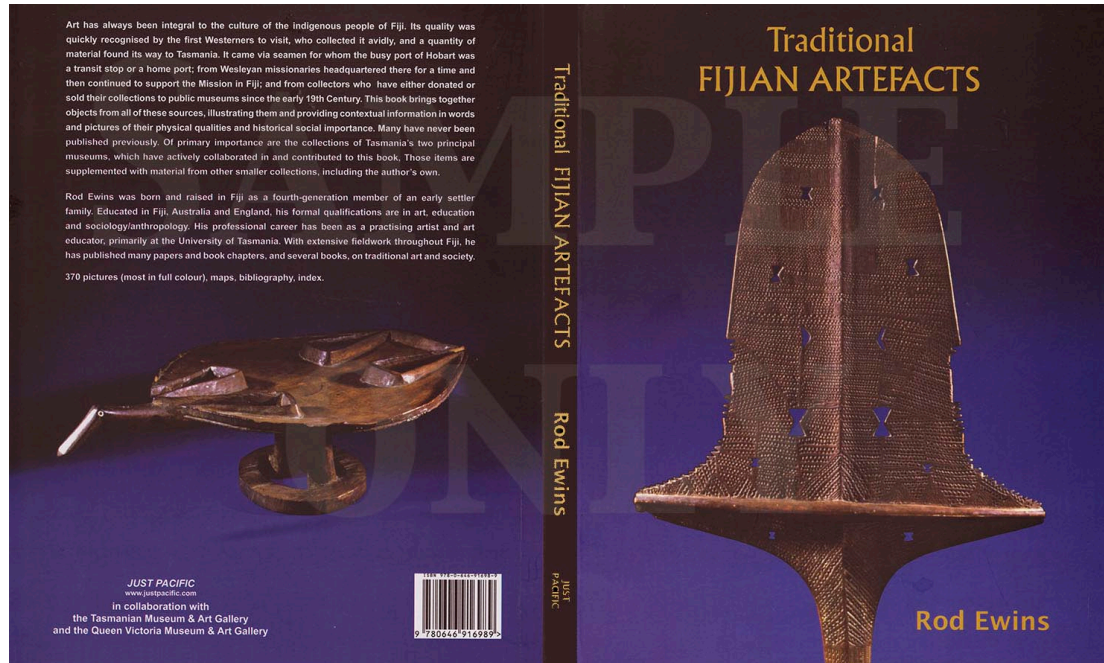


Several myths surrounding Fijian traditional art

Talk given to the Oceanic Art Society, Sydney Australia, 24 Sept. © Rod Ewins 2014

Good evening folks. I'm here to introduce my new book on Fijian traditional material culture <http://www.justpacific.com/fiji/mylatestbook/>



Over thirty years ago, I wrote the first ever book attempting a broad coverage of Fijian material: *Fijian Artefacts: the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery Collection*. That book became better travelled than I am, and I have met it in museums from St Petersburg to Dublin, Chicago to Dunedin, and many points in between. It has been out of print for years, but continuing demand prompted me to write an updated and expanded version, based this time on not just the TMAG, but Launceston's Queen Victoria Museum, the little East Coast Heritage Museum, and my own small collection. As with the old *Fijian Artefacts*, most of the photographs are my own, and as a career artist, I designed the book completely.

I only have a few minutes to expand on a couple of things mentioned in the book. In the wonderful classic film "The man who shot Liberty Valance", Ford has a newspaper reporter say "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." It was a great line, and certainly myth often overwhelms the facts. There are a lot of examples surrounding traditional Fijian art. In writing this book, whenever I met some of these highly suspect received wisdoms, I have tried to find the evidence for the truth. Even so, it is not always possible, and we are left to theorise. Nothing wrong with that, as long as we make it very clear we are theorising, and don't present it as though it is known truth.

My friend Fergus Clunie gave you a talk a couple of years ago about a classic Fijian myth, the so-called “cannibal forks” whose name itself is a fiction, and hides a far more fascinating, but more complex, truth about their use in the religious practices of Old Fiji (see Clunie, Fergus 2011, Autumn. "*Bulutoko*: forks and human sacrifice in Fiji". In *Tribal Art* 3(61): 102-07). I don't need to reiterate what he explained to you. But so pervasive are the myths, that in an episode of Q.I. that Bev and I watched the other night, Stephen Fry solemnly trotted out the old urban myths about them. So a few million more people who knew nothing about them, now think they know something, but it is all baloney. Good entertainment maybe, but bad science.



Another myth that has even gone into the literature concerns the throwing-club. Virtually every adult male possessed a pair of these, which he wore stuck in his waistband like a pair of pistols.



Their main use was similar, a weapon that could kill from a distance. They had others: slings, bows and arrows, and above all a great range of deadly spears. But throwing-clubs were very convenient, and generally considered to be in every way a match for a flintlock pistol. Early western sailors nicknamed them “handy billy”. At some stage in the late 19th Century, the myth arose (certainly among people who had never had one of these clubs whistle past their heads), that they actually killed by driving the handle into the assailant, the heavy head merely providing the ballast to drive them in. This was printed in a serious work on clubs and has been often reiterated. But it is as silly as saying that a throwing-knife kills by driving the handle into the victim. In both cases, though the weapon spins in the air, its heavy end, head or blade, will finally lead. The skill is to judge the throw so that the spin ends at exactly the right moment. It may be that someone was hit by the handle of a badly-thrown club, and assumed that was intentional. But in fact, it was the heavy head that did the damage.

Another thing seldom stressed is that clubs of this sort could also be used in close combat as hand-clubs, and indeed some of them are so

heavy that they could scarcely be thrown and were probably only ever intended as bludgeons.



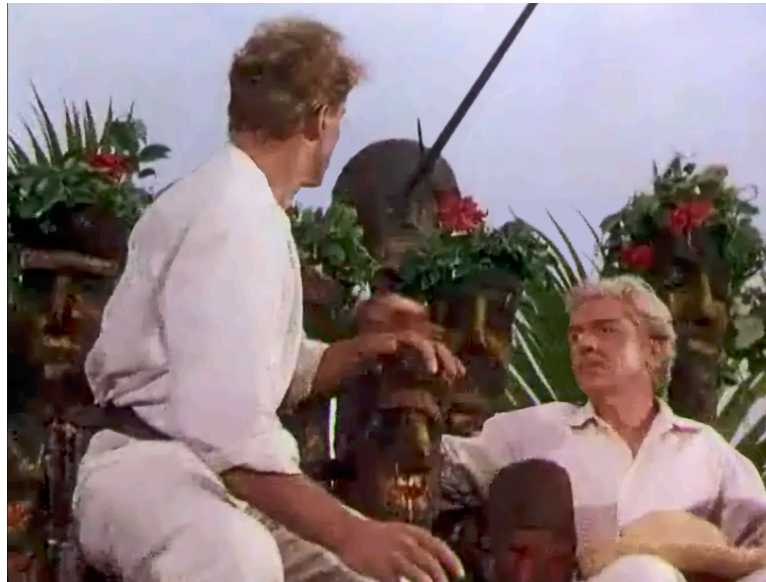
Now for a belief that has never really been asserted in the literature, but has gained currency merely by inference. I speak of the carved wooden masks that for many tourists epitomise Fijian culture. In fact, they have nothing whatever to do with traditional Fijian culture, though one could argue that for the carvers and their families they are what life is all about today.

Unlike Melanesia to the northwest, or much of Polynesia (particularly Hawaii and New Zealand) there were not many representations of gods in Fiji. There were indeed masks, used in first-fruits ceremonies and signifying mischievous spirits, but these were simple affairs made from the fibrous sheath surrounding the leaf-base of coconut trees, or *vulo*. Accordingly, the name for mask in Fiji is *matavulo*, or “fibre face.” Few of these survive, and those only in museums.



Photos courtesy Fiji Museum. Clunie, Fergus and Walesi Ligairi 1983a. "Traditional Fijian spirit masks and spirit masquers". In *Domodomo: Fiji Museum Quarterly* 1(1): 46-71

Enter Warner Brothers. In the early 1950s producer Harold Hecht brought Burt Lancaster and Joan Rice to Fiji to produce their contribution to the “Tiki” mania of the day, the film “His Majesty O’Keefe”. It would be hard to describe what a hopeless mish-mash of “native” cultures they produced. If you are curious, you can see the original trailer, voiced by Lancaster, on You-Tube.



Anyway, no proper island paradise could of course do without a lot of statues, god-figures and masks liberally scattered around. So the prop-men let their imaginations rummage through the Pacific, Africa and Asia at will, and produced a bunch of ferocious-looking visages to grace the sets. When Warner Bros left for home they sold off these props, mainly to eager local shop-keepers keen to cash in on the tourists Pan Am clippers had started bringing in by the dozen. So, many of them probably winged their way back to California, masquerading as “traditional Fijian art”. Local carvers could only look on enviously at the money changing hands. Or could they? No reason why they couldn’t make their own versions of these Tiki masks and flog them to the tourists. And they could make them smaller and lighter, to fit into suitcases. So an industry was founded, and the legend of Fiji’s “traditional” masks was born.

I was a kid at school in Suva when all this happened. Burt Lancaster’s family rented my uncle’s house at Pacific Harbour, where the shooting took place, and a schoolmate of mine rented them his pet green parrot to sit on Burt’s shoulder in the film. So I really do know the story, first hand, and I think I’m the first to write it down. Fergus Clunie wrote about how annoyed some tourists would get with Fiji Museum staff, when they couldn’t find any masks on display. Apparently they felt the Museum was dudding them, not the hustlers who had flogged them their “Estopol-coated” genuine artefacts!



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