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The Cultural Biography of Objects
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Source: *World Archaeology*, Vol. 31, No. 2, The Cultural Biography of Objects (Oct., 1999), pp. 169-178
Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/125055
Accessed: 20-08-2017 06:15 UTC

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The cultural biography of objects

Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall

A crucial area of thought in all the social sciences at present is the relationship between people and things. Until recently, material objects were given little attention in disciplines such as anthropology, history or sociology, being seen mainly as functional items vital to the social process but seldom as informing it. For archaeology objects have, of course, always been central to its endeavours, but again interest has concentrated on function, dating and, to a lesser extent, style. Through analysis of these attributes archaeologists have sought to make sense of the object world.

Over the last two decades this situation has changed and material culture has come to take the burden of much broader forms of social analysis. People have realized that objects do not just provide a stage setting to human action; they are integral to it. Certainly, if we consider material culture in its different moments of production, exchange and consumption, then little is left out, especially once each of these is set within its social contexts and consequences. This new focus directs attention to the way human and object histories inform each other. One metaphor for understanding this process is explored in this issue of *World Archaeology*: that of biography. The central idea is that, as people and objects gather time, movement and change, they are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and object are tied up with each other.

Processual archaeologists have tried to develop a more historical approach to objects using the concept of use-life (Tringham 1994: 175). Use-life approaches focus on changes to the morphological or functional characteristics of an object or artefact, following, for example, the reduction of a stone tool through successive episodes of flaking and grinding, focusing on the way its shape and use change as it becomes progressively smaller. The object here is a passive, inert material to which things happen and things are done. Such analyses do not address the way social interactions involving people and objects create meaning. In contrast, the biographical approach adopted in this volume aims to do precisely that. It is much closer to the life-history approach developed by Tringham (1994, 1995) to investigate Neolithic houses.

> In such a study, the house has to be considered as an individual, as a dynamic entity whose every month of life is significant for the men and women who act in and around it. It seems to me that the concept of life-history of the house has a more historical and humanistic significance than the term *use-life*. It concerns the time aspect – the duration of the house, the continuity of its generation (its replacement), its ancestors and

World Archaeology Vol. 31(2): 169–178 *The Cultural Biography of Objects*
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> descendants, the memories of it that are held by its actors, the ghosts that are held within its walls and under its foundations. In other words, I become interested in its biography.
> (Tringham 1995: 98)

Tringham's life-history, like the biographical approach taken here, seeks to understand the way objects become invested with meaning through the social interactions they are caught up in. These meanings change and are renegotiated through the life of an object. Changes in meaning need not be driven by the physical modification or use of an object, a point clearly brought out in Gillings and Pollard's paper in this volume which discusses the transforming meanings of the unmodified Stone 4 at Avebury. Meaning emerges from social action and the purpose of an artefact biography is to illuminate that process.

The notion of the biography of objects goes back to Kopytoff (1986) who felt that things could not be fully understood at just one point in their existence and processes and cycles of production, exchange and consumption had to be looked at as a whole. Not only do objects change through their existence, but they often have the capability of accumulating histories, so that the present significance of an object derives from the persons and events to which it is connected. Kula valuables in the Trobriands, for instance, often maintain links to named individuals who have owned and transacted them. The fame of objects and the renown of people are mutually creating, so that objects gain value through links to powerful people and an individual's standing is enhanced through possession of well-known objects. There is a mutual process of value creation between people and things.

Thinking biographically

Accession Number: 1940.10.54
Country: Fiji
Name: neck ornament
Material: whale tooth, coconut fibre
Field collector: The Reverend James Calvert
Other owners: King Thakombau
Pitt Rivers source: Pilot Officer James Lionel Calvert via his Aunt Miss Gladys.

The above is part of the Pitt Rivers Museum catalogue entry for a Fijian necklace made of sperm whale teeth strung on coconut fibre (Plate 1). This object, sitting in its glass case, may seem static and isolated, but this is a misapprehension of museum objects and of objects generally. Despite their apparent stasis such objects are continually picking up new significances, connections and meanings. Upon seeing the necklace, the first question a Fijian visitor to the Pitt Rivers museum might ask is: whose was it?; immediately followed by: which village did it come from? The history of ownership and use of such objects is often well known to Fijian people, especially if this history involved important chiefs, for objects touched by chiefs are thought to be both powerful and dangerous.

Of particular importance in Fiji are whole whale's teeth called tabua. Although strung singly on coconut fibre, tabua were generally cradled in the hand rather than worn around the neck. During the nineteenth century tabua circulated as part of a ritualized currency of exchange between gods, chiefs and people, including cannibal victims and marriageable

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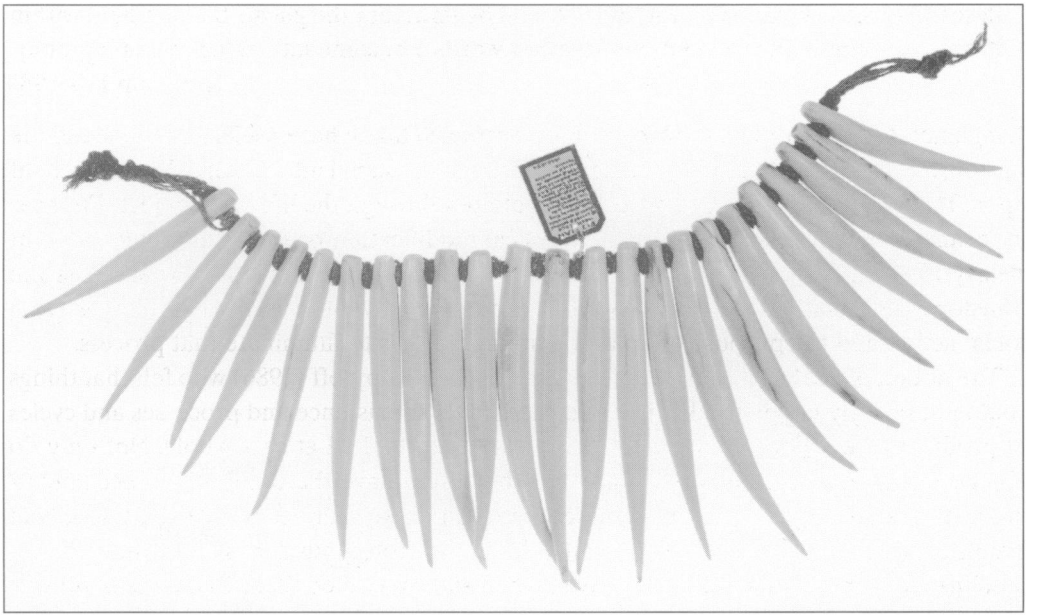

Plate 1 Fijian necklace made of sperm whale teeth strung on coconut fibre. 1940-10-54 Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

women (Sahlins 1985: 100–1; 1983). These whale's teeth still circulate today in ceremonies to gain favour, negotiate social debts and maintain social alliances. Most tabua have moved through many hands and this longevity of chiefly ownership and exchange is much venerated. As a whale's tooth ages it becomes darker in colour as oils from the hands of its many owners become incorporated into the ivory, and the power of successive chiefly owners accumulates within the substance of the tooth. The depth of a tabua's colour, as indicator of a lengthy biography, is a primary determinant of a tooth's value. Both value and biography are in this way generalized; few tabua have specific remembered histories (Thomas 1991: 67).

The necklace in the Pitt Rivers Museum is very different. It is made of sawn rather than whole sperm whale teeth and was made specifically to be worn as a necklace. Sawn sperm whale teeth necklaces were first produced in the early nineteenth century (Clunie 1986: 159–60) at a time when Fijian chiefs were actively strengthening links with neighbouring Tonga and Samoa. As Kaeppler (1978: 249) notes, while Tonga, Samoa and Fiji were each culturally distinct, they also formed a larger social system in which canoes, parrot feathers, barkcloth, mats and other items were exchanged. The sawn tooth necklaces, technologically superior to tabua, were made by Tongan canoe makers, either living in Tonga or resident on the eastern Fijian islands, and were initially made under the control of Tongan chiefs for presentation to Fijian chiefs. Their context of production and use was from the beginning colonial in nature. They were in a sense foreign, and they were very rarely exchanged between Fijian chiefs. These necklaces were 'singular, personal, chiefly artifacts' perhaps associated 'with chiefly positions rather than individual chiefs' (Thomas 1991: 74). Unlike the generalized biographies of tabua, the few known examples of sawn

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tooth necklaces have well-known and highly specific biographies, as is the case with the Pitt Rivers' necklace.

Around 1874 the whale's teeth necklace catalogued above was given by the chief Thakombau (Cakobau in more recent orthography) to the Rev. J. Calvert, a Wesleyan missionary who played a major role in the process of converting Cakobau to Christianity. The necklace remained in the Calvert family for over fifty years, presumably as a concrete reminder of their missionary and imperial links. It passed into the possession of Calvert's great-grandson, James Lionel Calvert, who died of his wounds on active service in France in 1939. His aunt Gladys then gave the necklace to the Pitt Rivers Museum where it is now on display in the court of the museum, and where it has been seen by many, including the novelist P. D. James, who made reference to it in her novel *The Children of Men* (p. 156).

The necklace was probably given to Calvert as a personal gift, an act in keeping with the traditional context in which these necklaces changed hands. However, it was given in the context of a significant colonial juncture, for in 1874 Fiji became a Crown Colony of Britain. In a formal ceremony Cakobau presented a series of traditional gifts to Queen Victoria which symbolized the relinquishing of ownership and authority over the people and land of Fiji. They included a war club and a large number of tabua. In the established manner the tabua, while powerful and significant, were unnamed and unremarked. The war club in contrast was named and itemized. Queen Victoria and King George V retained it at Windsor Castle until 1932 when King George returned it to Fiji as an unofficial gift and, embellished by a silverwork crown, it became the official mace of the new Legislative Council of Fiji. At the Council opening it was carried by an elderly man who had been a child at Bau at the time when Cakobau was chief there. Following this event, Governor Fletcher (1932) reflected that 'the mace with its historical associations, adds a new dignity to the proceedings'.

These gifts and ceremonies surrounding Fiji's entry into, and emergence from, the British Empire may echo the political use of objects in earlier exchanges between Tongan and Fijian chiefs. The necklace given to Calvert, unlike the mace, remains in England housed in the Pitt Rivers Museum. But like the mace it is not divorced from the complex social relations which make up its biographical history. Both objects remain contact points between Fiji past and present, between present governments and the old colonial powers, but recontextualized as objects of scholarly scrutiny.

Between objects and people

At the heart of the notion of biography are questions about the links between people and things; about the ways meanings and values are accumulated and transformed. There are many ways of understanding these links and many ways of conceptualizing the objects which lie at the heart of these links. We outline a number of theories currently being used to address these questions, but, as the diversity of papers brought together for this volume suggests, no one theory will ever be adequate to understand all circumstances.

One influential debate concerns the difference between gifts and commodities. This question has generated a vast literature which lies beyond the scope of this paper.

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However, the distinction between gifts and commodities goes back to Marx's definition of commodity and Mauss's thoughts on gifts. The distinction they made has recently been recapitulated by Gregory (1982). Gregory takes inspiration from Marx's view that commodities, while apparently relations between things in the market place, are in fact congealed social relations of class pertaining to the ownership of the means of production and the objects so produced. Likewise, gifts in kin-based societies may seem, to a Western eye, to be economic transactions, but are in fact concerned with the production of sociability, through the creation and maintenance of social links. Commodities are supposed to be alienable, so that they can be transacted without leaving any lasting relationship between giver and receiver. By contrast, gifts always maintain some link to the person or people who first made them and the people who have subsequently transacted them. The movement of gifts sets up a dense skein of ties between people, which can be unravelled only by the return of gifts. The main parallels for a such a state of affairs in the Western world are Christmas presents and birthday gifts, where the quality of the objects themselves is somewhat secondary to the social links and obligations that such gifts map out and maintain. The alienability of commodities versus the continued attachments people have to gifts provides very different means of creating and maintaining biographies.

Marilyn Strathern (1988) has taken up the idea that gifts produce social relations and are active in a mutually creative relationship between people and things. She has built a scheme of Melanesian sociability that is becoming increasingly influential for those viewing other parts of the world. Strathern sees Melanesian people and objects as moving moments within networks of relations. Their identity at any moment derives from their current network of relations. If gifts maintain an unbreakable attachment to the people who made and transacted them in the past, then all gifts are multiply authored: that is, they are produced by a range of different people and a plethora of links. While Westerners understand objects to exist in and of themselves, Melanesians see objects as the detached parts of people circulating through the social body in complex ways. People are not just multiple, they are also distributed. A person is ultimately composed of all the objects they have made and transacted and these objects represent the sum total of their agency. A person's agency may then have effects at quite a considerable distance from the individual's body and may continue to have effects after they are dead. Objects are shaped by their social significances and meanings and it is the differences in the scheme of meanings attached to people and things that separate Westerners and Melanesians. In Melanesia people can be both subject and object, found in one place or spread over many, directly effective or forming a diffuse background influence depending on their changing position in a network of relations. This is not true in the same way of Westerners' conceptions of themselves and this creates the gap dividing two radically different forms of life. This has radical implications for the notion of biography. Material things are not external supports or measures of an internal life, but rather people and things have mutual biographies which unfold in culturally specific ways.

Similar ideas have been explored by Gell (1998) using a basically Strathernian framework of reference. Although this work is specifically about art objects, the ideas can be applied to material culture more generally. Gell feels that objects can be seen as social actors, in that they construct and influence the field of social action in ways which would not occur if they did not exist. Despite the wide influence of Strathern and Gell's ideas,

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the Melanesian examples are only one way of conceptualizing possible links between people and things. They cannot be generalized to the world as a whole.

A stress on context is found in the work of Appadurai (1986), who is uncertain of the utility of distinctions between gifts and commodities. A watch bought in a shop as a commodity can be given as a gift with the social force of an item made and intended from the first to be a gift. For Appadurai context is all and, rather than making blanket distinctions between objects, we need to look at the political and social circumstances surrounding exchanges. Appadurai is interested in the degree of exchangeability between objects: when it is socially appropriate to exchange pigs for money or pigs for shell valuables. Thomas (1991, 1994) too stresses recontextualization, but retains the gift/commodity distinction as one of overall utility. Colonial relations in the Pacific over the past few centuries have brought about a mass of exchanges of objects between outsiders and local people, so that things originally produced as commodities can be exchanged for gifts and vice versa. Objects for Thomas have become entangled in new and evolving sets of relationships over the last five centuries in the Pacific, which cannot be glossed as the exploitation of the 'natives' by the colonialists or as cultural loss through the impact of an overwhelming and avaricious capitalism. Objects can be understood only through looking at the cultural contexts which originally produced them and the new circumstances into which they later moved. The histories of many objects are composed of shifts of context and perspective.

A slightly different approach to the issue of biography is found in the work of Hoskins (1998), who looked at how individual people's biographies were tied up in objects. She shifts the focus from the biographies that objects may accumulate to the way in which objects are used to create and sustain the meanings of people's lives. Hoskins, working in Sumba in eastern Indonesia, found that when she asked people about the story of their lives she elicited little response, but when she asked them about significant objects, she got a mass of detail about people's biographies. In her work she tries to define how objects operate as foils for self-definition and help with the organization of experience that constitutes someone's life story (Hoskins 1998: 7). Along the way she criticizes Strathern for not looking at how Melanesians might create a coherent sense of self out of their movable parts and their exchange histories which would complement their status and individual and multiple beings (Hoskins 1998: 10).

Performing meaning

Most of the theories discussed above focus on contexts of exchange. Objects are understood to accumulate biographies as they repeatedly move between people. But just as objects do not have to be physically modified to acquire new meanings, nor do they have to be exchanged. Contexts other than exchange create meanings and produce object biographies. One such context is ceremonial performances. On the Pacific Northwest coast of Canada the performance of objects is central to their meaning. In his marvellous anthology of the life and times of Willie Seaweed, a Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw artist and chief who lived from 1873 to 1967, Bill Holm (1983) draws together a corpus of work comprising masks, totem poles and small carved objects. To Western eyes this work has an intrinsic

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unity born of its creation by a single hand. But this was never a Kwakwaka'wakw point of view. The meaning of Willie Seaweed's art for the Kwakwaka'wakw does not derive from its maker:

> Northwest Coast artists of the past did not sign or mark their works. . . . Probably the first Kwakwaka'wakw artist to regularly sign his paintings and carvings, and then only those made for sale to non-Indians, was Charley James. . . . As far as I know, Willie Seaweed never signed a single piece.
>
> (Holm 1983: 35)

Nor does meaning inhere in the carvings themselves. Willie Seaweed commissioned Mungo Martin to carve a Both-Sides-Face mask while he himself carved a Raising-Top mask. Both were unusual and remarkable, yet:

> Willie Seaweed sold them both, along with several other objects, to Dr. Charles Newcombe, collecting for the British Columbia Provincial Museum in 1914. Selling masks, which represented noble prerogatives, to outsiders might seem to be a strange act for a conservative chief steeped in the traditions of his people. Yet it seems never to have been really troublesome for the Kwakwaka'wakw. A fine mask was and is prized, especially if it is an heirloom, but it is the right to display it, derived from ancient tradition, that is jealously guarded. Outsiders will not claim that privilege, and new masks can be made. Which is exactly what Seaweed did. The masks he made to replace those that went to the Provincial Museum he described as copies, and they were, in the sense that they represented the same creatures in similar form.
>
> (Holm 1983: 29)

For the Kwakwaka'wakw meaning must be enacted. It must be both performed and witnessed. Masks were a vehicle through which ceremonial privileges were made material and the best available carver would be sought because the dramatic impact of a performance depended a great deal on his skill. But, it was the act of showing which was powerful and which established a mask's meaning. Possession of a mask was not in itself significant because the mask possessed meaning only in the context of its performance.

As discussed in Lisa Seip's paper in this volume, a somewhat different understanding of the relationship between people, masks and performance pertained among the Nuxalk to the north. As a result, the Nuxalk had a very different attitude to the selling of masks to outsiders. The Nuu-chah-nulth to south, however, had similar attitudes to those of their Kwakwaka'wakw neighbours. When Captain James Cook sailed into the Nuu-chah-nulth village of Yuquot in 1778 people were extremely eager to sell any carved mask or pole he or his men might desire (Beaglehole 1967: 319–20). Oddly however this eagerness to sell was matched by an equally strong reticence actually to show the carving to the foreigners: 'we also observ'd that frequently in selling us their masks, which would be coverd carefully up, they would use mysteriousness & often secresy, bringing them slily to us' (Beaglehole 1967: 1414). The conflict engendered by this unprecedented contact situation was not over whether it was appropriate to sell carvings but rather how they might be displayed in a non-meaningful, non-ceremonial context in order to facilitate a sale (Marshall 1999).

A much more recent event highlights the same tensions. In March 1988 the Royal

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British Columbia Museum purchased a Nuu-Chah-Nulth ceremonial curtain from the estate of the late Andy Warhol. At the time of purchase the Museum already held in its collections a curtain of 'nearly identical design and imagery' (Hoover and Inglis 1990: 275) and subsequent investigations into the history of the curtain revealed the existence of further 'copies' of the same curtain. In this case, the privilege of displaying the curtain was passed to several people and copies were commissioned for each owner. It was not until much later that the original curtain was sold and came into the possession of Andy Warhol and later the museum. In 1988 the Frank family held the rights to the curtains and while they had no difficulty with the museum purchasing the Warhol curtain, the question of when and in what circumstances the curtain might be displayed was much more fraught. The agreed solution was to open the museum display of both curtains with a ceremony in which the curtains were performed and invested with meaning by their Nuu-chah-nulth 'owners' (Hoover and Inglis 1990).

Biographical variety

In the above case studies and theoretical reviews we have tried to give some sense of the great variety of ways an object might be understood to have a biography and of a range of ways a biography of objects might be approached. The Northwest coast was obviously a set of social contexts quite different from those in Fiji or western Melanesia. In the latter area it makes sense to talk of objects as social actors and of the meanings that reside in some sense in the objects themselves. On the Northwest coast an object came to life only in performance so that out of this context it held little inherent meaning. The Fijian whale's teeth seem to have taken part in both kinds of biography.

This distinction between objects which can accumulate biographies to themselves and objects which contribute to the biography of a ceremony or body of knowledge, rather than accumulating their own inherent meanings, can be helpful. Some of the objects considered here appear to be able to accumulate their own biographies: the Elgin marbles (Hamilakis), the Saxon cross (Moreland) and the S. Black bag (Peers).

But not all objects accrue meaning and biography in this straightforward sense. Examples include the Nuxalk masks (Seip), pearls in central America (Saunders), the equestrian figure in Andean rock art (Gallardo et al.) or Avebury as a monument (Gillings and Pollard). Did the physical appeal of stone balls and their lack of straightforward archaeological context make them performative objects working through the biography of meaning, rather than creating their own biography (MacGregor)? The extreme case is Rainbird's notion of the transformation of pots into tombs at Nan Madol, where one set of meanings was attached to different types of objects over time, indicating that the meaning was more important than the formal characteristics of the objects it was connected to.

In some circumstances, particularly those of colonial encounter, a sharp break may occur in a biography, a radical resetting of meaning. This happened when the Nuxalk mask (Seip) and S. Black bag (Peers) were alienated from their culture of origin and placed in a museum; it happened when the Spanish Apostle Santiago was reinvented by the indigenous Andean people (Gallardo et al.); and when Avebury was 'rediscovered' in the

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twentieth century (Gillings and Pollard). But these renewals are never fully complete. They bring with them fragments of old lives, threads of earlier meanings.

The notion of biography is one that leads us to think comparatively about the accumulation of meaning in objects and the changing effects these have on people and events. This central thread of comparison, however, makes the variety of relationships between people and things in different cultural contexts even more apparent. Ultimately, the utility of the metaphor of biography will depend upon on its role in revealing this variety.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Andrew Crosby for his thoughtful comments on earlier drafts and for sharing some of his extensive knowledge of whale's teeth in Fiji and of the war club that became the official mace of the Legislative Council of Fiji.

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