

**Fiji Museum Design Plan:
A South Pacific Approach to Multicultural Design
By Mara J. Fulmer**

The South Pacific conjures up images of swaying palms, blue skies, and ocean breezes, as waves break on the reefs beyond. I pictured myself sitting among laid back natives below a palm tree with my computer, designing landmark graphic design projects while serving as Art Director in my new post running the graphics and photography department at the University of the South Pacific Media Centre in Suva, Fiji Islands. In reality the projects I took on during my six-year stint (9/91-7/97), posed new challenges in visual language since many of the resources I depended upon no longer applied.

Nowhere did this become more apparent than when I took on the project of creating an overall Design Plan for the Fiji Museum at the start of my fourth year in Fiji. In September 1994, I approached the director of the museum about doing a much smaller project as fulfillment for a graduate school assignment with Syracuse University where I was participating in their Independent Study Degree Program. At first skeptical about being bothered by another expatriate “expert,” Kate Hindle Vusoniwailala begrudgingly gave me audience to hear my proposal to develop an advertising campaign for the museum. We traded information vital to the development of the campaign and some interesting background information emerged.

The museum’s visitors were 70 percent tourists, with only 3 out of 10 visitors from the local community, mostly grade school students who come on fieldtrips. The museum’s continued government funding depended upon improving their visibility within the broader community. Vusoniwailala wanted the campaign to reach both audiences, but was especially interested in reaching out to the local community to establish a sense of pride in what truly is an extensive collection of Fijian and Oceanic artifacts. They also had the added challenge of a very important cultural distinction within the local community in that around 49% were indigenous Fijians who thought of the museum as a “house of dead things.”¹ Another 47% of the population were Asian Indians, descendents of indentured sugar cane laborers brought to Fiji by the British. That population perceived the museum as offering little in the way of cultural support. The balance of the population were a combination of Europeans, Chinese, Pacific Islanders and “others”.

It was not a coincidence that I initially approached the museum regarding the smaller advertising campaign project. For my first three years in Fiji, I studied the local art and culture, language and symbols, all in an effort to be able to do my job as Art Director and Senior Graphic Artist more effectively. I developed an extensive collection of books and photographs, as well as kept sketchpads of drawings and notes on various symbols I learned about. With the patience of my local staff, I decided to set out to create a visual dictionary of the Fiji Islands which eventually became my thesis for Syracuse University.²

The University of the South Pacific, where I was posted, is actually a regional institution serving more than 12 island nations in the Pacific and I found it fascinating and exciting to be able to learn about all of these different Oceanic peoples and their cultures. Their contrast with the cultures of the many mostly western expatriates who worked at the university was striking. I wanted to become as familiar as possible with the Pacific Island cultures, visual symbols and their meanings as time and patience would allow an outsider to do.

I had never stepped foot in the Fiji Museum during my first three years but had seen some of their publications and had driven by the institution nearly everyday. I wondered how

they managed to survive without much publicity to the general community. It seemed to me that here was an institution with a worthwhile premise: to preserve symbols, histories, and artifacts of native and local cultures. But it was so under-appreciated by the local community that it appeared to be completely ignored. This was ironic in a country dominated by an indigenous cultural group that prided itself on “preserving” their native culture.

At our second meeting, something caught Vusoniwailala’s eye in the colorful graphic comprehensives I had shown her. Among the images that I used to juxtapose the concept of a “time connection” between the past and present, there was a roughed out logo design that did not at all resemble the museum’s logo at the time. I explained to her some of the difficulties in using their original logo and that for the purposes of showing it to my professors at SU, I had come up with an alternate design. The original logo was hard to read, to reproduce, had little “feeling” for a museum that was attempting to overcome an image of being a dusty old storage place. It was made up of two upturned triangles meant to represent the triangular sail of a traditional canoe called a drua. The letters “F” and “M” from the name Fiji Museum were set into these triangles. There was also a half circle filled with parallel lines suggesting a rising or setting sun.

Suddenly, the director was inspired to turn the tables and ask me a favor. She asked me to consider designing an entire design plan for the Fiji Museum, including symbols and signage for six galleries, a corporate identity plan, and publications. My rough idea for a logo had just been accepted (see fig. 1).

The creation of a Design Plan proposed to me by Vusoniwailala seemed intriguing. How often does a designer have a project like that just fall in her lap. But I wanted it to be perfect; I wanted to be sure that I could create a project that really helped to re-build the museum’s image in the community, to instill pride in its goals, and encourage more participation by the community. In the end, it required working closely with Vusoniwailala whose infectious enthusiasm and determination made the difference in the project’s final success.



Fig. 1. Horizontal version of the Fiji Museum’s new logo. A rougher version of this was presented to the Director of the Fiji Museum during a discussion for an advertising campaign.

Museum Logo

Sometimes design is a happy accident, sometimes it seems pre-ordained. And sometimes it seems we just get lucky. In the case of what finally became the Fiji Museum’s main logo symbol, it was a combination of a lucky coincidence and accepting an obvious choice.

There are many symbols that have been used in Fiji as logos, including native material cultural items such as the tanoa (a carved wooden bowl used to hold yaqona – a.k.a. kava), or the

bilo (a polished half of a coconut shell used to serve the kava). Those items are the Fijian equivalent of hospitality and welcoming.

Other symbols often used in logos include the triangular sails of the traditional sailing canoe, which represents in Oceanic cultures the exploration or the expansion of knowledge.³ War clubs, representing a pride in their warrior culture, are very common in tourist handicraft stalls. And even the sea turtle has served as a logo for some company or another in Fiji, one of them a timber company. These symbols were at once commonly understood in the Pacific and somewhat overused. They also had little to offer in the way of cultural meaning to anyone outside Pacific Island cultures. My brief, discussed with the museum's director, included designing symbols that would have meaning for not only Fijians or Pacific Islanders in general, but also the large Indo-Fijian population. It also had to be instantly attractive to tourists who would recognize its primitive (versus polished) significance to the region.

Even in Fiji, a certain level of political correctness was necessary to attract a substantial portion of the community to the museum. Because the museum was planning to bridge the gap in their gallery displays by seeking sponsorship for the creation of an Indo-Fijian gallery, it was important that even the main museum symbol have at least a tenuous connection to all cultures of Fiji.

Recently in Fiji, tempers flared when in May 2000 a group of armed thugs went into Parliament and took the first ethnic Indian Prime Minister and about 34 other ministers of Parliament hostage. It serves to underscore the tensions which could erupt in this otherwise peaceful country when one group is seen to gain more power or favor over another in this small island archipelago. Although one of the more developed nations in the Pacific basin, Fiji is hardly visible on a cartographer's map, though it consists of more than 300 islands and about 750,000 people.

The final choice for a symbol that caught Vusoniwailala's eye was a necklace called a wasekaseka that I had re-drawn from a photograph in a museum catalog.⁴ The necklace is made of carved sperm whale's teeth that had been cut into long, thin and sharp teeth resembling a boar's tooth. The lengths of each of the teeth were graduated so that they were a bit shorter as the necklace wrapped around the back. The result was an upside-down fan shape that also vaguely suggested a seashell.

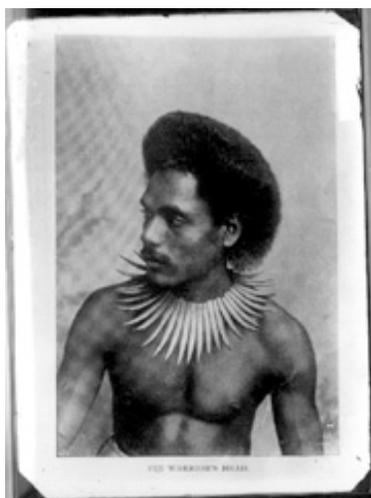


Fig. 2. A young Fijian warrior prince. Photographed by the Dufty Brothers studio in Levuka, Ovalau, Fiji, circa 1876. From the Fiji Museum's glass plate negative collection.

There were several wasekasekas in the museum displays but I chose one that had longer more graceful "teeth" that also appeared in a 1920s photograph of a handsome young warrior prince. (see fig. 2) The photo, from the museum's glass plate negative collection, had been reproduced as a poster for their gift shop. It was later used as the cover image for a fundraiser calendar I designed that highlighted images from the glass plate negative collection.⁵

I was at first attracted to the necklace because of its shape and the primitive gracefulness of the sharply carved teeth. There were also some interesting cultural points related to the not-quite serendipitous choice of this necklace. First, although the native people of Fiji claim it as their own design, the necklace was carved by a craftsman from Tonga to the east of Fiji, a nearby island nation with a strong Polynesian culture.⁶ It was carved out of sperm whales' teeth, prized greatly by the native Fijians for use in ceremonies ranging from the induction of a new chief, to the asking for forgiveness. However, the teeth were re-shaped to resemble the boar's tooth (before it curves back around in the older beasts). Boars teeth are highly prized in most Melanesian cultures such as in Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides Islands) which is nearby but to the west of Fiji. Thus, the necklace managed to connect two very strong overlapping cultural influences of Polynesia and Melanesia that make up the native culture of Fiji.

But that left establishing a connection to the Indo-Fijian people in Fiji. Walking through some Indian shops in Fiji's capital city of Suva, the answer presented itself. The connection was in the use of ivory. Although ivory in India is from elephants, not sperm whales, this ivory connection was enough to justify the logo's universal relevance and was accepted by the Board of Trustees for the Fiji Museum as an reasonable means of connecting all the main cultures in the country.



Fig. 3. Vertical layout for the Fiji Museum logo. This layout could be used with or without the Fijian translation and horizontal rules below the necklace.

The logo was created in pen and ink using a partial stippling affect to give it shape and a stylized tie. This style was carried over in various forms to the rest of the gallery symbols whenever applicable. Combined with the use of modified Lithos in large and small caps, the logo came together in an attractive and unified design. A "subtitle" that really was the museum's

name in Fijian, was also included in the final logo: “vale ni i yaya maroroi” which means “House to keep the old objects” a.k.a. the Fiji Museum. Two layouts were designed for the museum to fit both horizontal and vertical applications, and whenever possible, it was to be printed in a dark brown and coppery gold combination, with the symbol and “subtitle” in the coppery gold. The use of the logo without the subtitle in the vertical version was optional depending upon the application. (see fig. 3)

Gallery Symbols

The Design Plan that the director envisioned also needed to include symbols for the six major galleries within the museum, as well as interior and exterior signage. Although the museum did not have the budget to implement the entire program at once, she believed that it could slowly be adopted as funds were available. Her vision also included a plan to actually create an entirely new National Centre for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) which would provide a comprehensive outlet for traditional and contemporary performance, art and handicrafts as well as provide a larger home for the museum itself. Although it seemed a pretty grand vision for a small national museum in a small island country, we both felt that the momentum could be created to help gain support from both the local community and the many businesses that were based upon tourism in the country.

The six major galleries and their subject area where symbols were to be created, include:

- 1) **Taukei Gallery** (indigenous Fijian) – archeology, maritime history, Fijian household, ritual & religion, including warfare, dress and music.
- 2) **Indian Gallery** – Girit and Puraiv Sanskriti histories and cultures.
- 3) **History Gallery** (period of European contact to present) – Tongan & Samoan contact (trade, maritime technology, warfare technology); European Contact (early trade, weapon technology, new religions); Cession (when Fiji was made formally a British colony); Agricultural development (blackbirding slavery, indentured labor); Independence (from 1970 to the Republic in 1987).
- 4) **Masi Gallery** – Fijian barkcloth
- 5) **Natural History Gallery** – flora, fauna and geography. This gallery is not yet open but small temporary exhibits have occasionally been launched.
- 6) **Art Gallery** – meant to offer a place to exhibit contemporary art related to Pacific Island cultures.

Within the final published Design Plan, I offered six new gallery symbols along with proposed layouts for possible interior signage. As much as possible, I tried to encourage the use of native products such as masi (barkcloth) which could be screen-printed along with native woods and magimagi (coconut sinnit rope). It was a fairly inexpensive process for them to use, but could cause problems in the long run since items such as masi deteriorate over time.

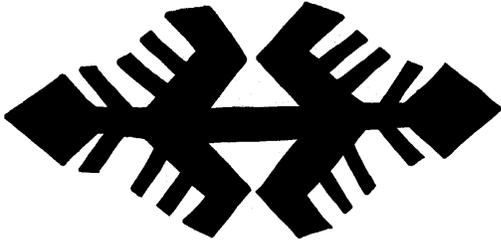


Fig. 4. Taukei Gallery symbol. It is adapted from an early painted masi, called a gatuvakaviti because the masi mixed both Tongan and Fijian styles of decoration.⁷

Taukei Gallery

Early on, the museum director and I discussed the possible use of the museum's main logo symbol for use in representing the Taukei gallery. However, it was eventually dismissed based on the possibility that it could be perceived as providing more outward prominence of this gallery over any other gallery. Instead, a symbol was adapted from an early painted masi that was on display in the museum's collection. The symbol depicts a birdlike creature traveling in two directions. It offered the museum an ancient symbol showing in its heavier drawn style, a link to the Fijian peoples' past and their future. (see fig. 4)

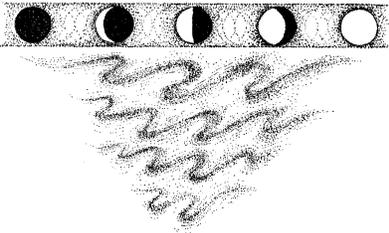


Fig. 5. History Gallery symbol. This symbol tied together a wide range of topics with the phases of the moon and ocean waves.

History Gallery

By far the most prominent and varied gallery in the museum, the History Gallery (also referred to as the Main gallery) was probably one of the hardest for which to design a symbol. Its sub-galleries ranged from Tongan and European contact to various technologies, ritual, religion, etc. The common theme that I finally settled upon was a symbol of travel and passing time using the phases of the moon in combination with ocean waves or changing tides. This ocean/moon theme was relevant not only to navigation but to farming, cycles, renewal and change since the period covered in this main gallery and its subgalleries covered the period of greatest change in the history of Fiji. (see fig. 5)

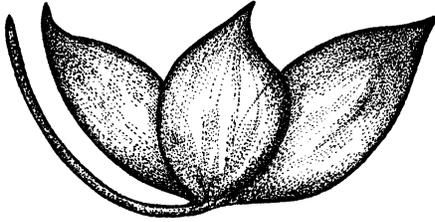


Fig. 6. Indo-Fijian Gallery symbol. This symbol represented the lotus blossom from Hindu mythology and Fijian flora.

Indian Gallery

Out of a number of different choices that could be applied to the development of this symbol, I finally settled upon the lotus blossom to represent the Indian gallery. It was easily recognizable in its shape and relevance to Fiji's own flora. (see fig. 6) The museum was also on the grounds of the Thurston botanical gardens where there was a large waterlily pond with lotus blossoms growing there. It is also a common flower in Fiji's brackish inland waterways. From the Hindu religion, one of several religions practiced by the Indo-Fijians (Sikh, Hindu, Christianity and Islam were the main religions of the Indo-Fijian population), the god Vishnu is often portrayed with a lotus blossom in one of his four hands or even over his head.⁸



Fig. 7. Masi Gallery Symbol. This symbol combines a coral shape and a portion of a floral shape, both adapted from masi in the museum's collection.

Masi Gallery

Barkcloth is one of Fiji's native handicrafts and is still produced today for a variety of rituals including weddings, births, induction of a chief, etc. It is also produced in lesser quality for sale to tourists. The native patterns that are painted upon them are often reproduced as screenprinted fabrics for conversion into anything from curtains to placemats and coasters, and from t-shirts to sulus for sale to tourists and the general public. The masi that is on display in the Fiji Museum's special environmentally-controlled gallery, is a beautiful collection dating back to the late 18th century.

The symbol created to represent this gallery was taken from two separate symbols that appeared on some of these masi. The major portion of the symbol resembles some of the coral commonly found around Fiji's pristine coral reefs. The semi-circular pattern placed at its base is from some simple floral images used in the barkcloth painting. Although almost contemporary in its design, the components are taken from some of the earliest examples in the museum's collection. (see fig. 7)

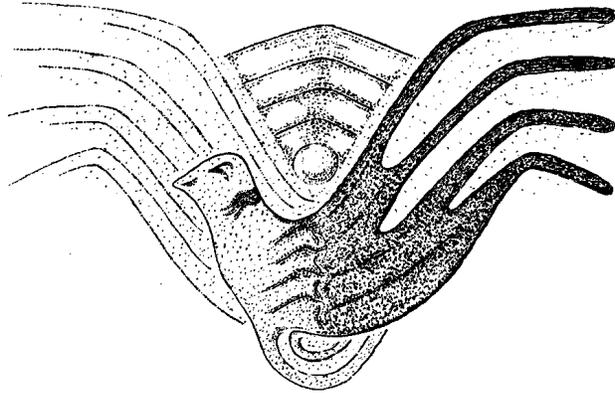


Fig. 8. Natural History Gallery. This symbol is derived from a petroglyph found on Vatulele, an island in the Fiji group, showing a bird called the Mengu Hegwa that was brought to Fiji about 2000 years ago.

Natural History Gallery

Although as of this writing, there still isn't a formal gallery to house the museum's natural history collection, the museum's plan includes its eventual development. The gallery would cover not only information on Fiji and the Pacific Islands flora and fauna, it would also cover the changing geology of the region including the Pacific "rim of fire." The symbol developed for this gallery is an adaptation of early rock paintings discovered on the Fiji Island of Vatulele.⁹ The bird is taken directly from one of these paintings and then is reflected in the shapes suggesting the mountains of Fiji. The sunset, meanwhile, also gives the impression of a pearl in a shell, another important relationship to Fiji's natural environment. The stipple and line style of drawing resulted in what has probably become one of the museum's more elegant gallery symbol designs. (see fig. 8)

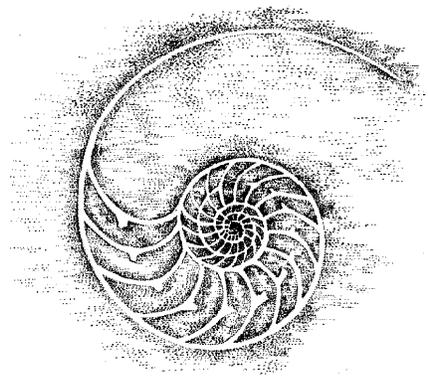


Fig. 9. Art Gallery symbol. This symbol is taken directly from a cross-section of a nautilus.

Art Gallery

This gallery symbol was also one of the most difficult to develop, apart from the History gallery. The Art gallery didn't open until a few years after the design plan was created and after I had returned to the USA. Vusoniwailala hoped to use the gallery to exhibit more than just westernized art forms, though these would also be included. Local artists, blending both

contemporary and traditional art forms would be highlighted. I thought maybe a symbol that could tie together both Fijian and western art would be appropriate to represent this gallery and therefore settled upon the nautilus, a mollusk found in the deep waters beyond Fiji's reefs. The perfect spiral form as seen in a cross-section of the nautilus seemed to bridge the cultural gap between Fiji and the west, from Botticelli to Vishnu to Fijian masi and woodcarving. (see fig. 9) In many cultures, the shell is associated with the origins of existence as related to its spiral form, water, and sound.¹⁰ And in Fijian cultures, the shell represents sustenance as well as an instrument used in rituals and traditional art forms.

Advertising Campaign

My original purpose for approaching the museum was to create an advertising campaign for them that would increase the community's awareness and pride in this national treasure. The general gist of the campaign was built around the concept of "Time Connections" and resulted in the creation of two parallel campaigns, one directed towards the tourist audience and the other directed towards the local community. In each case, two or more images would be juxtaposed against each other in a composited image tying the past to the present. Some taglines and related imagery included "Time Bandits" which showed a contemporary Fijian dressed in a native warrior costume appearing to be challenged by a similar character from an early etching. Another, with the title "Once Upon a Time" showed a dramatic etching of a traditional Fijian sailing canoe sparring in war with a contemporary sailing canoe owned by the Fijian and used for educational tours. The campaign was to be implemented as the situation and finances allowed and was tied in closely with the launching of the design plan.

Friends Society

This organization was a non-paid, non-profit volunteer group created to support the various activities at the museum by providing docents, a newsletter, fundraising, etc. One of the earliest means of implementing the design plan and advertising campaign was in the re-design of the Friends Society newsletter which tended to be a cut, paste and photocopy project with the resulting poor presentation. I redesigned this publication in a two-color tabloid format, suggesting department sections, types of stories, etc. and changing its name to "Time Connections" which seemed a natural choice for a newsletter as well as declaring the museum's goal. The results were terrific including increased business sponsorship for the publications and increased membership and participation in the Friends Society.

Three major events were organized in conjunction with the re-birth of the society and launching of the museum's new image: an Open Day, a formal Ball, and an Art Auction. The Open Day was geared towards the general population and was held on a Sunday afternoon. More than 4,000 people toured the museum, many for the first time ever. The grounds around the museum were turned into a carnival atmosphere with food vendors and games, the Fiji Police Band, and a radio station broadcasting live with a dance contest featuring the Macarena. This awareness-raising event succeeded in building pride among the general community many of who begged the museum to continue holding the event on an annual basis.

The fact that it was held on a Sunday afternoon was also significant. It had been a little over a year before when the Fiji government had overturned a Sunday ban on all non-religious activities including organized sports, sale of anything but gasoline and bread, and other organized public events, with the exception of tourist resort activities. This ban had been put in place after the military coups of 1987 in an effort to enforce the community of Fiji with a

“respect” for the unofficial Christian state. Holding the event on a Sunday afternoon (after most church services) helped to relieve the public of their ingrained fear of taking part in public events on Sunday. Prior to the ban being lifted, members of the community faced arrest for violations which could include selling handicrafts or even washing your car in the driveway.¹¹

An event that was held much later and planned as an annual event, was a combination Art Auction and Cocktail/Dancing evening. Local artists and artisans were invited to submit pieces for sale with or without an artist’s reserve that would be sold at auction. The main gallery was open for musing and a band played outside on a covered verandah. The result of this fundraising evening was a raised awareness and renewed interest in the museum among Fiji’s elite.

Official Launching

Another event was supported by the Friends Society but was tightly organized by the museum staff. It was a formal ball held at a historic home in the capital called Borron House which had been used at one point as headquarters for Allied forces in the Pacific. Mrs. Vusoniwailala put together a proposal to local architects to enter a competition to design the National Centre for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). Each architect was provided with a copy of the design plan and then asked to follow this as a character model towards the development of a vision for the NCCA. The formal ball was held to officially launch the design plan and provide a forum to announce the winner of the NCCA design competition. It turned out to be a great success and featured many prominent citizens who came to support the Fiji Museum including the Prime Minister as the guest of honor.

The director of the museum was ultimately very pleased with the final design plan that included instructions for creating printed materials, signage, and a summary of the original accompanying advertising campaign. Published presentation to the Board of Trustees and then again later at the Borron House Ball was tailored for the audience. The book was printed on the recommended paper which Simpson Evergreen Aspen text. This paper was one of the first recycle-look papers ever brought into Fiji en masse. I had visited the manager for the only major paper importer in Fiji and discussed with him bringing in a variety of different papers. Prior to this, one had a choice of any color paper, as long as it was white. As Art Director for the USP Media Centre, I was in a position to specify exactly which papers we would use in the bids and I promised the manager that if he brought some different papers in, we would be sure to use them. We sat down together with the swatch books from his preferred suppliers and he let me pick out about six different variations on the same stock. Later that year, when I was choosing a stock for the Fiji Museum, I went back to him again. He had been able to successfully sell these other colors and styles of paper to his other customers and was happy to oblige me with this new special request.

In addition to the text and matching cover stock for the major printed version, the Board of Trustees and guest of honor at the ball were presented with a special edition of the Design Plan. This limited edition used real barkcloth (masi) on the cover and coconut sinnet (magimagi) to bind the book. The result was a very striking presentation to the honored guests.

A South Pacific Multi-Cultural Challenge

Since moving back to the USA in July 1997, I have continued my work with the Fiji Museum helping them build bridges across cultures, increase appreciation for heritage and shared community, and of course, raise much needed funds. This work has included creating several

special fundraising calendars featuring multicultural images relating to the Pacific Islands and the development of a website.

In July 1999, I took on the challenge of bringing four of my Graphic Design students to Fiji to take part in workshops in traditional Fijian art and design that I arranged with the staff of the Fiji Museum. These were combined with various other cross-cultural experiences that I put together with my contacts there. These mid-Michigan community college students from Flint, four young women, were immediately faced with culture clash in terms of propriety of behavior and dress, not to mention the visible surroundings of a lush tropical paradise that belied its inherent dangers and distresses.

At the start of the trip, the students asked me loudly: “Why did you ever leave here?!” After two weeks of non-stop cross-cultural bootcamp that included many exciting experiences, along with at least a few stressful ones, they began to understand. My work with the people of Fiji, the university and especially the Fiji Museum has given me insight and a great respect into the people and cultures of the South Pacific. But it also gave me a great appreciation for the culture of the United States. It was this cross-cultural understanding and appreciation that I hoped to share and instill in my students, even in the classroom. I hope to repeat the trip again in coming years.

With the recent coups of May 2000 and ensuing unrest, much of it based on tribal infighting, I see the Fiji Museum’s mission of promoting “cross-cultural understanding and appreciation” as becoming even more important to the country’s future. Such an ironic role in a community that used to think of this institution as being a “house of dead things.”

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End Notes

¹ Vusoniwailala, Kate. Personal interview, September 1994. “House of dead things” was a distortion of the museum’s official Fijian name vale ni i yaya maroroi which means “House to keep the old objects.”

² Fulmer, Mara. “Symbols & Patterns of Grassroots Culture in the Fiji Islands.” Thesis Syracuse University, 1996.

³ Hau‘ofa, Epli. “Our Sea of Islands.” ed. Epli Hau‘ofa. A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands. Fiji: USP-SSED, 1993. 2-16. Hau‘ofa, now Director of the Oceanic Centre for Culture and the Arts in Fiji, described the European perspective as defining Pacific cultures existing within “islands in a far sea.” Whereas Oceanic cultures (his preferred term since he says “island” suggests isolation) see the region as a “sea of islands” suggesting an inclusion of the ocean as expansive rather than restrictive to the Oceanic peoples.

⁴ Clunie, Fergus. Yalo i Viti: A Fiji Museum Catalogue. Suva, Fiji: Fiji Museum, 1986. 67, 159. The necklace is one of several in the collection.

⁵ 1997 Fiji Museum Calendar. Suva, Fiji: Fiji Museum, 1997.

⁶ Clunie 67, 159.

⁷ Clunie 131, 193.

⁸ Whittaker, Clio. cont. ed. An Introduction to Oriental Mythology. London: Quintet, 1989. 71.

⁹ Palmer, Bruce, and Fergus Clunie. Rock Paintings & Engravings in Fiji. Fiji Museum Educational Series, No. 1. Suva, Fiji: Fiji Museum, 1970.

¹⁰ Stix, Hugh and Marguerite, and R. Tucker Abbott. Introduction. The Shell: 500 Million Years of Inspired Design. New York: Ballantine, 1972.

¹¹ This ban was in place during my first few years in Fiji and I had been warned by friends to be very subdued in my activities on Sunday. Mowing the lawn on Sunday was definitely out of the question.