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From: *Journal of the Polynesian Society*
 Vol. 113, No. 4, December 2004
 University of Auckland, New Zealand
 Ed. Judith Huntsman et al.

VANISHING ARTEFACTS OF THE SOUTH SEAS

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During the summer of 1998, archaeologist Dr Barry Rolett unearthed a small, unique collection of artefacts in the Marquesas Islands, French Polynesia. In the course of excavating a land parcel in the valley of Vaitahu on the island of Tahuata, he and his fieldworkers came across four beautifully carved and preserved *tiki* heads buried just beneath the jungle floor (Figure 1). One might assume that these objects would subsequently have become a central symbol of Vaitahu's patrimony, a source of pride and a historic treasure/valuable worthy of display alongside other similar items in the town museum. Ironically, however, since the day of their discovery all material trace of these exceptional artefacts has disappeared, save a photograph (Figure 2).

I was not a member of Rolett's archaeological team in 1998 when the *tiki* were unearthed; but I did take part in the 2000 excavations, and came to know the story of these mysterious *tiki* the following year. The description featured here is derived from Rolett's account of that day, and is the one with which I was originally familiar. His tale of the discovery is essentially the same as the various other accounts I subsequently heard over the period of two months spent conducting ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in Vaitahu.²



Figure 1 View of Vaitahu from Resolution Bay, 2001

In the course of these interviews, I came to realise that the tale of these four *tiki* heads captured many elements of a larger narrative, one which involves contemporary Marquesans and their understanding of their history as the product of a complex dialogue between local and foreign agents. In effect, the story of the heads illustrates how the struggle for ownership of the Marquesan people's past is evident in the battle for its material remnants. Various theories canvassed here surrounding the mysterious disappearance of the *tiki* demonstrate the wide variety of perspectives that Tahuata islanders hold, and their equivocal perception of archaeological artefacts as both a blessing and a burden to the Vaitahu community. Thus, although archaeology has had many positive influences on Tahuata through the educational, artistic and economic value of its findings, the spiritual meaning generated by objects' traditional *mana* and *tapu*³ has meant that contemporary Marquesans are burdened with, as well as threatened by, the mystery and power of discovered artefacts.

French Polynesian law theoretically provides for the removal of objects such as these from the local community. As in many other post-colonial countries, cultural heritage legislation there requires that all unearthed artefacts be immediately released from the landowner's care and surrendered to governmental jurisdiction (Peltzer 2000). Yet Vaitahu archaeologists and



Figure 2: Tiki heads on the day of their excavation in 1998.

landowners alike profess to have no idea where the four *tiki* might be found, and questions on the subject seem to produce a different answer from every source. Thus, it is evident that despite any legislation to the contrary, these artefacts have been lost in a web of local rumour and mystery. Moreover, the local museum, conveniently located in Vaitahu's centre, displays a relatively meagre collection of artefacts compared to what is held in village residents' private homes. This is not an isolated occurrence: a similar phenomenon has been observed among the Makah of Washington State (Tweedie 2002).

Why has this pattern of non-compliance with cultural resource legislation and museum donation been established, and why is there so much mystery surrounding these *tiki* heads in particular? Following several Vaitahu archaeological excavations in the 1980s and 1990s, the village museum was established in 1998—the very same year as the *tiki* discovery. Its realisation was the product of concerted efforts by local functionaries, with generous encouragement and guidance from Dr Rolett, and was for the express purpose of housing artefacts found both casually and archaeologically. Indeed, over the past few years many objects have been either excavated or donated with museum display in mind. Why, then, have the *tiki* heads vanished? By addressing this specific question in the following pages, I can chart the negative as well as positive effects that archaeological activity has had on the community of Vaitahu.

SPIRITUAL IMPLICATIONS OF EXCAVATION

Immediately following the discovery of the *tiki* heads Dr Rolett decided to cover them up again, and to keep the finding a secret until the following day. In this way the artefacts could be properly excavated and subsequently removed to the landowner's house in the village, where they would be safe from theft. As is customary, the archaeologist had properly consulted the local people as well as legislators before proceeding with the excavation, however this cautionary measure was adopted in the emergency as a matter of mutual agreement among the excavators on the day the *tiki* were discovered. As planned, the workers returned to the site the next day, uncovered the treasures and carried them forthwith down to the Maieue,⁴ or landowner's, household on their shoulders. As soon as this transfer was accomplished, Gabriel Maieue and his brother Heehue (the former was a member of the 1998 excavation team and both are local Vaitahu artisans) consulted relatives now living in Tahiti (Heehue, Interview 10 July 2002). Their mother, Titi, had little opinion on the subject; their older brother Tiro, however, had strong feelings, specifically with reference to the *mana* of the *tiki*. At first Tiro suggested his brothers dig a deep hole in a secret place and bury the *tiki* there, so they might never be

found again. Then, by way of an alternative, he urged his siblings to stick the heads in a canoe, take them out to sea and throw them overboard. In any case, Tiro was adamant that the *tiki* be removed from the house, so they might not pose a threat to his family (Rolett, Interview 5 February 2003). This reaction manifests an unease about the repercussions of removing the artefacts from their places of rest.

Several stories related to me by Heehue and various others betray a genuine apprehension about the risks of moving sacred, or *tapu*, objects from their places, as by excavation. For example, one of Heehue's stories concerned a man from the nearby valley of Motopu, who one day took a *tiki* from its resting place at the entrance to a cave on his way home from chopping copra (coconut). He had attached the stone figure to his horse and was about to continue his descent from the back of the valley, when the animal suddenly galloped off without warning. When the old man finally found his horse again, the *tiki* was gone. That evening there were rocks thrown at his house from unseen hands and the man knew it must be the angry spirit figure punishing him for what he had tried to do. The same night he was sick, and the following morning when he returned to chop copra, he saw the *tiki* was mysteriously back in its place at the mouth of the cave (Heehue, Interview 30 July 2002). In view of accounts like this one, it is perhaps less surprising that the notorious *tiki* heads are said to have mysteriously "disappeared" from the Maieiu home, apparently of their own volition. In Heehue's own words: "among those four heads there was one that was evil and naughty. The photo of them is in the museum, but now I do not know what happened to them; perhaps they have gone back to their place"⁵ (Heehue, Interview 30 July 2002).

Several factors alerted the Maieiu family (long-established in Vaitahu) and others almost immediately to the *tapu* status of the *tiki* heads. *Tapu* objects in contemporary times are most often ancient masterpieces or objects of ancestral significance. This was true of the four *tiki* not only because they were expertly sculpted in relief and finely polished, but also because they depicted the human head—the life-source of a person's power according to traditional religious beliefs. In ancient society, "the preservation of heads of important people was extremely important to the Marquesans, for the head was the seat of all the individual's supernatural power, or *mana*, and even after death the skull retained its high charge of unearthly power, radiating a protective aura to those in its proximity" (Suggs 1962:94). In addition, these artefacts were found in what is customarily known as a sacred space, beneath a giant banyan tree. Such characteristics help explain the Maieiu family's apprehensions about the sacred power potentially vested in the *tiki* heads.

A comment Heehue made concerning the excavation of the *tiki* heads further confirms the undertaking's spiritual significance to him particularly. In his own words:

... you must prepare well for going to ancient sites—like Barry did. You must get permission from the people who are descendants of the ancestors who owned the land and who own the land at present, so that you know where you are going. Otherwise you are bound to get lost, even with a good guide (Heehue, Interview 30 July 2002).

From Heehue's perspective, getting permission from the ancestral landowners therefore signifies not just compliance with the legal authorisation required by government law, but more importantly a spiritual requisite for intruders if they expect to trespass upon *tapu* territory safely.

These statements illustrate the Maieiu family's general respect for the sacred. Moreover their elusiveness surrounding the *tiki* heads makes excellent sense, for it was only through secrecy that they could preserve and protect the *tapu*, or exclusivity, of the artefacts. Heehue's vague explanation of the heads' disappearance, quoted above, was the only one ever offered to me by a Maieiu family member. Significantly, his assertions imply not only a continuing belief in the *mana* of such objects, but by virtue of their ambiguity suggest a commitment to the artefacts' concealment—a move likely made partly in the interest of avoiding theft, but more importantly in order to avert such spiritually damaging exposure to the outside world as must result from surrender of the objects to an archaeologist.

Strictly regulated secrecy and limited access were vital components in traditional Marquesan life and in *tapu* law particularly. Historic accounts often tell how violations of the *tapu* or exclusivity of an object led to severe illness or misfortune, such as were recounted by Heehue's story (Chaulet 1886[1952]:46, Darling 1835: unpaginated). The fundamental reliance of archaeology and museum displays on sharing objects and knowledge directly contradicts such strict principles of segregation. Thus, it is the persistence of ancient *tapu* beliefs in various forms which continues to cause dilemmas and difficulties for archaeologists working in the islands.

CONTEMPORARY PERCEPTIONS OF *TAPU*

For the residents of Vaitahu, the discovery of ancient items has turned into an uneasy process of spiritual re-evaluation, as the objects' traditional *tapu* power is tentatively redefined in the contemporary context. Not all artefacts have sacred power and the very process of situating ancient objects in the

modern community has become a question of assessing *tapu* versus non-*tapu* items on an individual basis. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries the Marquesas were ravaged by internal warfare, introduced diseases of epidemic scale, cultural suppression at the hands of missionaries and merciless slaughter by foreign intruders. From an estimated population of 20,000 in 1842, the mid-20th century Marquesan population was reduced to a mere 7,000 (Suggs 1961:191-2, 1962:53). So dire was the situation at the start of last century that *National Geographic Magazine* decided to feature the islands in a dramatic 1919 article entitled "A vanishing people of the South Seas: The tragic fate of the Marquesan cannibals, noted for their warlike courage and physical beauty" (Church 1919). It is not surprising then that the contemporary definition of traditional spirituality has involved a concentrated focus on tenuous, nearly extinct values (Denig 1980:259). It is for this reason that evaluating the meaning and strength of contemporary *tapu* in the public sphere has proven such a trying undertaking. Many complexities and disagreements have surfaced surrounding the significance of ancestral beliefs that are only now emerging from the secrecy of private discourse, after being so heavily suppressed by the agents of Western contact and subsequent hegemony (Thomas 1990:145).

Artefacts hidden from these foreign eyes have in some capacity managed to survive the onslaught of destruction and disease. By virtue of their relative immunity to the passing of time, such objects have in a sense become the most crucial among the ancient *tapu* items, powerful symbols able to continuously express meaning across the ages. While individuals and activities are both similarly limited to a temporal setting, materials have the capacity to persist intact beyond the age when, and for which, they were made. In the case of the Marquesas, the issue therein is one of conveying traditionally significant meaning to generations no longer fully versed in the expertise of their ancestors. Demonstrating this process, a proliferation of once *mana* objects is now exciting anxious local discourse on the meaning of *tapu* in Tahuata, engendering diverse opinions and values about *tapu*. In Vaitahu the word "*tapu*" is still often pronounced in hushed tones, as if speakers are wary of its ominous connotations.

Questions about *tapu* sparked a wealth of tales from locals. For example, Teiebo (a highly-respected community leader, Marquesan elder and former legislator, who attended university in France and played a primary role in establishing the village museum) once spoke of a cousin who became very sick while building a boat for him, because his wife had gone near the man while he was working. This rule about places of work being *tapu* is an old one, strictly observed among ancient artisans, or *tuhuna*, who would isolate

themselves from all members of the female sex while at work (Thomas 1990:65). Teiebo's story illustrates how the belief in some form persists to the present day.

Tamoumu (a respected local artisan and functionary) spoke about another existing *tapu* concerning the female body and the perception of touch as defiling or harming: "Girls [at camp] will steal a [boy's] T-shirt because they're jealous, and it will give the boy wounds everywhere the T-shirt has been [touched]—thus this *tapu* continues today. It is what little remains of *mana*..." (Tamoumu, Interview 27 July 2002). Tamoumu also recounted that

the grandmothers say women with their period must be careful not to hit children, or they will have big bruises...women with their period are also not allowed to touch fishing hooks or line for fishing; they even cannot go in the *pirogues* [canoes] when they have their period, or else you will have bad luck and there will be no fish (Tamoumu, Interview 27 July 2002).

In addition, both Marie (age 22, a native of Vaitahu) and Teiebo's wife (a highly respected community leader, teacher and descendant of traditional Vaitahu royalty) warned not to walk in the graveyard while menstruating, because it brings bad luck and is considered sacrilege against the dead. Picking fresh fruit or flowers during this time could also make a woman sick, or the plant barren (Marie, Interview 23 July 2002).

Repercussions of this kind, from bad luck to severe sickness, are most often what alerts locals to the presence of *mana*. However, in certain cases individuals can tell simply by looking at or touching an object whether it is sacred. Poutinne (a local Vaitahu functionary) described an example:

One time I was on Ua Huka and we found a stone adze. We left it in the house for a while but then there was always someone in the family getting sick and we didn't know why. We also heard footsteps at night, but when we looked there was no one there. Then my grandfather came one day—he was a healer—and he looked at our collection of ancient adzes and knew that one of them was sacred.... So then my grandfather took out all of the adzes and went through each one and touched them. Nothing, nothing, and then when he touched the sacred one he felt something—it gave him goose bumps. Then he put it in sea water; and the water boiled. And so that was the only sacred one, because before the ancestors had considered it *tapu* (Poutinne, Interview 2 August 2002).

As evidenced by tales of this kind and others like it, currents of the ancient *tapu* beliefs still run strong among some Vaitahu residents. Furthermore, Poutinne's description of his family's troubles illustrates the type of threat

which Tiro Maieua feared and was eager to avoid by removing the *tiki* heads from his home. Yet as Tamoumu's comment about the grandmother's sayings also illustrates, interpretations of sacred power are not by any means universal. On the contrary, they appear to depend heavily upon the background and perspective of the individual. As a result, merely identifying artefacts as *tapu* within the Marquesan community is an ambivalent process.

True, evaluating the traditional spiritual meaning of objects in this way is not an undertaking owing solely to the practice of archaeology in Vaitahu. The discovery of artefacts by contemporary Marquesans who are estranged from them by centuries of depopulation and cultural upheaval is quite a common occurrence in the islands in the course of everyday activities, such as road work, house construction and copra collection (Figure 3). Before scientific archaeological work began in the islands a few decades ago, islanders dealt with these items as they saw fit: they either buried, threw out, sold or saved the objects as family heirlooms. The decision of what to do with a *tapu* artefact was based upon personal and local opinion or on a financial incentive, informed as much by persisting traditional values as on an individual's volition.



Figure 3: Two Vaitahu workers with a forest tiki, 2001.

Scientific excavation and academic scrutiny have challenged such evaluations of historic materials. Furthermore, the recent establishment of the museum in Vaitahu has come to complicate the choices people have concerning what to do with artefacts. In particular the significance and rarity of the four *tiki* heads, and their relatively public discovery through archaeological excavation, have made their case unique. Although Marquesans have been dealing with various artefacts for decades now, the calculated and scientific uncovering of objects as consequential as the *tiki* heads has brought pre-existing and conflicting ideas about *mana* and *tapu* into a more public and relevant sphere of social discourse. Anxieties about the definition and treatment of *tapu* objects has therefore gained currency in the community at large and become a matter of widespread concern, with the introduction of the four *tiki* into an unrestricted realm.

Cultural resource legislation is another key factor in this process in the public and local negotiations of the placement of sacred artefacts and their values. As noted above, recently passed French Polynesian law requires the ownership of all discovered artefacts to be submitted immediately to the government (Peltzer 2000). However, enforcement of these regulations is extremely difficult, particularly in such isolated locales as Vaitahu, where artefacts are found relatively regularly by local people and without public notice. For objects unearthed through archaeology the situation is otherwise, of course. The practicing archaeologist in the Marquesas is strictly bound to obey French Polynesian law in every aspect. The archaeologist is continually monitored and the artefacts he excavates are likewise under constant public scrutiny. Such exposure therefore accounts for the high level of conflict, negotiation and debate surrounding the notorious *tiki* heads from a material as well as spiritual perspective.

The Vaitahu situation furthermore does not appear to be unique. In a book called *Drawing Back Culture: The Makah Struggle for Repatriation* (2002), the anthropologist Ann Tweedie illustrates how modern cultural resource legislation can lead to complications in the successful identification and return of artefacts to local indigenous communities. For some Makah this legislation made has made the road to repatriation a much more multi-faceted, conflict-ridden one (Tweedie 2002:5). Excavations in both indigenous communities have thus recently given new immediacy to the question: Where do ancestral objects belong in our modern lives? Whereas Marquesans are called upon to both define spiritual potency and negotiate ownership, the Makah struggle is restricted to the latter and a more general search for artefacts' cultural significance as it relates to museum display. Nonetheless, Tweedie's concluding statement illustrates a strong parallel between the two cases:

Makah tribal members themselves point to how the drawing back of significant objects under NAGPRA [or the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act] could potentially bring out intangible aspects of culture—dances, songs, stories—thereby giving deeper meanings to those objects. While it is tempting to view repatriations of objects to native communities as the end of a long process of struggle and negotiation, it is clear from this project that it is rather a beginning (Tweedie 2002:136).

Thus, local disputes over the power and meaning of cultural patrimony reveal the complexity of dealing with ancient artefacts subject to cultural resource legislation at the local level, or “tribal level” as Tweedie calls it, in both the Marquesas and Washington State.

POSITIVE EFFECTS OF ARCHAEOLOGY

As discussed above, local concern surrounding artefact ownership and the observance of *tapu* laws brings out the more negative impacts that archaeology has had in Vaitahu. What therefore remain to be examined are the equally important positive effects of the archaeological work there. First, the establishment of the Vaitahu museum as an independent enterprise has meant a marked increase in the number of local Marquesans able to view and interact with recently excavated archaeological artefacts. Previously, the products of archaeological investigation were removed to Tahiti—roughly 1,000 miles to the south-west of Tahuata—or, in the days before cultural heritage legislation, they were taken by the archaeologist from French Polynesia altogether. Today, however, artefacts are securely housed in the very village where they were found. Excavated objects that are displayed are often unique and different from items found or passed down by local Marquesans, owing to their unusual form or state of preservation.

For example Rolett’s book, *Hanamiai* (1998), examines the diverse range of delicate fishhooks excavated by him in and around Vaitahu, artefacts whose fragility makes them virtually impossible to discover today by chance. The systematic excavation of such items thus represents a significant influx of relatively new ancestral materials to Vaitahu. As explained by Moanna (a brother of the artisan, Mohho, and native of Vaitahu): “People are interested in the museum because they see things there that they have never seen before.... Thanks to archaeology we know about the technology used by our ancestors to fish” (Moanna, Interview 1 August 2002). Excavated items are explained, and the information about them is transmitted, by the archaeologist as well as through the museum display. The outcome of these explanations and sharing of information has been enormous steps towards greater communication between archaeologists and islanders and a valuable new understanding of local history.

Such an understanding is owes much to the museum’s educational value. The use of artefacts as instructional tools in their original context has boundless potential, as archaeological experts and local residents alike are provided with the opportunity to learn and profit from newly discovered artefacts. For example, Vaimiti (wife of a local fisherman and labourer, native of Vaitahu) was especially proud that the museum’s artefacts would teach her children about the skills of their ancestors, as her family owns some of the land where Rolett has excavated (Vaimiti, Interview 8 August 2002). Xavier (a local legislator educated in Tahiti and France) expressed similar sentiments on the value of the museum, illustrated by the following statement:

We can’t think of the future without reflecting on the past; without a past we cannot have culture. There are people here who are like boats on the water, floating along without any knowledge of their past or anchor in their culture. This is why it’s so important to teach children about the past (Xavier, Interview 15 July 2002).

Teiebo also proclaimed: “I believe a lot in our youth. They must conquer *your* knowledge, Western knowledge, and use that knowledge to re-conquer our own past” (Teiebo, Interview 29 July 2002). Rolett’s instruction of local workers in excavation techniques and the interpretation of artefacts, as well as the foundation of the museum immediately adjacent to Tahuata’s elementary school, have helped Vaitahu pursue this goal of self-sufficiency and the fusion of old and new.

Moreover, the museum has facilitated the transmission of historical knowledge across generations, through the old stories offered by elders to explain the significance of its contents. Mohho and many others expressed apprehension about the loss of awareness and knowledge concerning *mana*, owing to the steady loss of Vaitahu elders and the correlated danger of losing their great wealth of unrecorded knowledge. A middle-aged local artisan who has never left the Marquesas archipelago, Mohho commented,

... those who can really tell what *mana* is, all they have to do is look at something to know that it’s *mana*—they don’t even have to touch it. Others touch and then they have telepathy and they know. But the young people today—it’s only sickness that shows them what is *mana*—they can’t look at something and tell.... The young people now, they want to ignore the ancient ways and the *mana*; but when they get sick where will they go to get cured, when all the old *tohua* [or traditional priests] are dead? All the old people keep the recipes for medicines in their heads—if young people aren’t interested in it then that knowledge will disappear when the old die (Mohho, Interview 6 August 2002).

In this respect as well, the Vaitahu museum has been built in the community at a most opportune moment. It is a convenient place where dangerous *tapu* objects can be kept away from the younger, less knowledgeable generations of Vaitahu. Heehue related how Teiebo once donated a finely crafted double *tiki* which had been found in a neighbouring valley to the museum, because the stone figure was jiggling around and making noise in his cupboard (Heehue, Interview 30 July 2002). Thus the museum represents a unique island of security within the village, and more than just a simple collection of historical resources or communally owned cultural patrimony. Its establishment through the help and encouragement of the archaeologist as well as local leaders has also meant that islanders have a safe place to put their troublesome or potentially dangerous casual finds and family heirlooms. In this way they, too, can take the initiative in encouraging historic awareness in the community and in helping the museum attract tourists as well as fulfil its educational role.



Figure 4: Wooden tiki crafted by a local artisan, in Vaitahu museum, 2002.

The emphasis of both Rolett and the museum on the remarkable craftsmanship and utilitarian functionality of artefacts furthermore helps to increase local Marquesan pride, contradicting the negative perceptions of a past that has for years been portrayed as barbaric, cannibalistic and shameful by various Western sources (Denig 1999:260). Contemporary artisans especially have gained inspiration from archaeological materials. No less than four of Rolett's regular field excavators are local artisans, two of whom have crafted traditionally styled pieces for the enrichment of the museum display (Figure 4). Access to use of the museum and to Rolett himself as sources of knowledge on the art of the Marquesan past has thus meant the promotion of professional careers by way of artistic inspiration.

In addition, the economic effects of archaeological excavation have benefited Tahuata, not only in the form of employment in the excavation team but also through the museum's commercial potential. The museum charges a small entrance fee to visiting tourists and contemporary artists have also managed to integrate the building into their marketing strategy. Setting up tables directly outside the museum's door, local artisans offer their work for sale to tourists, who pour down the main street and into the schoolyard once a month. Visitors going in and coming out of the museum are actually forced to manoeuvre themselves *around* artisan tables to gain the entrance (Figure 5). Clearly, contemporary artists, such as Tamoumu, have learned how to exploit the authentic air which ancient objects can lend to modern artistic products. Today's pieces are mainly necklaces of cow bone carved as *tiki*, fishhooks or manta rays, and finely sculpted wooden bowls fashioned in the same style as articles in the Museum. As a visitor exits the display room and encounters the tables, motifs and materials common to both ancient and contemporary items are immediately visible.

Archaeology has also played a role in slowing down the flow of island objects sold to outside sources. Not only does the Vaitahu museum encourage compliance with French Polynesia's cultural heritage legislation through donation, but the respect for artefacts emphasised by archaeological practice and museum display has helped raise community awareness of the cultural and long-term value of their Marquesan patrimony.

The sale of artefacts in the islands is a firmly established pattern; visitors interested in buying and bartering for objects have never ceased their demands over the course of the past four centuries. The result has been a diaspora of ancient Marquesan objects across the globe: a simple database search of Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology inventory turns up everything from magnificent Marquesan clubs to *tiki* to a porpoise-tooth headdress. A similar search on the lot archive of Sothebys.com, the online version of the world-wide auctioning enterprise, reveals

a wealth of comparable materials, among them carved stilts, traditional earplugs, and various stone *tiki*. The most valuable of the *tiki* was purchased for US\$51,750 in 1998.

It is prices like these which continue to persuade some Marquesans to sell the artefacts they find. Tamoumu himself recounted how he once received an offer of purchase for an ornamental human bone *tiki* he found in 1988. After being invited onto a visiting sailboat and served a little whiskey, he was offered 3 million French Polynesian Francs (roughly the equivalent of US\$30,000 today) for the artefact (Tamoumu, Interview 27 July 2002). Luckily Tamoumu refused; he recognised the *tiki* as an important piece of his cultural patrimony not worth a price in money. To have sold the artefact, which Rolett had already seen and praised, would have been not only a disappointment to the archaeologist but also a violation of a friendship and trust founded on several years of close acquaintance between the two men.

The breadth and strength of mind demonstrated by Tamoumu and others who have made museum donations can be said to arise in part from an appreciation of archaeology's significance, in addition to the educational value of Vaitahu's museum. The perspective lent by museum contents to



Figure 5: Local artisan selling crafts to tourists outside Vaitahu museum, 2002.

local perceptions of the past exercises a general influence in the community, despite the fact that visitors are most often tourists, school children and local artists. Whether the information embodied by museum artefacts offers Marquesans artistic inspiration, economic benefit or cultural pride in their ancestors, those who take an interest in the little building are active in their concern for its contents and participation in archaeological excavations. The nature of these interactions and the sentiments they engender in the small town hint at the power which the Vaitahu Museum wields, even without a wealth of local visitors pouring through its doors each day.

STRUGGLES IN ARTEFACT TREATMENT

As discussed above, the enhancement of a historic consciousness within Vaitahu has in some ways been a positive process. However, the uncertainty and apprehension surrounding the ancient spiritual significance of objects has also caused negative repercussions. In effect the museum is not simply a zone of protection, for some it is actually an unwelcome interference into the patterns of island life. Once again, this dichotomy of meaning is owed to the ambiguity surrounding the definition and depth of *tapu* power in contemporary Vaitahu. As illustrated in some of the stories above, the range of local interpretations is tellingly manifest in the treatment of ancient artefacts by islanders. While some Marquesans have been drawn by financial or artistic incentives to warily collect objects over the years, many have also encountered the repercussions of this practice, which arise from transgression of ancient *tapu* laws. As a result some individuals have been driven out of fear to sell, throw out or bury, or to donate to the museum potentially *tapu* artefacts which they had collected, rather than maintaining them in their homes.

For example, Tamoumu asserted that residents of the neighbouring village of Motopu had “put everything in plastic and buried it in cement” (Tamoumu, Interview 16 July 2002). Henateiane (a local elder) explained as well how

... people know where sites are—*pai pai* and heads in caves. When you go walking there you see them, but you must not go and take them; they and their places are sacred. If you want to take them you must put them in a bag and bury them in a hole; you mustn't play around with them. If not, you'll be haunted by them at night and have nightmares about those heads from the caves (Henateiane, Interview 9 August 2002).

Thus the act of burying potentially *tapu* objects is seen as one protective measure against both their theft and their power, and is for some Vaitahu residents a preferred and fundamentally Marquesan alternative to the more recently introduced option of museum donation. Indeed, as illustrated by the

strong link between *tapu* and secrecy or exclusivity, the process by which hundreds of pairs of eyes scrutinise museum artefacts indiscriminately can be interpreted as a direct violation of ancient laws. As explained by Taheya, actively staring at objects alone has the potential to disturb and even anger the ancient spirits:

When I saw the [double *tiki*] in the museum, I looked at it a long time; and when it started to look back at me, and I swore out loud! If you look at an ancient object for a long time like that, it'll look at you. And so then I believed my mother was right [about the power of *tiki*], and that we must not look at those things a long time. Instead you should only look briefly by the corner of your eye... that's the power of *mana* (Taheya, Interview 6 August 2002).

Although staring itself is not historically documented as being capable of transgressing an object's *tapu*, this statement correlates with literary descriptions of how access to items with *mana* was highly restricted (Thomas 1990:65). Both the donation of an object or its burial can be seen as the removal of artefacts from the social or spiritual realm of the greater community context; once established either underground or in the museum, a *tapu* object can never again be free to move about the town and cause trouble. However, artefact burial represents the protection and observance of ancient *tapu* laws of exclusivity, while the more Western concept of museum display signifies a direct violation of such beliefs.

As a result, though placement of potentially hazardous artefacts in the museum has for some islanders proven a relief as well as a service, the same process poses to others a serious threat to spiritual values. Specifically for the Maieu family, deciding against donating the heads can be seen as a reclamation of not only their ancient patrimony but of their past. Meanwhile, however, the ambiguous nature of these items' spiritual meaning and their fate remains a source of unease and dissidence within Vaitahu. The archaeologist has brought these artefacts out into the light, but only in the form of a photograph. As the objects continue to be missing the process thereby begun is mercilessly denied any sort of closure, specifically for those who care about the *tiki* as valuable sources of information on Marquesan history and artistic development.

In the absence of widely established systems of knowledge to control the potency of ancient *tapu* materials like these, contemporary Marquesan views are anxiously wary and fragmented concerning their treatment and interpretation of cultural materials. Beliefs about *tapu* power have become diversified to such an extent that it would appear no single treatment of sacred artefacts would be suitable to serve the needs of everyone. It is evident that traditionally *tapu* objects still possess a power beyond what can be explained

or adequately dealt with by the modern Vaitahu community as a whole. Local unease resulting from this dilemma has subsequently transformed ancient artefacts from gifts to burdens. They have become sources of cultural renewal but also of anxiety.

CONCLUSION: POWERFUL PATRIMONY

The Marquesans of Vaitahu and their cultural patrimony have been caught somewhere between governmental legislation concerning the treatment of artefacts, the establishment of a local museum, and the actual process of excavation. Defining the circulation and use of ancient items consequently remains a cloudy, conflict-ridden process. The uncertain situation of the Maieu family in the case of the *tiki* heads epitomises the tenuous and uncomfortable position of the community as a whole in its attempt to handle the traditional power of ancient objects, a task for which it is no longer properly equipped. The mysterious power of artefacts has sparked not only battles over their ownership and control, but also the struggles of individual residents to manoeuvre themselves and their beliefs around a past which has acquired a new sense of immediacy—fresh out of the ground, as it were. By concentrating on Marquesan history and its remnants, the practice of archaeology has made these conflicts public and thus more virulent. As a result, although valued as symbols of cultural pride, continuity, economic revenue and artistic inspiration, artefacts have come to provoke dissonance and apprehension as well.

What must also be taken into account is the broad and powerful spread of archaeology as a field of "study". When scholars travel the world to excavate artefacts, they introduce those artefacts into contemporary social contexts in a manner which, although often positive, can alternatively be disruptive or even unwelcome. These are scholars who do not simply study what they find, but who simultaneously implement irreversible change—to the material objects they excavate and likewise to the local people among whom they work. This is not to say that the practice of archaeology is inherently doomed to disrupt and damage as it discovers; indeed, as an archaeologist myself, I believe the positive products of excavation significantly outweigh the negative. Nonetheless it is absolutely essential that archaeologists and academics more generally recognise the myriad effects of their research as it transpires, in both its positive and negative aspects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr Barry Rolett and the residents of Vaitahu, Tahuata for their invaluable help, advice and support in the realisation of the project that made this article possible.

NOTES

1. *Tiki* are Polynesian representations of humans or sometimes animals which most often have a traditional religious affiliation. In ancient times they were considered *tapu* due to their strong ties to the divine (Thomas 1990:65). Certain characteristics which frequently distinguish East Polynesian human *tiki* are the large eyes, wide nose and mouth, and position of the hands on the stomach.
2. Drawing upon my research in 2002, I went on to write my undergraduate honours thesis on the complex and conflicting effects of archaeological practice in a contemporary indigenous community.
3. *Mana* is the Polynesian term for a religious or sacred power or force; a kind of greater potency associated with the divine (Valeri 1985:97). In the Marquesas today, something imbued with a great deal of *mana* is also considered *tapu*. *Tapu* is an ancient set of laws which once defined a complex hierarchy of both social and material entities (Thomas 1990:68). The rules of *tapu* dictated the treatment and respect of artefacts possessing *mana*, and in their contemporary interpretations these values continue to do so today. Both *tapu* and *mana* depend heavily upon the principle of purity, which is maintained by exclusivity and strictly limited physical contact. Thus proximity to a *tapu* object, such as when it is touched or stored in the home, poses a serious threat to its sacred value. For further detail on these concepts, see Denning (1989) and Thomas (1990), or for more traditional Polynesian values, see Valeri (1985).
4. Fictional names are used exclusively in this paper, out of respect for Vaitahu community members as well as for their own protection.
5. All original quotations were translated from French to English by the author.

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