 around the island of New Guinea. His companion on the voyages, Lady Vera Delves Broughton, took photographs, and they had guests who joined them (including in 1935/6 Clementine Churchill, wife of William Churchill). Their voyages were privileged and luxurious: the *Rosaura* had many staff, an extensive library, sports deck and phonograph. Moyne also set himself scientific objectives. He arranged in advance to make collections for the British Museum and the London Zoo, and brought a professional photographer and two zoologists with him on the voyage.

There was, as Nicholas Stanley comments "a strong flavour of pure adventure" in Moyne's thinking (Stanley, 2016: 1). Moyne's particular interest was in finding places which he could characterise as "untouched by Western development" (Moyne, 1936: 1), and on several of his voyages he visited the south coast of the island of New Guinea, making significant collections from the Asmat people, who suited this objective. In 1936, on the way to the Asmat area, Moyne visited E.J. Wauchope, who had a plantation to the east of the Ramu River mouth, at Awar, and with Wauchope's help, made an expedition along the Ramu. Wauchope himself was a collector: much of his collection is now in the Australian Museum Sydney (Bolton, 2012: 115). Wauchope's wife Biddy was said to have been fluent in the language spoken around Awar, and to have been "an authority on Sepik River arts and crafts" (Sydney Morning Herald, 1936).

The London figure was collected during the 1936 *Rosaura* visit to the Ramu, but whether Moyne acquired it from Wauchope, or directly from people he met along the river is not clear. Wauchope was making his collection for the Australian Museum at that time (Thomsett, 1986: 20). If the figure came to Moyne via Wauchope, then it isn't possible to trace where it was collected by tracing the places he visited, Wauchope's collection covers that wide region. The mouth of the Ramu River is only 25 kilometres west of the mouth of the Sepik, and the deltas of both rivers blend into each other in an expanse of flat swampy country cut by many waterways and lakes. People living in this area have cut across the many sinuous curves of these watercourses by cutting channels or *barets* between them (see Chinnery, 1998: 137), and both objects and other kinds of things are traded throughout the region (Tiesler, 1969). So, even if the London figure was acquired on the Ramu River itself, it might potentially have been acquired by the people there by trade from somewhere else.

Nicholas Stanley's extensive research into Moyne and his voyages suggest that no further information will yet be found about the collection of this figure. It is unlikely that a field collection list, recording the place and date of his object acquisi-

3. Côte published books about rings (1906) and co-authored a study of the clockmakers of Lyon (Vial and Côte, 1927), there is also a book about his collection (Côte, 1912), which principally illustrates European and Indo-European objects – nothing from Oceania.

tions, and prices paid, is ever likely to turn up. It may be that further research into Côte adds some more detail for the Paris figure. A list of Côte's collection is held at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris (Philippe Peltier, pers. comm. 7 Sept. 2017) but I was not able to consult it for this paper. Further research into Charles Ratton's collection may also provide more insights into where and when it was collected.

Comparisons and provenance

One way to understand objects is by comparing individual pieces. These two figures can be compared with each other and with other small female figures found in the wider Lower Sepik region. A number of museums hold small female figures from the Lower Sepik, many of which are standing rather than squatting. The Australian Museum in Sydney holds one standing female figure, also with bead eyes,[4] for example, while the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco holds two female figures, one standing and one squatting. Comparing the information related to all such objects enables some insights into them. Until recently, such comparisons had to be made by visiting collections and finding objects: online catalogues are beginning to make comparisons easier, and gradually, as more people do collection research and publish catalogues,[5] and as more goes online, the corpus of works that can be compared becomes larger and larger.

The Australian Museum Sydney figure has been published several times (Specht, 1988; Bolton, 2012). The figure stands, hands on hips, on a small cone, with two smaller figures between her feet. She is naked, with explicitly depicted genitals, and has strong shoulders, with concentric circles incised above her breasts. She has a cane armband on one arm, and holes in her ears. She is not wearing a hood, but rather has a ridge across the top of her head with small holes in it, to which some kind of fibre decoration was perhaps once attached. This figure was acquired in 1947, and was registered as coming from the Sepik River. It is 24cm high.

One figure in San Francisco also stands, hands on hips, on her two feet (not on any kind of cone or small platform), and is 31cm high.[6] She has some human hair tied to her head (through holes similar to those on the Sydney figure), and yet again has cane armbands, in this case on both arms and with small shell rings attached to each. This figure came to the San Francisco collection from the primitive art collector John Friede, who seems to have bought it from the Brussels dealer Jef van der Straete. Friede himself probably made the provenance attribution to the Murik Lakes (Hillary Olcott, pers. comm. 2017).

The other San Francisco figure squats, arms wrapped around her knees, small cane armbands around each arm, and a hood covering her head, and is 25cm high.[7] This figure is catalogued as being 19th century, and is thus the oldest of the figures discussed here; it has a documented collection history, having passed through several different collectors, starting with the Walter Bondy collection in Berlin. The catalogue entry in the Jolika collection publication suggests that it comes from either the Lower Ramu River or the Lower Sepik River. However, an earlier anonymous in-house catalogue record in the museum specifies it as coming from the Lower Ramu River, possibly from the Giri people. The Giri villages are not on the river itself, but in the hills to the east of the Ramu.

Thus it appears, just from comparing collections, that there may be a distinction to be made between figures from the Murik Lakes and Sepik River, and those from the Ramu, and that such a distinction would rest on whether the figures stand (as does the figure in Sydney) or squat (as does both the Giri figure and the Ramu Delta figure in the British Museum). The squatting figures seem also to consistently wear hoods. But there are also points of similarity between them: all are wooden figures usually about 25cm high, explicitly female, with cane armbands. None of the figures appear to have been made by the same carver, but rather to be representations of the same conceptual model made by different hands.

One of the reasons that object comparisons are only partly informative is because provenance – the identification of the place from which an object derives – has pitfalls for the museum anthropologist. Museums consistently use geography as an organising principle of collection management, storing and displaying objects by reference to the place they come from. Adjacent but distinct groups of people in regions like New Guinea generally make, use and exchange objects which are stylistically similar, so that there is a connection between the form of the object (style), the group from whom it derives, and the place that it was made. In ethnographic museums, this has led to a framing of style areas (such

4. The Australian Museum figure is registered as E.52227. It is reproduced in Brunt *et al.*, 2012: 97.

5. Thus for example the poster for the musée du quai Branly exhibition *Sepik. Arts de Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée* featured the Paris figure under discussion here, and it was published in the catalogue of the exhibition (Peltier *et al.*, 2015).

6. This standing figure in San Francisco is reproduced in Friede, 2005: vol. I, 74, Fig 48 and vol. II, 90.

7. This crouching figure in San Francisco is illustrated in Friede, 2005: vol. I, 101, Fig 74, and vol. II, 94. It was sold by Sotheby's, Paris, June 16, 2010, lot 6 (http://www.sothebys.com/fr/auctions/ecatalogue/2010/oceanic-and-african-art-pf1017/lot.6.html). See photo 3.

as "the Sepik"), linking the form of the object to a geographical region (Bolton, 1997). Style areas are in some ways the product of the storeroom: they map collections into regions on the basis of the appearance of the objects. Objects in a collection that aren't provided with information about where they come from are often assigned to a region on the basis of stylistic characteristics. Thus, it would seem, John Friede attributed the standing figure he gave to San Francisco to the Murik Lakes on the basis of stylistic similarities with other Murik figures (and quite possibly on the basis of a direct comparison with the standing Sydney figure).

Field documentation

Researchers have been seeking information about collected objects through field research for a long time – in the Pacific at least since in 1888 when, as Jude Philp points out, A.C. Haddon took with him to the Torres Strait Islands a photograph of an object acquired by the British Museum only three years previously, in 1885 (Philp, 2004).[8] In the Sepik area, a number of such initiatives took place in the mid to late twentieth century. For example in 1966 staff from the Basel Museum in Switzerland went to the middle Sepik with photographs of objects collected less than ten years previously, as well as of objects collected by Felix Speiser in 1930 (Kaufmann pers. comm., February 2017). I myself have been involved in a long series of field documentation programmes, taking images of objects back to the places from which they are believed to have come and asking people what they know about them. Christian Kaufmann reports of the Basel documentation initiative that people could say most about the objects collected most recently, an unsurprising conclusion. In my experience however, as Antony Forge suggests, what people can say about objects is almost always much less than one hopes for. Forge comments about discussing objects present before him that rarely if ever does a question

> "get an answer that satisfies our idea of an explanation, although the answers seem perfectly satisfactory to those who are giving them." (Forge, 1979: 279)

In the mid 1980s the Australian Museum initiated a programme to obtain more information about its collections from the Lower Sepik region, hiring anthropologists specialising in the region to take photographs of the collection back to show people there. David Lipset and Kathy Barlow undertook two field trips for this project, in 1986 and 1988 (Barlow, 1990; Lipset, 2016; this volume). I participated in these trips as an assistant.[9] Susan Thomsett, who was working for the Australian Museum sorting out the Sepik collection and improving the catalogue records for it, published a short article in 1986 setting out the objectives for this project. Thomsett explained that the museum chose to focus on the Lower Sepik collections not just because little was known about them, but also because Frank Tiesler's painstaking documentation of the region's trade networks – involving the movement of both artefacts and ideas – demonstrated complicated stylistic links in the art of the region (Thomsett, 1986: 18).

Tiesler documented significant trade and interconnection between the different groups who lived along the Sepik/Ramu coast and on the offshore islands (1969-70). Both goods and information were constantly being traded, notably but not exclusively by the Murik, a group living in mangrove lakes to the west of the Sepik mouth. The Murik became the focus of the Australian Museum project. Kathleen Barlow and David Lipset had undertaken doctoral fieldwork among the Murik. Their documentation of the Australian Museum standing female figure was composed partly of their existing understanding of Murik knowledge and practice, and also of information they obtained by showing the photograph of the figure to people in the region.

Barlow observed that female figures such as the Australian Museum figure were displayed to young female novices in a women's cult. The figures represented female spirits that gave power, prophecies and love magic. Barlow associates these figures with what she describes as the Murik triad: "sexuality, aggression and nurturance" (Barlow, 1995: 96). During the process of initiation into the women's cult, girls had the symbol of the moon, concentric circles with radiating lines, cut into the skin between their breasts (Barlow, 1995: 102). Barlow also reported that the cult focussed on enhancing the initiates' sexuality; "they absorbed seduction and beautification magic from sleeping with female, cult, spirit figures" (Barlow, 1995: 106).

Female figures were also often part of ceremonies for launching a canoe (Barlow and Lipset, 1997).

These figures were carved by men, and decorated by women who clothed them with skirts, armbands and shell rings, decorations befitting the status of the spirits the figures represented. They were typically small and were each kept in

8. This was a large turtle shell crocodile mask from Mabuiag Island which had been commissioned and collected by Samuel MacFarlane (British Museum Oc,+.2489). As Philp observes, Haddon often used photographs in the field as a starting point for conversation (Philp, 2004: 91, 94).

9. I was working at the Australian Museum at this time, as Pacific Collection Manager. I am grateful to Jim Specht for giving me the opportunity to be involved in this project.

a special basket in the house of the high-ranking woman who owned them. The owners were usually first-born, and had often inherited the figures from their mothers. The spirits in the figures were named and had stories associated with them, they were known to be capricious and flirtatious, vain and easily offended. They were capable of possessing their owners, who would then speak with the voice of the spirit, conveying important information about society and the powers of women (see also Tamoane, 1977). Barlow associated the figures in particular with a female spirit and culture hero called Jeri. The figures also clearly represented human women: David Lipset has commented that the Australian Museum figure represents an ideal: a physically strong image of Murik womanhood (pers. comm., 1988).

Barlow and Lipset's information make something else clear about these figures: when they were in the Lower Sepik these objects were individuals. Such figures were individually owned, often passed down the generations from mother to first-born daughter, and they represent, indeed provide a vehicle for, individually named spirits. It is this individuality that can almost never be retrieved, even through field documentation. I have never yet taken a photograph back to a place and encountered people who recognised the specific object.

Barlow herself has commented that the Lower Sepik region was such a complex of trade networks that there can be no certainty about where the Australian Museum figure specifically came from, arguing that in such a fluid region it isn't possible to tell where something was made from where it was collected (pers. comm., 2008). However, people in the Murik Lakes told Barlow that the Australian Museum standing female figure probably came from Singarin, a village on the Sepik about 25 kilometres from the sea as the crow flies.[10] In 1986, two women, Wiem and Miki of Darapap village in the Murik Lakes suggested to Barlow that because the figure is not wearing a palm spathe cap (marking initiation) she must be from the Sepik (Bolton, 2013a: 117). It is not unlikely that that such small details of design do act as a locator for people in the region. On the other hand, in my experience, when people do not recognise an object they very often suggest that it comes from somewhere outside their immediate region.

Critical to this kind of research is the assumption that relevant knowledge exists in those societies, and can be retrieved. But all of this depends on the degree of change in the society in question, and the extent to which people still practice (or are able to recall) the contexts in which the objects are used. The Sepik Documentation Project took place in the 1980s, some seventy years after the Murik began to be significantly impacted upon by expatriate influences, starting with the Catholic Mission from 1913, and then after World War II with the arrival of outboard motors, which by 1970 had re-oriented Murik trade to the provincial capital, Wewak, source of gasoline, and a market for smoked and fresh seafood (Lipset, 1997: 49-52). David Lipset summarises the impact of these changes by reference to objects. Until the mid-1960s, he explains, Murik masks were considered "alive"; in 1981, a senior man complained to Lipset that masks were "just empty"; and by 2001 masks were no longer kept in the male cult house, but in the homes of individuals, although knowledge and belief about them had not entirely disappeared (Lipset, 2005: 118-121).

The Sepik Documentation Project started from the expectation that people would at some level recognise and know something about objects from its collection presented as photographs: the project sought to establish "just what sorts of information survives about the artefacts" (Thomsett, 1986: 17-18). Kathy Barlow published an article at the conclusion of the project, addressing just this question. She discussed some of the problems of this kind of research, remarking that it is important to recognise documentation as "a cumulative and on-going process," in which the

> "full significance of many objects will accumulate over a long period of time, with information gathered from multiple informants on numerous occasions." (Barlow, 1990: 21)

Barlow makes this point by reference to the mourning capes that used to be made and worn by Murik women. When she showed photographs of these capes to older Murik women in the 1980s, the photos "evoked a tremendous emotional response" (Barlow, 1990: 18), but the women provided only quite basic information, including the language term for them (the name for them), and remarking that they had been worn by the chief mourner, especially by a widow, when making necessary brief excursions from the house. At the time Barlow showed the photographs, these capes were no longer used. In the 1980s mourners leaving the house merely covered their heads with a towel or cloth. Only by piecing together multiple kinds of information from different occasions, did a wider set of meanings and associations become apparent. These included the significance of the designs woven into the cape, which explicitly indicated the family's descent group, and "a broader association with the nearness or presence of the spirit of the dead" (Barlow, 1990: 18).

10. This attribution may be complicated by the fact that the much larger kneeling female figure (ex coll. Capt Haug, Linden-Museum, now Museo delle Culture Lugano) published in Z'Graggen (2011) as representing the Nzaari/Jeri culture hero, comes from Bien, in the neighbourhood of Singarin. (pers. comm. Christian Kaufmann 5 Sept. 2017).

It is my experience of field documentation in Melanesia that on the whole people are interested to look at images of objects held in museums from their places and their antecedents. This is often quite a casual interest – an afternoon's diversion – but even so people will often provide certain kinds of information about objects that they recognise: the name of the object and its component parts in their language, and sometimes details of manufacture and use. Sometimes, when one shows photographs of objects to people in their home villages, they will go and get a similar object to provide an example and point of comparison. Very occasionally the process of showing photographs stimulates the revival of certain object types – people are reminded about something and make it again. In Melanesia, in my experience, it is the *type* of object that people recognise, not the actual specific object. The commentary that people provide is usually about the type, not the individual object, for example, Wiem and Miki's comment that the Australian Museum figure is characteristic of Singarin, rather than of some other part of the Sepik.

The information Barlow gathered around this figure is revealing at a number of levels: in providing information about this type of object this specific figure is documented; but the information also provides more insight into the other similar figures such as the two that are the focus of this paper. Given the complex cultural and trading links in this region it is highly likely that the two squatting figures now in Paris and London were used in a female cult much like the Australian Museum figure. They might hold a different pose but in other ways they are similar, including in the shell rings attached to their arms. The hoods that the two figures are wearing would seem to represent the plaited and decorated hoods that can be found in a number of collections, similar to the mourning hoods that Barlow describes, which are also used in initiations.

Nzari and Jeri

Until recently, there was comparatively little anthropological research in the region east of the Sepik and around the Ramu River delta. However, in the first decade of this century two researchers, Anita von Poser and Alexis Themos von Poser, each undertook doctoral research in adjacent areas of the Ramu delta (A. von Poser, 2013; A.T. von Poser, 2014). Alexis von Poser was based in Kayan village, while Anita von Poser was based in Bosmun. Both make significant reference to a key culture hero, for whom the Kayan name is Jari, and the Bosmun name is Nzari. This culture hero is an important figure for the whole region, and the spirit to whom Barlow refers, Jeri, is the same character. Versions of this story occur along the entire coast from east of Murik to some distance west of the Ramu delta, and on Manam island. John Z'Graggen, a linguist and missionary, has collected and recently published about thirty versions of the myth about this character, whom he calls Daria, comparing and contrasting the versions which are remarkably consistent in their overall structure (2011). All the versions of the story are, as Anita von Poser points out, topogenies, they are anchored to specific known places (A. von Poser, 2013: 123).[11]

Nzari/Jeri (to use two of her names), daughter of a snake, is first married (which all goes horribly wrong) and then becomes a solitary wanderer moving east from named place to named place along the coast. As she travels she creates rivers by scraping their course in the ground and sometimes then urinating the water into them. As she goes she also teaches women how to give birth (previously a woman at full term was killed so the baby could be cut from her womb). Nzari/Jeri then approaches a man called Kaamndong, who has no house, fire, or genitals, and in a sequence of events gives them all to him. In the version told at Bosmun, recorded by Anita von Poser, Nzari (as she is known in Bosmun) gives Kaamndong fire by squatting over a gap in a house platform and letting fire pour out of her vagina. In Bosmun Nzari also stores the objects that are her wealth in her womb.

Anita von Poser publishes a picture of woman's paddle carved with a low relief image of Nzari viewed from the front, squatting, her elbows on her knees, and a line carved above and down either side of her head that could perhaps represent a hood, and a vertical line dropping from between her thighs (A. von Poser, 2013: 122-131). In a Murik version of the story, Jeri (as she is there known) created a river by first drawing a line on the sand with her broken paddle, and then standing over the line and urinating, thus the river came about. Alexis von Poser reports that in versions he heard in Kayan, Jeri (there Jari) squats to urinate (pers. comm., Oct. 2015). On the paddle a vertical line dropping from between Nzari's thighs could perhaps represent a stream of urine.

It became possible to link the low relief image of Nzari on the Bosmun paddle to the two figures with which I began this paper partly as a result of the identification of the standing female figure in the Australian Museum with Jeri.

It seems to me that as different versions of the myth emphasise different details of the story, so the different images of Nzari/Jeri may also do so: by analogy with the Bosmun paddle illustrated by Anita von Poser, in Bosmun Nzari was depicted squatting. Since we know for sure that Moyne

11. In this volume Kathleen Barlow discusses this culture hero as Jeri, while Anita von Poser discusses her as Nzari.

visited Bosmun, it is possible that the British Museum squatting figure was collected there by him. Whether this is the case or not, I would argue that all the figures I am discussing in this paper are at least potentially images of this hero, in her various guises. And if small details do act as locators (as Wiem and Miki suggested), then perhaps this is one of them. Perhaps in the Ramu Delta, Nzari is generally represented squatting on her heels.

Taking images of objects back to the Lower Sepik involved taking them back to people who, despite changes, were living in the same cultural milieu and who were engaged with similar objects. They could comment on the characteristics and type of the objects in the Australian Museum collection. In showing images of objects to people in Melanesia through the British Museum's Melanesia Project and more recently in a project on the British Museum Australian collections, I have more and more often been showing objects to people who are no longer living within the same cultural framework as that in which the objects were originally made and used. In some cases that means that the objects are of only casual interest to people, preoccupied with matters of day to day life, they look at the photographs and move on.

No region of Papua New Guinea has ever remained unchanged: the Lower Sepik/Ramu coast is no exception. Alexis von Poser makes clear, as Lipset also does, the transformations that are currently occurring in the region. Von Poser foresees two significant and upcoming changes: firstly that the population in Kayan village has more than doubled in the last seventy years and secondly that the land available to the village is shrinking as the sea-level rises. The Kayan solution to this problem is to focus on getting education for their children (A. T. von Poser, 2014: 13). In the context of such changes, the potency of stories about Nzari/Jeri is likely to diminish.

Connecting collections and communities

In recent decades, projects to find out more about collections have been framed theoretically not as documentation but as encounter. Nicholas Thomas, writing about the British Museum's Melanesian Project, phrases the interaction between "people from diverse Melanesia societies and historic museum collections" as encounters of several different kinds – not just between people and objects, but also between those people and both museums and curators, the whole machinery of museum collections work (Thomas, 2013: xi). In that project we did not just take photographs to Melanesia, but also brought people from Melanesia to London to study collections in the storeroom. This principle of collaborative research was not new, but rather part of the wider movement within museums to work alongside people by this period often characterised as traditional owners, or source communities, for the objects (Peers and Brown, 2003). The project was also an experiment, not in finding out what can be learnt about objects so much as exploring the different kinds of significance objects can have, in both the past and the present.

A clear conclusion from the Melanesia Project was, yet again, to reflect on the way objects are always situated in relationships (Bolton, 2013b). Objects mediate all kinds of relationships, including relationships with spirits and other beings, as well as in more obvious senses, for example with trade partners. Objects can also mediate new relationships with ancestors and predecessors – in the sense of enabling people to think about them. Two men from Reite village in Madang Province, visiting London to look at collections, responded to them by expressing empathy for the people, their own antecedents, who made and mended the objects so carefully and who did not have the tools they now have (Nombo and Sisau, 2012: 92). If the project began with the objective of enabling encounters between people and objects, it concluded with a sense that objects exist in a matrix of relationships, and that to seek more information about those objects, is also to create new relationships, and hence new contexts of meaning, for them.

Later projects led by Nicholas Thomas, which address collections from early voyages to the Pacific across museums in Europe, take the sense of encounter in a different direction. With his co-authors, Thomas proposes such research as encounter and reinterpretation. They argue that objects are being

> "reinterpreted in a cross-disciplinary way, informed by art history, anthropology, histories of travel, exploration, science and not least by indigenous perspectives and knowledge." (Thomas *et al.*, 2016: 11)

This perspective is informed by engagement particularly with communities in the eastern Pacific, and not least New Zealand, where ancestral objects have great significance to contemporary communities.

The documentation of collections has thus been brought into the separate dynamic of the reconnection of collections with source communities – bringing people to museums, and objects to communities in several different forms. Such concerns with present significance are very much the preoccupation of the more recent trend for museums to connect collections with communities through digital technologies. There is a growing literature about returning both field photographs and photographs of collected objects through digital strategies. As Graeme Were has observed, the transfer of ethnographic collections into digital formats together

with the launching of digital platforms such as interactive websites and online catalogues has made objects available online and on demand to those with access to a computer and the Internet (Were, 2014: 133). In part this is driven by community concerns, in part by researchers keen to utilise these technologies, as Paul Basu was in making a website of collections from Sierra Leone (Basu, 2011).

Digital projects such as these are often not concerned with understanding the objects better, so much as with addressing moral concerns about access and ownership of objects, and with investigating what communities want to do with the objects now. Graeme Were's own project was with the provision of 3D digital images of objects to the Nalik people of New Ireland, Papua New Guinea. Discussing this, Were presents it as a solution for Nalik men who did not want the actual powerful objects returned to them, but only a safely intangible digital object. However for Nalik men reclaiming objects digitally carried the potential of reproducing those objects, thereby legitimising their clan history and land, and also enabled them to tap into New Ireland Provincial Government funds by demonstrating their claim to possess *kastom* (Were, 2014: 141).

As Josh Bell, Kimberly Christen and Mark Turin have discussed, the more that is written about the provision of information about collections to source communities, the more emphasis there is on

> "the ways in which objects are embedded in a nexus of social relations, the meanings of which are contextual and temporally bound." (Bell *et al.*, 2013: 3)

But also, they suggest that what is interesting about the provision of digital objects to communities is considering what happens when these materials are returned; they are interested in looking at knowledge creation and cultural revitalisation (Bell *et al.,* 2013: 14).

The shift from documentation to encounter and revitalisation is often a shift from working with people still living within the overall frame of the system of knowledge and practice that produced the objects, to working with people whose predecessors operated within that frame, but who themselves only understand it partially, but want to reconnect to it. Change is happening in the places from which collections have come, and the opportunities to accumulate information about what objects meant to their makers and users are diminishing. Gideon Kakabin and Helen Gardener recently presented a paper in Melbourne about a project to return digital images from the Melbourne Museum collection to the Bismarck Archipelago in PNG via Facebook. The New Guinea Island Historical Society Facebook page posted the images for its 10,000 members. One image, of a fine string bag collected in the late 19th century, drew 46 comments and 154 likes within a week: Kakabin and Gardner comment that the Tolai have long considered themselves a basket people, not a netbag people, so the image challenged their own self-characterisation (Kakabin and Gardener, n.d. [2017]).

It perhaps now becomes clear why this paper began with Anthony Forge. His argument was that much about Sepik art – Sepik objects – is unknowable precisely because to spell out an object's significance would be to destroy its power. Kathy Barlow makes a similar point in remarking that to learn about objects in the field, one has to obtain information cumulatively, over time, gaining understanding, in effect, of what is otherwise unsayable. If that has been the case, then as time passes and societies change, the knowledge becomes unobtainable in a different sense, no longer known. But I see value not just in reconnecting collections to present communities for present purposes. Objects from Melanesia are the only point of access we can have to aspects of the region's history. For me, coming to understand that the two figures with which I began the paper are probably representations of, or linked to, a key culture hero significant along the whole Lower Sepik and Ramu coast, and adducing that they probably represent the version of the story as it is told in the Ramu Delta, is a satisfying conclusion. Not least, the figures enable us to understand new aspects of women's lives in this region.

Focused research on individual objects like this is traditionally the preserve of art historians, but I am here arguing that there is a place for recognising ethnographic objects as suitable subjects for intensive study, drawing on a variety of different approaches, and finding a place for it within anthropology. While the words written about Nzari/Jeri by Z'Graggen, both von Posers, and by Barlow, gives a picture of her, these figures also illuminate her in a different sense. Informed by the words, the figures perform her significance, and offer a reflection on the Lower Sepik region in the twentieth century. As well as the future-directed work they can do for contemporary communities in the Lower Sepik, researching objects such of these opens a window on a history that we are only just beginning to sketch.

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