A WHALE’S TOOTH FROM FIJI
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Introduction

In March 2010 a whale’s tooth, also known as a tabua, was purchased in Adelaide from the son of a South Australian Methodist minister, the Reverend Charles Dadds, who had received it from indigenous Fijians during his tenure as a missionary in their country from 1918 to 1920.

It was, according to family history, given to Dadds as a token of esteem, and he perhaps saw it as a souvenir or lucky charm, rather like a rabbit’s foot. The tabua is not so easily dismissed however; it comes with gravitas and history that invites curiosity and thereby further investigation.

This work is based on a review of selected historical accounts of life in Fiji in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and some more recent anthropological studies. Its limitations are many, but it has been fashioned as an honest attempt to provide non-Fijians with an overview of the significance of the whale’s tooth in traditional Fijian society.

The main source of this information has been published histories of Fiji, often written by Methodist preachers and Government officials. Academics, especially anthropologists, have contributed more information to the historical record, but the native voice is almost absent in these accounts. The scope of this work is limited to the period early 1800s – 1920s.

It is also intended to place the tabua given to Reverend Dadds into this context so that it may be appreciated as much more than an amulet.

Any errors or omissions are entirely the fault of the author and no offence is intended to any person or group.

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Ways of seeing

Tabua are often pictured in books on “primitive art”, although “art” is not a word or concept that was familiar to those in traditional primitive cultures in many cases. To the western mind, an art object, sacred or secular, is often seen as a word picture: i.e. the object represents some other thing, symbol or idea that the observer recognises. In some tribal societies, art is non-representational. The tribe member experiences the “art” object, inextricably linked as it is in cultural and traditional ways to his or her life, as a sacred modality. The object never was a “thing” or a “word picture” to these observers, but a sacred experience. Western thought patterns tend to preclude the direct experience of the tabua in the traditional Fijian sense. In the same way, an early 19th Century Fijian might, say, upon finding a fine bronze crucifix in a shipwreck, be at a complete loss to understand or experience the attendant symbolism and significance of the cross, as well as the reverence with which it was held by its former owners.

The whale’s tooth is, likewise, a mystery to non Fijians – its historical meanings are layered and complex, often obscured within a seemingly primitive old religion that embraced secrecy, taboo (tabu) and cannibalism. The absence of an indigenous written historical record has helped obscure the meanings and myths associated with the whale’s tooth. The significance of tabua also depended on the event in which it was used and by whom and for what purpose. More difficulties arise for Westerners trying to understand this strange object – without a frame of reference it is an enigma.

The experience of the tabua is an altogether different matter. It is “outside” our experience, it is “non-representational” and intricately interwoven in traditional Fijian cultural life. Its relationship with the sacred is the key to its understanding – but understanding is the poor cousin of experience. Depending on our enculturation we may be locked out of ways of seeing and particularly ways of experiencing an object. Without a receptive audience, an object cannot successfully sign its meaning and thereby no longer exists at that level. It becomes a shell.
Fiji... the Cannibal Isles

Fiji is a group of volcanic islands in the South Pacific, about 1700 km north of New Zealand. There are over 300 islands of which 100 or so are permanently occupied. Viti Levu, the largest island, with 69% of the population, is home to the capital, Suva and Vanua Levu some 60 km north holds 15% of the population. Both these islands are mountainous with peaks up to 1300 m and are well covered with tropical forest. Prehistory indicates that people reached the Fijian archipelago some 2000 years before the birth of Christ. They were clearly great sailors.
During the late 18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} Centuries, Fiji was known as “the Cannibal Isles” and carefully avoided by mariners on account of its fiercely hostile warriors and treacherous, mist shrouded waters that hid dangerous coral reefs (Sandy 1986). The arrival of white traders, missionaries and officials of the British Colonial Government changed all that. Today the quotation is still used, as a catchy tourist promotion and only the Suva museum shows artefacts from the “the time of the devils” as the 19\textsuperscript{th} Century is now known by Methodist Fijians.

Captain James Cook (1774) noted the practice of Fijians “being addicted to the eating of their enemies they kill in battle”. Fijian cannibalism was the most ghoulish and barbaric practice for 19\textsuperscript{th} Century authors and their readers to come to terms with. Few realised that this practice was part of a highly ritualized culture integrally woven into the fabric of traditional society. The Methodist missionary, the Reverend Thomas Williams, c 1850, observed that “cannibalism among this people is one of their institutions”.

Writing in Popular Science in December 1895, Laenus Gifford Weld described cannibalism as “the one foul blot on the character of the Fijians”. He went on to observe that when compared with neighbouring Pacific Islanders, the Fijians were “a superior race” and they have “relatively advanced religious beliefs and a rather elaborate system of mythology”.

**Tabua**

James Cook introduced the word “tabu” to the English language after visiting Tonga in 1777. The anglicized form, taboo, denoted a sacred (Polynesian) system of beliefs that had restrictions and prohibitions. The barrier between the everyday world and the divine is the tabu, and it sets apart the sacred. Most religions are characterised by “thou shalt not….” (limiting access to the holy to those people ritually sanctioned to do so).

The sacred can only be represented in symbolic terms. The power of the symbol is that it exists at the root of human thought and thereby acts to open and transform the mind.

The tabua was exchanged, in Fijian society, in sacred rights that actualised the experience of the sacred. “Sacred” is both a process and a state of being.

The shared ritual experiences created and maintained relationships within Fijian society and, although these symbolic acts have had many constructions placed on them, the role of the tabua in present-day Fijian society remains pre-eminent as a symbol of kinship and to many it is possessed of a mystical power that they much revere.
In an interview on ABC Classic FM on 23 July 2010, the whale expert and author Phillip Hoare described the sperm whale as one of the most mysterious animals on earth. It is also the world’s largest predator, attaining lengths up to 18 metres and weighing up to 42 metric tons. Its diet includes fish and squid and it eats a ton of them a day. By supercharging its blood with oxygen, it can dive to depths of 1000 metres in search of food, and stay there for up to 2 hours.

This remarkable creature is distinguished by its massive head, housing the largest brain on the planet. It is listed as an endangered species today, hunted extensively as it was from the 18th Century.

Females and their calves remain in the more tropical waters year round. The adult males are migratory, moving out of the tropics to higher latitudes and then returning to breed. Sperm whales live for hundreds of years, Hoare declared, and that some whales alive today may well have seen Cook’s Endeavour on its way to Tahiti.

Fijians, despite their huge ships and maritime prowess, did not hunt the whale, they clearly revered it. The whale tooth was sacred, in part, because it came from the oldest, largest and most mysterious beast in the Fijian’s realm. It was a talisman from the most powerful creature on the planet.
As Paul van der Grijp says in his article Tabua Business: Recirculation of Whale's Teeth (2007) “Fiji is the only place in the world where natural whale teeth have a privileged and sacred status”.

What are these whale’s teeth? In his book Staying Fijian (2009) Rod Ewins describes a tabua as an “especially prepared and ritually sanctioned tooth of the cachalot or sperm whale (Physeter macrocephalus)”. Tabua come from the lower jaw of the whale, the upper being without teeth. In pre-colonial days, tabua were much more significant and venerated.

The teeth are whale ivory and, once engraved, become scrimshaw, a folk art by-product of 18th and 19th Century whaling. Beached whales, much more numerous in the early days, were the only available source of teeth available to the Fijians. Some were introduced by Tongans and later by Europeans. Various sources suggest polished hardwood, stone and even human bone were used as tabua, predating whale teeth, or used instead of them.

Whale’s teeth were prepared in the traditional manner, which involved cleaning and scraping the tooth, then polishing with coral sand and leaves of a tree. Staining was achieved by the application of turmeric and coconut oil and sometimes by smoking in a smoldering fire of sugar cane or masawa roots. A square-sectioned plaited sinnet cord was applied to each end of the tooth. This cord is likewise ritually important and its use is specified by tradition.
Whale's teeth are ivory, and occur naturally as an off-white colour, as seen in the photo below –

Set of six sperm whale's teeth of various sizes,

W L Crowther Library, Tasmania Archive and Heritage Office

Note these teeth have been sawn off roughly perpendicular to the vertical axis of the tooth. A whale's tooth may be considered to be a conic section. Where it is cut perpendicular to the long axis, it will be circular in section. However, an oblique cut will generate an elliptical section that will look “oval” in shape. Fijian whale teeth are cut in both ways, perhaps to achieve different purposes. Sections through the distal (nerve) end will show up as circular or oval “holes”.

The SA Museum has a good collection of tabua which can be viewed on-line at http://www.justpacific.com/fiji/sam/
All the teeth in the collection are coloured and polished, but some have natural unpolished distal ends. Others show circular or oval ends, usually polished. The shaping of the distal end as an oval section may have been to achieve the desirable “archetypal” crescent shape or a yonic form, or for some purpose obscured by time.

In his book The Hill Tribes of Fiji (1922), A Brewster reflects on the nature of the Fijian mind in the late 19th Century. The Fijian native considers three things worth living for, and they are tabua, yaqona (kava) and pigs, which constitute in their eyes riches, strong drink and feasting. The Fijian considers tabua to be the most important of the three.

Brewster also observes that “some of the present day tabua are of very great beauty, having been oiled and polished and kept in the seclusion of the special kato or baskets for many years. Such are looked upon as most holy, and jealously guarded and seldom seen, except by the initiated, who know of their existence”.

Tabua kept in baskets are placed with a symmetrical shaped polished pebble as a companion piece. The latter is called “tina-ni-tabua” or the mother of the whale’s tooth. Tabua are lonely if left to themselves, and will cry, especially at night, so they are provided with a mother to hush and comfort them. (Brewster, 1922 and Parke, 1997)

Tabua are considered by Fijians as a “chiefly thing”. The Fiji museum in a recent email (06/07/10) describes the current use of tabua in a Fijian ceremonial:

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*Sperm whale tooth on a plaited cord. 197 mm. South Australian Museum: A.35523. Photo: B. Craig*
The Use of Tabua in Fijian Ceremonial

The ceremonial term applied to a tabua is “kamunaga”, and this is the word used during all ceremonial presentations. Apart from the element of goodwill in every presentation, it is frequently the vehicle for a request, and acceptance of the tabua implies that the recipient is in honour bound to carry out this request. Today, the presentation of a tabua is most often a gesture of goodwill, respect or loyalty from the persons presenting it and the detailed ceremonial ritual is always carefully carried out.

It is often presented at ceremonies associated with births, deaths, marriages, the naming of a child, on departing or returning from a long journey, after a yaqona ceremony, particularly when a chief has been installed and so many other occasions. The tabua, contrary to general opinion, has never been used as currency and cannot be used to purchase an article or service.”

William Lockerby, who lived in the Fiji islands in 1808-1809, facilitated trade between whites and Fijians. He advised would-be traders on navigation, offered a little Fijian vocabulary and said which chiefs were reliable. He endorsed whale’s teeth as “the most valuable item”. Sandalwood was bargained for and later bêche-de-mer (sea cucumber) and tortoiseshell (for the Asian market). Tabua were used, not so much as payment, but as ritualised presentations to chiefs as a necessary pre-condition to trade. Chiefs received huge quantities of muskets in exchange for goods. Their stock of tabua gave them boosted status and increased power and the muskets were put to murderous use in inter-clan rivalry and disputes. The body count in inter-tribal warfare went up significantly.

Charles Savage survived the shipwreck of the Eliza at Bau Bay, Vanua Levu in 1808. He gathered up muskets from the wreck and helped Bau become one of the most powerful chiefdoms in Fiji. His story was similar to other whites who “went native” and managed to survive by being useful to the chiefs by making war or facilitating trading with other whites.

Savage was rewarded for his fighting skills with a position of privilege and many wives. He died in battle in 1813 and his skull was preserved as a kava bowl. (Thomas, 1991)

The consequences of ceremony and exchange took on a more deadly meaning once gunpowder entered the arena, presaging a period of intense social upheaval. At this point in my narrative, it would be useful to consider some structural elements in traditional Fijian society, in order to place in context the various ways tabua worked in that society, and, more particularly, the meanings. (See Appendix I).
Missionaries

The arrival of missionaries in Fiji meant that traditional beliefs were overturned and old ways had to be renounced. In practice, the Fijians gradually incorporated the Christian God as the dominant deity and kept their totemic and spiritual beliefs in place privately.

Writing in 1908, Basil Thomson says (in an Old Testament kind of way) “The religion of Fijians was so closely interwoven with their social polity that it was impossible to tear away the one without lacerating the other... Religion was a hard taskmaster to the heathen Fijian; it governed his every action from the cradle-mat to the grave. In the tabu it prescribes what he should eat and drink, how he should address his better, whom he should marry, and where his body should be laid. It limited his choice of fruits of the earth and of the sea; it controlled his very bodily attitude in his own house. All his life he walked warily for fear of angering the deities that went in and out with him, ever watchful to catch him tripping, and death but cast him naked into their midst to be the sport of their vindictive ingenuity”. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Fiji, June 2010)

S M Lambert in his 1941 book “A Doctor in Paradise” points out the fallacy of smug Europeans who “sit among dark races with the idea of giving them good laws and teaching them morality”. He saw the medicine man as holding a position both “useful and important” to the tribe. He says “in the old days, sorcery was a hereditary and honoured profession and even today (viz 1922) he sought to shield his flock from evil spells and to sustain all those subtle influences that go to form the social cement that marks the difference between a community and a horde of men”. His enlightened understanding, however, was not commonplace.

The destructions of traditional Fijian religion was begun by the arrival of white men and muskets, aided and abetted by the narrow minded Methodist missionaries who sought to drive out all heathen influences and finally, but not totally, achieved by the advent of a measles epidemic in 1875.

Chief Thakombau and his two sons arrived in Fiji suffering the disease in January of that year after a trip to Sydney. They were not quarantined on disembarkation and the disease spread rapidly. In six months, 50,000 people had died, or about one third of the population.

S M Lambert (1941) states that the population in 1870 was 200,000 and by 1891 it had fallen to 105,000, bottoming out in 1905 at 87,000.

Introduced diseases such as influenza carried the recovery population still lower to 82,000 in 1919. There is scant recognition of the impact of this calamitous population decline in some histories of Fiji. It almost goes without saying that the double whammy of the new religious order and the white man’s pestilences combined with dire effect to subdue then decimate village communities. Apart from the disastrous loss of life, there was a loss of culture, of elders, of history, tradition and myths. The loss of children signified a loss of hope. The sacred order of things had changed irrevocably.
It seems inconceivable without that the ferocious Fijian warrior class would submit to the seemingly weaker “obnoxious” white man with a black suit and dog collar. They had found God by looking down the barrel of a gun. By 1918, when Dadds was in Fiji, the role of the missionary had become all powerful; he had the double tasks of leader in secular and religious matters.

Mayer (1915) gets closer to the Fijian perspective when he notes that the missionary is “the vicar of the terrible god of the white man whose favour was hard to win and whose punishments were eternal”.

Small wonder then that Dadds received his tabua as a token of fealty and honour from the people of his island parish. It had been their tradition, since time immemorial to pay tribute to their priest. By honouring their priest, they kept some of their old culture alive and in the giving and receiving ceremony they bound Dadds and themselves in a religious transaction that was more “heathen” then he could have imagined. The irony was doubtless lost on him.
The Arrival of Charles Dadds in Fiji….

It was into this shattered society that the missionary Reverend Charles Dadds arrived in 1918, with his young wife. His appointment was announced in his home town of Adelaide in “The Advertiser” of Saturday 8 June 1918:

“Mr Dadds has been appointed to represent the Methodist church in the Macuata circuit”.

Dadds served the Methodist church for over 40 years. His service record is shown in the Methodist Ministerial Index for Australasia (1962). In the year of his retirement, 1957, the minutes of the South Australian Methodist Church Conference, record that Charles Robert Dadds, (b. 1891) “served at Macuata for three years” and that “he always struck the evangelical note in his preaching”.

Macuata is a province in the northern part of Vanua Levu, Fiji’s second largest island and formerly known as the Sandalwood Island. The sandalwood had long disappeared 100 years before Dadds arrived, shipped to Singapore and Canton by unscrupulous entrepreneurs who paid with muskets and gunpowder, oblivious to the consequences. It is a familiar theme in colonial history.

What Mrs Dadds thought of the place is unknown but it was clearly a difficult place to begin a family for The Advertiser of Saturday 14 June 1919 reported that:

“Acting under medical advice, Mrs C R Dadds and child have returned for a few months from Fiji to South Australia. They are staying with Mrs Dadds’ parents at Laura. They will probably go back in October to Fiji where the Reverend C R Dadds is laboring as a Methodist minister”.

It is known, however, that the Revered David Cargill reached Fiji some 85 years earlier and his wife described the place as “a land of darkness and superstition where men delight in cruelty and bloodshed”. (Aberdeen University Journal, 1921)

Dadds had also spent some time on the southern coast of Vanua Levu, at Naidi, according to his son. By March 1921, Dadds was back in Australia. The West Australian mentions him lecturing on Fiji at the north Perth church on 19 March 1921.

One interesting distraction from this monologue is the story of the film “Among the Cannibal Isles” made by an American couple Martin and Osa Johnson, in Fiji in 1918. This early film showed a range of indigenous customs, but at one point the makers fell foul of a local chief and had to be rescued by a British patrol boat. It’s interesting to speculate if Dadds had encountered this historic foray into silent image making. A lesser, eminently forgettable effort was made by MGM in 1933, as part of their “Travel Talks” series and is entitled “The Cannibal Isles”. It is on YouTube.
Tabuas Various Roles in Fijian Society

Various social and sacred ceremonies in Fiji require the presentation of Tabua and historically, some requests were nefarious in intent. A few examples are considered below:

A Fateful Tabua

Brewster (1922) provided the first anthropological study of the hill tribes of Viti Levu (great Fiji). His description of “A Fateful Tabua” outlines the murder of Thomas Baker in 1867 by the people of Vatusila in the western hills of Viti Levu, and the role a whale’s tooth played in his demise.

Baker lived on the lower Rewa, the big river of the island. He’d decided to travel inland and unbeknown to him a nearly local chieftain had dispatched a tabua to the first of the heathen tribes on his way, asking people if they would be kind enough to accept his gift and in return kill the obnoxious white foreigner. It was some 30 years before the sender was identified and he was by then dead.

Following a series of illnesses and misfortunes, the chief’s son decided he was being visited by the sins of his father and sought to make an act of atonement (soro) to the Wesleyan Mission. (Note that the “sins of the father” is probably analogous to a curse, evil spirit, sorcery or witchcraft in their traditional vernacular). This soro was done by presenting a string of tabua to the assembled elders at the annual synod accompanied by a confession and a plea for pardon and absolution. This was granted and “thus his soul obtained relief”.

It is reported that the people of the villages through which Baker passed greatly desired the tabua and although it was discourteous to not accept it, common sense dictated that they decline. The dreaded white man had unlimited command of guns, powder and bullets and was best left alone.

Baker was deaf to their admonitions to turn back from the great danger that lay ahead. His fate was sealed by a gross breach of good manners when he was among Vatisula people. They’d initially decided to let him pass through their village unhindered but when he snatched a comb from the head of the leading chief, he committed a fatal sin in their eyes. The comb belonged to Baker and the chief, seeing it unattended, had innocently enough picked it up and placed it in his fuzzy locks. He was traditionally entitled to whatever properly was within his realm.

Brewster says “the head is the sacred part of the body and there dwells the mana or mysterious power of a man. More especially is this the case in regard to a chief, as he is generally the shrine of the ancestral god, and as such is himself divine. He is the holy father of the tribe. So revered is his head that only the hereditary priests can dress it.

So, the insult to the chief’s honour and the covetous desire for the beautiful ivory tabua bought about Mr Baker’s demise.

An ancient chieftainess of the tribe predicted evil fortune for the tribe as a result of the murder and tried to bury Baker. Tradition demanded that he be eaten and he was. The tribesmen had never seen shoes before and boiled his boots for a whole month in the vain hope that they might
be able to eat them. One of the boots remains in the Suva museum. The tabua proved to be a veritable dragon’s tooth and both the people of Vatusila and the sender knew nothing but ill fortune thereafter.

It is an interesting postscript to this story to consider that in November 2003, the village of Navatusila presented whale teeth to descendants of Reverend Thomas Baker in a ceremony of atonement. One hundred years earlier, in 1903, the chief’s son spoke with “distress and pain” as he asked the church to forgive his father’s sins.

Clearly, the presentation and acceptance of the tabua have a profound influence in the minds of Fijians, even today, on the outcome of acts of atonement. The power of the tabua to right wrongs has not been diminished by 175 years of Christianity.

**Wedding Tabua**

When a marriage was arranged, the bride’s parents accepted tabua and other gifts to seal the contract in a ceremony with the bridegroom’s family. These arrangements were made when the children were quite young. The next day feasting occurred and the child bridegroom presented his child bride with a tabua.

Masi doth was wrapped around the bride and it was also used to create a pathway in her bridegroom’s house. The couple was forbidden to touch or talk to each other. The ceremony continued the next day with more feasting. In due course, the young girl was trained by her mother-in-law in the ways of the village, the domestic work and how to fish the hill streams. As the youth grew older, more presents were given to the girl’s relations. Eventually elders decided the young woman was ready to be tattooed, and the marriage ceremony was then completed. A description of this process is in Appendix II.

The marriage ceremony depends on a series of rituals that are traditionally based to preserve culture and to favourably invoke spiritual realms. The exchange of whale teeth (male goods) and masi (female goods) is repeated over and over throughout the ceremony.

A formal chiefly wedding (Teckle, 1984, quoted in Ewins, 2009) involved ten separate presentation of tabua, totaling 49 from the bride’s side and 45 from the groom’s side. Tabua, even in one ceremony, have multiple roles with different meanings at different points in the marriage ritual.

**Sorcery and Tabua**

S M Lambert in “A Doctor in Paradise” described in the 1930s “a recent case of witchcraft” that involved two of Thakombau’s grandsons, Ratu (chief) Pope and Ratu Sukuna. Pope was in hospital with cirrhosis of the liver. He put it down to a spell cast on him by this cousin Sukuna. Sukuna rushed to his bedside protesting innocence and Pope, confronted, sought forgiveness. He died not long after. His widow was keen to avenge his loss and to protect Pope’s throne from her enemies. She asked for a spell to be placed on one Ratu Lala and presented ten tabuas to Ratu Wailala to organise the deed. Lala was a likely contender for Pope’s now vacant office.
Moese, a very able witch doctor, was tasked to deliver. He performed a traditional ceremony on Ratu Lala’s grandfather’s grave, asking for Lala’s death. Some days later, Ratu Lala became ill. He knew why and sent for a powerful sorcerer Ngio to combat the evil magic. By mid September, some five months later, Ratu Lala was in hospital, close to death by his own assessment. A week later he was in high spirits, attributing his survival to superior magic. Ngio had worked from the bible and that was big medicine. He used the Gospel according to St Matthew, and from that he could foil any ghost or devil that ever flew over Fiji.

The story illustrates the power of the new paramount God and his infallibility. Moreover, it shows how that this God was pressed into the service of “pagan witchcraft” and how it best served its adherents by acting through the traditional culture. The outcome was more a victory for sorcery than Christianity. The Fijian belief system was able to incorporate the new supreme deity without being compromised to extinction, a feat of considerable flexibility that, if the tables were turned, would have been impossible. Score one for the home team.

Tabua and Women

On 30 July 1849 at Rewa, when the missionaries Lyth and Calvert were absent, their wives intervened in the intended killing and eating of three female prisoners; the only remaining members of a group of 15 who were being butchered at Chief Tanoa’s orders. The Methodist women successfully made a presentation of tabua to Tanoa, entreating him to spare the survivors (Derrick 1946). The ability of the tabua to prevent murder indicates the value placed on the whale’s teeth by the chief. He exchanged women for tabua and it can be considered that each whale’s tooth was symbolically equivalent to the body of a woman.

Funereal Tabua

Traditionally, a dead man was accompanied to the grave by a tabua (placed in his hands, on his chest or under his head) along with a war club or a musket, and his strangled wives. These all helped in their ways to facilitate his spiritual journey to the afterlife. The tabua acted as a “passport on his journey to the happy land” (Deane 1921). Deane says the man’s soul took the spiritual part of the symbol as his guide.

Diplomatic Tabua

Every significant request of other was accompanied by a tabua presentation ceremony. Tabua facilitated what was otherwise impossible. If a person received a tabua, he had a debt of gratitude to the sender and was solemnly obliged to honour their request.

Historical Tabua

Deane observed that “old teeth were valued more that those newly acquired” and that those used for important events “gained a pre-eminence” and that some teeth “gained a reputation”. To those who knew the history of an individual tabua “the spirits of the past seemed to hover around it”. Some tabua passed from generation to generation and were never sold. Deane says that at the conclusion of a tabua presentation ceremony, the supporters of the presenter all cried out “mana” in unison. Brewster, in his book The Hill Tribes of Fiji, describes an ancient whale tooth figure of a woman that was known to the tribe as “the Queen of Waimaro”. It was kept hidden and its origins were “lost in the mists of antiquity”.
In 1997, Aubrey Parke described how he had seen the carved human figure of Waimaro in the year 1970. He described the female figure in some detail, including that the ivory parts were “joined by wooden and ivory cleats”. This contrast with Brewster’s figure whose fixings were by “means of leaded rivets, cut from bullets apparently”. It is significant that the whale’s teeth were kept wrapped in masi in each case. Parke said these objects had “an aura of value and reverence and that they were endowed with “supernatural powers of good fortune”. The chiefs of the tribes said these objects were “to be greatly respected and cherished for the benefit of the Waimaro people”. These were tabu objects.

Parke says the figures can be regarded as unifying and identifying symbols of the Waimaro. They are, “greatly feared and respected”. He further notes “their significance may have varied as their cultural context altered in time and space”.

Thomas (1991) described how a tabua, once associated with a chiefly line, was unlikely to be exchanged (ie transacted) further. Prestige made it an inalienable object. In this way, some whale’s teeth became cherished and were kept out of cycles of exchange.

The Tabua Myth

Sanday (1986) describes this myth as “how the Fijians first became cannibals” and she goes on to say that although it appears to be about the origin of cannibalism, it is actually about the origin of culture.

The Myth – on the western coast of Viti Levu, the “first man” lives alone with an aging wife and three daughters. He plans to kill his wife and marry his daughters. One day the daughters find a handsome stranger washed up on the beach. They nurture him back to health and he agrees to marry them. He approaches the father and asks permission to marry, offering to plant food for the old couple in return. The elderly man is offended, and demands a work of mana instead. The young man, known as “tabua” goes away to consider this request and decides on a ruse to demonstrate his mana. He remembers seeing a dead whale ashore near where his canoe capsized, and correctly assumes that the old man knows nothing of the beauty of whale teeth. He finds the whale and begins to remove the teeth, but in doing so, accidentally knocks out four of his own teeth in the process. He is able to incorporate this event into his plan however, and burns the whale’s carcass.

He returns to the old man a few days later, finding him lecturing his daughters about the fickleness of youth, and planning to strangle his wife. Tabua tells his story, a myth within a myth, about how he had cleared a patch of land, as if to grow yams, but planted his own four teeth instead. Within eight days the teeth had magically increased in size a number. This was indeed a work of mana. The whale teeth, beautiful to behold, are clearly valuable to the old man. The four women, all delighted, press Tabua’s claim for marriage. The old man agrees, but demands the right to make certain laws. These are: That henceforth Tabua shall be the name for whale’s teeth, that a man must make payment of tabua for marrying a woman, and that all other castaways must be killed and eaten.

This myth is also described by Sahlins (in Sanday, 1986), Van der Grijp (2007) and Thomas (1991). Thomas identifies how Fijians first became cannibals, as recorded in the papers of E Heffenen, held at the Cambridge museum and perhaps collected in 1877. Williams (1858), observes that those who escape from shipwreck were supposed to be saved that they might be eaten and, very rarely were they allowed to live.
The myth of tabua describes how Fijians are to regulate their society – the tension between senior and junior males in competition for the same women is regulated. Social order is established over the primordial chaos of nature. Women in Fijian society are sacred, so either an act of *mana* is necessary to obtain a wife, or the presentation of tabua. Outsiders were to be killed and eaten. Cannibalism is a cultural system whereby the ritual is a channel for the predication of social and individual identity as well as the means for controlling innate aggression. It is only through disorder that disorder is overcome. Desire in man is satisfied by the ritualised killing and mutilation of victims and this offering to the Gods satisfies their voracious appetites. Social and cosmic existence is thereby guaranteed.

It is worth noting that the Aztecs considered human sacrifice a cosmological necessity…. a condition of the continuation of the world (Sahlins quoted in Sanday, 1986).

By eating a victim’s flesh a man entered into communion with the Gods and divine power was imparted to him.

The Gods were propitiated in the pursuit of group goals that used the body as a model for the destruction of evil and the construction of good. The tabua myth regulates cannibalism and ends incest. By renouncing incest, the father gains valuable whale teeth (seen as the equal to human flesh) the daughters are freed from the hold of the father and gain a powerful husband.
Dadds’ Tabua

By the time Dadds arrived in Fiji in 1918, the Methodists had been Christianising Fiji for over 70 years, 50 of which had been aided and abetted by British Colonial rule. The bloody inter-tribal wars of the 1850s involved Methodist teachers from Tonga along with local clergy. The first condition of surrender was Christian conversion. The vanquished saw their old ways torn asunder, their temples destroyed and a new religion installed. Objects that survived the zealous evangelists from the London Mission Society were collected as trophies for dispatch to European museums or treated as souvenirs to be displayed at Christian fundraisers to enable more good works in the pagan Fijian darkness. There was a need for positive discourse. The Fijian souls were worth saving and, for this reason, their peaceful positive achievements, such as house and canoe building, agriculture and handicrafts were often lauded as useful art, ie, as signs of hope. Hooper (2006) describes how such souvenirs changed identity from memento to curio to work of art as the 20th Century progressed.

The Reverend Charles Dadds is survived by his son, a bible with his name and Macuata, 1918 inscribed on the fly leaf, as well as the whale’s tooth and a Fijian throwing club, allegedly inherited from a female cannibal upon her death.

Dadd’s Fijian Throwing Club made from hardwood - red brown patina, lobed head, length 360 mm.

The tabua and the club likely illustrated Dadds’ religious work on his return to Australia. The themes of the two Fijian objects are Death and Pagan Religion, and both provide tangible “proof” for his stories of heathen savagery and spirit worship – their surrender to Dadds’ hands embodied the triumph of Christianity over the forces of paganism.
Dadds’ tabua deserves some further analysis. It is 450 g in weight and 160 mm long. It is engraved with two names: on one side “FANE” and “MACIT” on the other side. The cord is 25 mm square and 800 mm long. Ewins (2009) says that it is not unusual for tabua to be so marked, perhaps to ease them out of the exchange cycle so that owners can squirrel them away.

A careful examination of the photographs will show the engravings have been done by two different hands, i.e., the script differs slightly. This characteristic style of lettering appears on several tabua in the possession of the South Australian Museum. It is likely as taught by a Methodist school from the second or third quarter of the 19th Century.

“Fane” is Fijian for Fanny, the woman’s name. “F” is only used in the Lau group of islands. “Macit” is Fijian for Mathew T and the T likely refers to a surname. Both these names are of Anglo origin and were added after the tabua had been originally shaped and smoked. The scratch carved letters make for English names that Fijian children would have received most commonly after colonisation (1874). It is reasonable to assume that Dadds’ tabua was fashioned prior to 1850 and that it was taken out of general circulation and had at least two more or less permanent owners before Dadds.

It follows then that the Dadds’ tabua is a ritually sanctioned objet that saw its service as an exchange item of spiritual significance during the time of the old religion in Fiji (pre 1850).

Sometime later it was engraved by or for “Fane” from Lau and then for “Mathew” by another hand. Later still, in about 1919, Dadds was the new “owner” and he subsequently used it to beat the drum of superstition as he lectured on Fiji to curious Australians.

There may be alternative meanings to these engravings. “Fanny” has another meaning in English and it conceivable that the yonic form of the distal end of this tabua might be so named. “Fane” may also be a surname, as well as a place consecrated for religion.

“Mathew” may also refer to the Fijian favourite gospel of the New Testament that was most efficacious in warding off evil spells and converting many to the path of Christianity. Both of these possibilities seem slight, but Fiji has an improbable history, so perhaps they should be considered.

Any attempt to resurrect the history of a particular object from a foreign culture that was virtually shattered over 100 years ago is fraught.

To rely on historical accounts of the period, inevitably written by the victors in the battle for colonization or religious dominance, is likewise difficult. In each case the indigene has no voice, a particularly poignant proposition given that he also had no written history save what the white man encouraged him to after the 1850s. Tragically, the custodians of oral history were too often lost early to the pestilences inadvertently introduced by these white men.

Missionaries styled themselves as Christian soldiers and destroyed much of an ancient culture for reasons based on “gospel wars” full of religious zealousness. The colonial administrators, benign by the previous world standards of the time, ensured that the embers of the old religion were snuffed out initially by English law.

The greatest 19th Century Fijian Chief, Thakombau, much lauded for his handsome bearing, considerable intelligence and able statesmanship, was the ideal convert from savage heathen chief to Christian believer.

His early life was punctuated by parricide, murderous intrigue and butchery on a grand scale. He held a chiefly disregard for his own people as befitted how he saw his office. His defection to Jehovah may well have saved Fiji from Tongan dominance.

All these events and much more created the alien world into which the Reverend Dadds and his young wife were placed in 1918. What remains of their time in Vanua Levu is precious little, but the whale’s tooth is more significant than they could have imagined.
Significance of the Whale’s Tooth

The classical Greek symbol for a woman’s fertility was the cornucopia. The god Zeus was raised on breast milk by the goat Amalthea in Crete, according to the Greek myth. Zeus accidentally broke off her horn while playing and remorsefully gave it back imbued with supernatural powers of abundance for whoever possessed it. It was considered holy. In the same way the tabua was seen in Fiji as a divine instrument of prosperity based on shared relationship history. Tabua were fundamental to relationships and did more that symbolize them – they embodied the relationship.

This essay seeks to describe some of the many ways the whale’s tooth facilitated ritual exchanges in pre-colonial Fiji. This debt and exchange cycle reinforces a kin path between giver and receiver that has attached meaning and profound social value.

The tabua is a vehicle for mana, and as such is to be feared and revered. Its traditional use was strongly paired with masi. When Baron von Hügel purchased a fine tabua in 1874 and promptly hung it on the wall, the old owner complained saying that it should be removed, wrapped in its masi and kept from view (Roth and Hooper 1990).

Religion in pre-Colonial Fiji encompassed all aspects of life – the culture was saturated with divinity. All things were sacred, so at every turn, every rock, tree, bird or man echoed something of the divine. Divine favour was a necessity, and humans got it by formal exchange, relationships based on reciprocal offerings and blessings. Tabua contained mana available for human needs.

Even the sennet cord that held the tabua was revered – the cord bound the chant and prayer of the ceremony into itself. (Hooper 2006) It also formed a circle of connection between the two groups which are imagined into “a virtual close family relationship” such as “parents and children or as siblings” (Ewins 2009). There is a parallel here with the statement that the Queen Tabua of Waimaro was the “fecundity of the tribe” (Brewster 1922).

Some of the tabua then may be considered, in a symbolic sense, to be archetypes of the universal mother, and all those in relationship with this mother must be kin. That all tabua presentations bind those involved in kinship insists that all teeth so used pay homage to the archetype.

A pendant carved from a portion of a whale’s tooth.

W L Crowther Library, Tasmania
Archive and Heritage Office
The whale tooth pendant shown above is carved with a nipple at one end and the distal end is shaped as a vulva. The use of genitalia on this female figure reinforces that tabua as a symbol of motherhood and fertility. The theme is one of biological continuity and kinship. Ewins (2009) says the whale tooth became “a sign for the female element in nature, and cosmic generativity” with “simultaneous engagement of spiritual and temporal worlds”.

The acceptance of this biological signed meaning for teeth over time meant that the simulacrum evolved to the more common, less ornamented, form, suggests Ewins. The older forms of the tabua, then, are more likely to suggest vaginal forms at the distal end, in keeping with their signed (original) meaning. Dadds’ tabua has such a yonic distal end. It’s form signs the original meaning of the tabua as archetype of the universal mother.

**Conclusion**

The foregoing discussion underlines why the whale’s tooth can’t be considered as an object in isolation in the traditional Fijian realm. Its meaning is multi-layered and intimately woven in with the land and the people and their beliefs.

Once detached from that world, the loss of socio-cultural context ensured that its meaning was diminished – it became a souvenir, an empty shell, a proof of superstition – because without cultural relevance being seen by the observer, without an appreciation of its spiritual significance, it is literally “pearls before swine” and unable to transmit its meaning.

So the few fragments of Fijian history considered here suggest a possible, albeit incomplete, cultural and spiritual framework through which the sacred Fijian whale’s tooth may begin to be understood and appreciated by non-Fijians. Dadds’ tabua carries an echo of all that the whale’s tooth has been in Fiji for the last 200 years. It is argued that this tabua is a fine, pre-Christian archetypal example, of profound significance in the days of blood and old religion.
Appendix 1

Fijian Society

The people of Fiji organised themselves along hierarchical lines. Their personal and community identity was underpinned by kinship networks. Each villager was born to a certain role. The village chief had absolute power of life and death over commoners. He was the divine head. Each chief led the people to fulfill their role to the Vanua.

Scene over Bau Village – Note in particular the rectangular roof outline of the Paramount Chief’s Council House. Photograph courtesy Fiji Museum

The Vanua is the name given to the grouping of several larger tribes (joined on the basis of geography of social or political affiliation). The tribes are each comprised of several clans, and each clan consisted of a series of family units. The welfare of the clan was paramount.

The Vanua is headed by the most prominent chief. Vanua is also the soul of the land, inseparable from the people, who are interdependent with the land. It invokes an ethic and morality of sharing. The Gods and the land are united.

Social interactions between families and close tribes are remarkably intricate. Power was by patrilineal descent, so lineage was everything. Maternal ties to a village, known as vasu, were used, however to promote inter-marriage to expand family links.
Chiefs who were heads of powerful families could increase their domain through conquest, alliance and treason. Polygamy meant that alliances could be consolidated by marriage, but women were given as tribute or taken as a prize of war. Male rivalry for women caused instability among the smaller groups.

The male and female roles and their inter-relationship are represented in Fijian mythology by powerful symbols. The Fijians had no tradition of written language, and it wasn’t until the second quarter of the 19th Century that Westerners developed an English-Fijian dictionary.

This meant that tribal elders had the daunting task of memorizing intricate genealogical tables so important to the Fijian sense of self and kin and to recalling one’s ancestors.

Weld (1895) observed that oral history was preserved by the men sitting around the yangona (kava) bowl and singing traditional songs. In this way “numerous legends and fables were passed from one generation to the next”. He found it a pity that this “truly interesting national character” had been lost since the arrival of the Europeans.

When the missionary Thomas Baker was murdered by western hills tribesmen in July 1867, the event was preserved in children’s song documented by Brewster (1922) who’d heard it in Suva in 1870 –

Oh, dead is Mr Baker  
They killed him on the road  
And they ate him, boots and all”

Brewster noted that “Fijians make rhymes and verses about every occurrence; it is their way of preserving historical events”. Ironically Wesleyan missionaries adopted this method of instruction too.

Traditional religion in Fiji was based on a highly ritualised system of elaborate ceremonies that involved a panoply of gods great and small, ancestor worship and the power of sorcery. Spirits were an all pervasive part of the religious, mental and physical landscapes.

Villagers took particular totemic symbols from nature, eg a bird, and venerated them. To these they would do no harm.

Traditionally Fijian religion had a hierarchy of gods called “Kalou”. In 1854 an early Methodist missionary, Reverend Joseph Waterhouse stated:

“It is impossible to ascertain even the probable number of the gods of Fiji; for disembodied spirits are called gods, and are regarded as such. But the natives make a distinction between those who were gods originally, and those who are only deified spirits. The former they call Kalou-vu (root-gods), the latter Kalou-yalo (deified mortals). Of the former class the number is great; but the latter are without number… There were various ranks amongst the Kalou-vu according to the event of their territory and the number of their worshippers. Thus, some gods were universally known throughout Fiji, others were local gods of large or small territories, while some were simply gods of particular families.”
The Fijian gods (Kalou-vu, Kalou-yalo and numerous lesser spirits) were generally not made into any form of idol or material form for worship apart from some small objects used in ceremony and divination. However, it was more prevalent that certain places or objects like rocks, bamboo clumps, giant trees such as Baka or Ivi trees, caves, isolated sections of forest, dangerous paths and passages through the reef were considered sacred and home to a particular Kalou-vu or Kalou-yalo and were thus treated with respect and a sense of awe and fear or “Rere” as it was believed they could cause sickness, death or punish disobedience. Others would provide protection.

Thomas Williams and James Calvert in their book “Fiji and the Fijians” write:

“Idolatry – in the strictest sense of the term – he seems to have never known for he makes no material attempts to fashion material representation of his gods.”

It is clear that one of the “small objects used in ceremony…” that Waterhouse refers to is the tabua.

The main gods were honoured in the Bure Kalou or temple. Each village had its Bure Kalou and its priest (Bete). Villages that played a pivotal role in the affairs of the Vanua had several Bure Kalou. The Bure Kalou was constructed on a high raised rock foundation that resembled a rough pyramid base and stood out from other bures because of its high roof, which formed an elongated pyramid shape. Inside, a strip of white masi cloth hung from the top rafters to the floor as a conduit of the god. More permanent offerings hung around the wall inside. Outside of the Bure Kalou, plants with pleasant aromas were grown which facilitate spiritual contact and meditation. Many of the gods were not celebrated for their sympathetic ear to man or their loving natures; rather they were beings of supernatural strength and abilities that had little concern for the affairs of man. Peter France (1966) notes:

“Local gods were plentiful, but were celebrated in legend and song more for the wild obscenities of their sylvan antics than for their influence in human affairs... The old tales [told] of gymnastic encounter in bathing places, which celebrated, with hilarious ribaldry, the sexual prowess of ancestor-gods”. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Fiji](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Fiji), June 2010)

Aspects and practices of the old religion

Consulting the gods

The different gods were consulted regularly on all manner of things from war to farming to forgiveness. The Bete (Priest) acted as a mediator between the people and the various Gods. R.A Derrick (1957) notes:

“The gods were propitiated to ensure favourable winds for sailing, fruitful seasons, success in war, deliverance from sickness...In times of peace and prosperity, the Bure Kalou might fall into disrepair; but when drought and scarcity came, or war threatened, the god was remembered, his dwelling repaired, its priest overwhelmed with gifts and attention.”
Laura Thompson (1940) speaking of the situation in Southern Lau states with regard to the Bete:

“The priest had charge of the worship of the clan’s ancestor gods (Kalou vu). He was the intermediary for the people and the god. Since he was influential in securing mana from the god, he was feared and respected. He controlled the activities of the people in warfare, in times of famine, and in sickness, receiving offerings from the people and presenting them to the god according to the sevusevu ceremonial pattern...The principal offerings were first fruits, kava, and cooked feasts, including human sacrifices. As a small offering wreaths were presented. The priest prayed to the god, who presently took possession of him and spoke through him or revealed his will by means of a sign or omen...When a priest was possessed his whole body shook in convulsions and his flesh twitched...The people gave a loud cry as the god took possession of the priest. When the god finally left the Bete was served with Yaqona. After the ceremony the priest and his clan consumed the sacred offerings.

Witchcraft

Consulting the spirit world and using them to influence daily affairs were part of the Fiji religion. Using various specially decorated natural objects like a conch shell bound in coconut fibre rope or war club, it was a form of divination and was not only in the realm of priests. It was referred to as “Draunikau” in the Bauan vernacular and the practice was viewed as suspicious, forcing the practicers to do it stealthily. R A Derrick (1957) writes:

“The Fijians...attributed all unexplained phenomena to gods, spirits or to witchcraft...Sickness and insanity were the work of malignant spirits, and food gardens wilted under their spells. In such cases sorcery was assumed and steps were taken to find the sorcerer and counter his spell with another, more potent.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Fiji, June 2010)

Mana

Understanding Mana is complicated by a raft of different meanings given by missionaries, anthropologists and linguists. Matt Tomlinson (2006) offers a review of various meanings of mana and his observations are considered below (all references are as cited by him)—

- **Mana & truth** – the missionary Cargill, himself a skilled linguist, trained at the University of Aberdeen, related an exchange he had with the Tui Cakau (the high chief of Cakaudrove) and his sons in 1837. The Fijians said they would listen to the Christian doctrine to know if it was true or false, beneficial or useless. Cargill then asked about the truth of Christianity, and the chief said “true – everything is true that comes from the white man’s country; muskets and gunpowder are true, and your religion must be true”. In 1914 Holcart quoted an informant who said “If it is true it is mana, if it is not true it is not mana”.

- **Mana as effective action** – Tomlinson says that mana is often best translated as a verb denoting effective action. He quotes Wilkes (1845) and Carey (n.d.) describing how mana is used to denote the completion of ritual (similar to Amen in English) and to make it effective.
• **Mana** as supernatural power – the current standard Fijian dictionary defines **mana** primarily as “supernatural power, a sign, a token, an omen: as adjective; possessing supernatural qualities.” (Capel, 1991). Kessing (1984) wrote that such an invisible medium of power was an invention of Europeans.

• For Salins (1962) the spiritual power of the chief is **mana**. The theologian Tuwere (2002) writes “**mana** is power or influence, not physical, and in a way, supernatural...”. In the mid 1840s **mana** meant “a miracle” to the ethnologist Hale and that meaning was added to by the missionary Hazelwood (1850), who suggested it also meant “a sign, omen, a wonder and something effectual and efficient.”

• **Mana** as magical efficacy – Mans (1972) defined it as a socially generated force of magical efficacy encompassing the sacred. **Mana** dwells in some people or objects according to Tippett (1968) with some objects being **mana** repositories and some **mana** transmitters. Tomlinson concludes that Methodist missionaries have reconfigured people's imagination about the invisible world and thereby shaped ideas about the potential for effective human action.

However **mana** is considered from the above discussion, it represents aspects of power, truth, authority and efficacy, and is much venerated by traditional Fijians.

Rod Ewins (2011) says than mana means effective(ness) and that missionaries did a good job in trying to re-write the term because there was no Fijian concept of supernatural power as such, and of course they needed one to preach Christianity. To describe tabua as having mana would need to be heavily qualified, in terms of how Fijians believe it relates to the success of the enterprise in which they are presented. (pers.comm.)

**Afterlife**

At death it is believed that the spirits of the dead would set off on a journey to Bulu, which is the home of the dead sometimes described as a paradise. Immediately after death the spirit of the recently departed is believed to remain around the house for four days and after such time it then goes to a jumping off point (a cliff, a tree, or a rock on the beach). At that point the spirit will begin their journey to the land of spirits (Vanua NiYalo). The spirit's journey would be a dangerous one because the god Ravuyalo would try to obstruct and hinder it on its travels to Vanua NiYalo.

**Cannibalism... tales of blood and old religion**

The Methodist minister Reverend David Cargill reported outrageous savagery before his own eyes (http://www.heretical.com/cannibal/fiji.html):

“October 31st, 1839, Thursday. This morning we witnessed a shocking spectacle. Twenty (20) dead bodies of men, women and children were brought to Rewa as a present from Tanoa (father of Thakombau, self-proclaimed King of Fiji). They were distributed among the people to be cooked and eaten. They were dragged about in the water and on the beach. The children amused themselves by sporting with and mutilating the body of a little girl. A crowd of men and women maltreated the body of a grey-haired old man and that of a young woman. Human entrails were floating down the river in front of the mission premises.
Mutilated limbs, heads, and trunks of the bodies of human beings have been floating about, and scenes of disgust and horror have been presented to our view in every direction. How true it is that the dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty.

November 1st, Friday. This morning a little after break of day I was surprised to hear voices of several persons who were talking very loudly near the front fence of the mission premises. On going out to ascertain the cause of the noise, I found a human head in our garden. This was the head of the old man whose body had been abused on the beach. The arm of the body had been broken by a bullet which passed through the bone near to the shoulder, and upper part of the skull had been knocked off with a club. The head had been thrown into our garden during the night, with the intention no doubt, of annoying us and shocking our feelings.

These poor victims of war were brought from Verata, and were killed and brought away by the victors to be roasted and eaten. Many women and children were taken alive to be kept for slaves. About 30 living children were hoisted up to the mastheads as flags of triumph. The motion of the canoes while sailing soon killed the helpless creatures and silenced their piercing cries. Other children were taken, alive, to Bau that the boys there might learn the art of Feegeean warfare by firing arrows at them and beating them with clubs. For days they have been tearing and devouring like wolves and hyenas."

There is no arguing with the shocking nature of many of these cannibal stories. They offend the deepest part of Western sensibilities, but one shouldn't forget the barbarism of medieval Europe or, for that matter, that of modern warfare, suicide bombers etc. The Fijians have had no monopoly on barbarism.

In Fiji, cannibalism was a custom intimately connected with the whole society. In some societies, it was to compensate for a man killed in battle, in others is was necessary to tame the dark forces of chaos. Cannibalism and torture, according to Sanday (1986) when projected onto enemies, became “the means by which powerful threats to social life (were) dissipated”. Further, the loss of one’s own might be reversed by taking a victim from the other side and reducing them to food, in the “ultimate act of domination”. She notes “by consuming enemy flesh one assimilates the animus of another group’s hostile power into one’s own”.

Other ancient customs required human sacrifice to placate the gods, Sanday maintains, or, in the case of the Aztecs, to hold the world in place, rather as a cosmological necessity. Through eating the victim’s flesh “men entered into communion with the gods, and divine power was imparted to men”.

The life of Fijians was governed by strict observance of ancient customs that were a complex charter for social order. Human sacrifice was needed to placate the gods. The gods consumed the spiritual part of the offering, the tribe took the rest.
Masi

Masi is the barkcloth made by women from the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree. The bast (inner bark) is beaten by hand and felted together to form sheets not unlike paper. This fabric is often decorated by stenciled designs that have cultural and religious significance as well as indicating group identity.

There was also a domestic use for masi, e.g. as room dividers or mosquito screens. In pre-colonial times (before 1875) masi was ritually significant as an important spiritual adjunct to almost every social occasion. It was part of births, initiations, marriages and deaths as well as the investiture of chiefs. It signed status and power and thereby was desirable as an item of exchange. In the temples it hung from floor to ceiling as a conduit for the Gods.

Much of the use of masi involved wrapping and binding it around those people involved in ceremony. Chiefs were, at investiture, wrapped in long lengths of masi that were ceremoniously removed. Initiated youths were wrapped in barkcloth after circumcision and it was used for the “sashes, waistbands, trains and turbans of chiefs.” (Clunie, 1986)

Mana was contained and controlled safely for human purposes by wrapping with masi. Masi and tabua are “profoundly interrelated” (Ewins, 2009) in the ritual presentations where they are both present, and they represent complementary roles in these sacred ceremonies. They underpin Fijian identity.
Yaqona

Yaqona or kava is a narcotic infusion of the pulverised roots from a species of pepper, and it is shared socially and ritually in Fiji. The ritual use facilitates contact with the spirit world, creating obligations for those humans involved to give “full co-operation, on pain of insulting the spirits that have been engaged.” (Ewins, 2009)

Thakombau... and the twilight of the Gods

Thakombau (1815-1883) was a Fijian chief and cannibal warlord who united sufficient of the Fijian tribes to claim the title of King of Bau (1867) and King of Fiji (1871), but in reality he was proclaimed Rex by only a few of the Europeans on Fiji. He renounced his pagan past when he became a Christian in 1854, although it is suggested that political pragmatism was more involved in the decision than the appeal of Jehovah.

Thakombau was a charismatic leader of considerable ability. He was possessed of a noble bearing and today he is revered by some of his descendants in the Fijian ruling class. His name came to be “Evil To Mbau” or “Death to Mbau”.

In 1866, the missionary Waterhouse declared that “when certain Mbau gods (ie, chiefs) resisted Christianity even after Thakombau had converted, the chief assembled their priests and whipped them” (Sahlins quoted in Sanday, 1986).
While it is certain that Thakombau had a fierce arsenal of horrors to unleash on those Bauans who failed to do as he ordered, it is equally true that the missionaries were as adept at using violence and intimidation to win converts from the heathen hordes around them.

Alfred Mayer, from the Carnegie Institute, wrote in 1915 (in the Popular Science monthly) that this action was “reprehensible”. In 1854, Thakombau, newly Christian, got his muskets and was supported by an American warship. Mayer goes on to say that “the influence of unprincipled white men and the introduction of firearms let to conquests which had done more to exalt the power of a few chiefs and to develop the worst excrescences of the social and religious system of Fiji than any other factor”.

Maafu was a charismatic and powerful Christian Tongan leader exiled to Fiji after a failed rebellion there in 1848. He promptly established a power base with expatriate Tongans and began to assist weaker Fijian chiefs in their wars and, once victorious, took over his erstwhile allies, thereby establishing a foothold to conquer all Fiji. Mayer says “famine and poverty stalked in his wake” and that there was always a Tongan “teacher” (ie a native preacher) by his side. The Wesleyans kept quiet about his horrors on the basis that the first article of peace negotiations with the vanquished was the renunciation of heathenism and the conversion to Christianity.

It was only after public outrage at brutal torture and massacres at Natakala and Naduri that the missionaries were forced to wash their hands of Maafu and weakly protest. Mayer sees their actions as a “sad and revolting abuse of power” and notes their reports home only glowed with “the glorious story of conversions”.

Thakombau ceded Fiji to Britain in 1874, after a series of failed attempts at government by a parliament of white men of which he was constitutional sovereign. Thakombau’s conversion in 1854 was the death knell for traditional Fijian society. His innocent role as the vector for the 1875 measles epidemic has already been canvassed.

The loss of the old religion, along with its ceremonies and rituals, meant for the first time the ancient customs that had conferred place and meaning on all things Fijian had gone. It generated a culture in free fall.

In Europe, in the fateful year of 1874, after decades of work, Wagner published his Ring Cycle masterpiece. One of the principle themes of this work is the struggle for love (and its associated nature and liberty) against power (and its associated civilization and law). The symmetry of the theme with the disparate Fijian circumstance is palpable.

In 1838, the paramount chief of Rewa observed that Fijian gods were no longer “true” – they’d failed to protect their believers, whereas the new religion had to be “true” as it had allowed its believers to prosper (quoted in Sahlin’s Islands of History, in Sanday 1986). “True” means “bringing into existence” and “containing mana”. Power manifests.
Appendix II

Tattoos in Fiji

Young women who were to be married were given tattoos in a sacred ceremony. This process was also a rite of passage, somewhat like the circumcision of teenage boys, and indicated that the woman was ready to begin conjugal relations with her husband and to fulfill her role and duty to the tribe by having children.

Juniper Ellis, writing in her book “Tattooing the World” (2008) says that “the history of the modern tattoo began in the Pacific” and that the patterns were well defined motifs that “placed the individual in a particular community and often conveyed genealogy and ideas of the sacred”.

According to Justine Vaisutis, in her book “Fiji”, the un tattooed women “would be persecuted by the ancestor spirits in the afterlife” and it is no surprise that Christian missionaries sought to eradicate tattooing as a heathen force. According to Kingsley Roth, “tatu ing in Fiji is now practically a past art... Medical officers have told me that the designs are similar to those found on painted bark-cloth and on the incised designs on clubs.” (Roth, 1933)

The drawing of blood in the primitive world was full of significance as a rejuvenating and immortalizing factor.
The pottery found in the Pacific Islands is historically interesting because it “provides examples of incised decorations consisting of V shaped elements, interlocking geometrical patterns and stylized motifs resembling masks and creatures” (Gilbert, 2000). These, says Gilbert reference ancient Polynesian tattoo design.

In September 1691 the adventurer and buccaneer William Dampier carried a fully tattooed islander from the Philippines to be exhibited as a curiosity in London. His motive was to exhibit “Gilio the famous painted Prince” for a handsome profit, but, alas, poor Gilio soon died of smallpox (Gilbert, 2000). It wasn’t until 1769 that the naturalist Joseph Banks wrote a first-hand account of the tattoo process when in Polynesia with James Cook.

Banks’ description of tattooing in Tahiti has some significant resonance with the practice in the Fijian archipelago, as well as New Guinea. He describes the use of lamp-black prepared from the smoke of the oily nut, the candlenut. The pricking instrument was made of shell or bone, with three to twenty teeth (In Fiji or PNG, a thorn is mounted on a stick, dipped in the “ink” and driven into the flesh in the same way). Banks found that custom “absurd” and that only superstition could be the “inducement to suffer so much pain”. (Gilbert, 2000)

Tattoo designs (along with patterns on masi, mats and pots) in Fiji are “geometric motifs: (predominantly elaborations on the triangle) generally organised in grids and panels” (Ewins, 2009).

Bark Cloth (Masi) South Australian Museum, 49100. Donated by I L Nicholson. Photo: R Ewins

These patterns are culturally meaningful, specifying group identity and shared systems of belief. The balance and symmetry of the patterns are no accident either. These represent the “organizing principle of Fijian culture and society” (Ewins, 2009) by which “all aspects of their world are ordered”. They are of cosmological significance.
Thus, the design elements in tattoos, masi etc have meaning for the initiated that is both identity specific (the patterns vary from inter-clan group to group) and sacred (they denote spiritual associations).

In traditional society, art, myth and ritual serve to empower society’s members to control that which is unyielding to force or logic.

In 1925 the Oxford anthropologist Wilfred Hambly, published his “History of Tattooing and its Significance” and in it says that, historically, tattooing arose in connection with ancient rites of scarification and blood-letting which were associated with religious practices intended to put the human soul in harmony with supernatural forces and ensure continuity between this life and the next. He wrote –

“Primitive man approaches non-human forces by positive rites carried out with meticulous accuracy, and at the same time he employs a number of negative rites in the form of prohibitions or ‘taboos’. Association of such ceremonial with body marking is a sure indication of its importance. When, in addition to caution, secrecy, and ritual there are definite beliefs relating to the value of tattoo marks in heaven, dedication to a deity, relegation of the tattooer’s craft to priests, or other clearly expressed concepts of the like kind, the evidence for a religious dynamic force in body marking is incontrovertible.”

Brewster’s “Hill Tribes” contains descriptions by his Fijian contemporaries (C. 1900) describing the tattooing ritual. Tattooing is described by them as “the revered and beautiful ornamentation of the women”. Tattooing took place in secret by the hereditary priestess, and by 1900 Brewster considers that the practice had almost died out. This, by implication, means that the traditional Fijian marriage ceremony was, by the beginning of the 20th Century, forever lost.

The girl who was to be tattooed had to arrange the procedure with the old priestess. She had to make a payment of masi beforehand and, on the chosen day, tabua, more masi and liku (grass skirts) were presented.

The manner of tattooing followed ancient paradigms. The girl was required to be “free from the custom of women”, she had to fast, to fish all night for freshwater prawns and then select three lemon thorns that were tied to handles (these being the instruments used in the operation). The old woman used lamp black in a watery solution held in a coconut shell. She first blessed that liquid and then she prayed to the spirits of the dead to soften the girl’s skin so that the thorns would not hurt her too much.
The girl lay on her back and the first to be done was her “sacred part”. The girl suffered much pain and was then soothed into a heavy sleep. The patterns on her skin “were like those painted on native cloth”. There were net like patterns and some circular ones, as seen in the illustrations below.

Once the work was done, the wise woman was honoured with a feast and more presents. The marriage ceremony then continued a few months later; the rituals involved presentation of masi and whale teeth and, most importantly, the new bride was given a “liku” or married woman’s skirt. It signed her new status.
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