

*Leveraging Lessons from Museum  
Studies: Colonial Histories and  
Ethical Obligations*

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“Biological Collections Digitizations in the Pacific”

Workshop

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## “New Museology” → recognition of:

- Colonial histories
  - Hawai‘i – colonized/occupied by the United States
- Uneven production of knowledge
  - Indigenous/Native/Aboriginal vs. Settler/Non-Native
- Ethical obligations
  - What does it mean to produce knowledge within a colonial institution?
  - University of Hawai‘i’s strategic plan + issue of social justice: What is our *kuleana* (responsibility) to the Native Hawaiian people?

# Life in the Pacific of the 1700s

The Cook/Forster Collection  
of the Georg August University of Göttingen

An Exhibition held at  
The Honolulu Academy of Arts, Hawai 'i  
February 23 - May 16, 2006  
National Museum of Australia, 1 July - 10 September 2006

Organized by the Honolulu Academy of Arts  
in cooperation with the Institute of Cultural and Social Anthropology  
of the Georg August University of Göttingen, Lower Saxony, Germany







*'Poncho-like' garment* tiputa Purau fibers  
Tahiti - 94 x 50 cm, Inv. OZ 421, Humphrey No. 38



*Three skirts, Purau fibers*

top left: Tahiti - L ca. 50 cm, Inv.  
Hanover 1854, No. 12, Forster (?)

top right: Tahiti - L 74 cm, Inv. Oz 420,  
Humphrey No. 47

bottom: Tahiti - L 30 cm, Inv. Oz 425,  
Forster (?)



- Minimal text and interpretive information in the galleries was a problem – even in an art museum/gallery
- A museum's galleries are the primary spaces where visitors learn about the material culture on display. The choice of texts or didactic materials to be included, or excluded, is the result of a careful exhibition process.
- For exhibit evaluator Beverly Serrell, museums that provide little contextual information and say it would like visitors to “find their own meanings” are being irresponsible.
- In this case, the museum abandoned its responsibility to help visitors understand how European and American colonial practices informed and misinformed our knowledge of the collected objects and their cultures of origin.



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## Decolonialism and Decolonizing Strategies

Colonial histories and their contemporary contexts are important to consider.

- “decolonialism” – originally referred to process of handing over governance to the indigenous inhabitants of former colonies

• Linda Tuhiwai Smith uses the term “decolonizing methodologies” to represent the mobilization of an indigenous language of critique to understand and analyze the impact of colonialism on living indigenous communities.

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## Decolonizing Conservation Practices

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“decolonizing conservation practices” – attempt to challenge the Western system of knowledge that separated the notion of an object from the social networks that bound people to their objects.

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Obligation to consult Indigenous/Native (or source) communities and establish collaborative practices to address/challenge the “mask of democracy and fair play” or the seeming objectivity or neutrality in the generation of knowledge

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• Importance of “community-based” conservation practices

Community conservation presents a range of challenges for the conservation profession.

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• Importance of introducing multiple perspectives into the process of understanding the significance of an object, practice, or event

Sully, Dean, ed. *Decolonising Conservation: Caring for Maori Meeting Houses outside New Zealand*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007.

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## The Parachute Scientist

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*A hundred and fifty years ago, scientists would often arrive in a country, conduct their research and extract specimens, all in the absence of interaction with local researchers or institutions. In the Philippines, this brand of foreign researcher is referred to as a “parachute scientist” because the scientist drops in and then disappears.” [47]*

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*In the modern world, “partnership” is the name of the game and the only reasonable strategy. It is also the strategy that will most likely achieve the greatest results. [48]*

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Gosliner, Terrence M., and Meg Burke. “From Parachutes to Partnerships: An

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‘Integrated’ Natural History Museum Expedition in the Philippines.” *Curator* 56, No. 1 (January 2013): 47-67. [2011 Philippines Biodiversity Expedition project organized by

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the California Academy of Sciences]

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## Digitization of Pacific Collections

d [Some] Indigenous populations see digitization as a way of revitalizing their  
e culture, projecting their own voice, connecting across generations and with  
other indigenous groups.

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• Concerns

- Digital media may enable information to become universally available without control

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- In some communities, access to some cultural objects, particularly sacred objects, is granted to people based on gender, age, clan status, and/or initiation

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- Making these objects universally accessible goes against traditional knowledge and copyright

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Singh, Supriya and Meredith Blake. "The Digitization of Pacific Cultural Collections: Consulting with Pacific Diasporic Communities and Museum Experts." *Curator* 55, Vol. 1 (January 2012): 95-105.

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Problem of “**technological colonization**” (Singh/Blake, cont.)

“Any IT strategy dealing with cultural material must avoid any perception of *technological colonization* and loss of local ownership.”

—M. Hughes and J. Dallwitz (2007)

**QUESTIONS:**

- What constitutes “cultural” information or data?
- Why is “scientific data” generally assumed to be “non-cultural” information?

Importance of “**responsible digitization**”

- Consultation is essential in resolving issues of access— digital or physical

- “Consultation is an ethical process...Consultation involves serious ongoing obligations to the people consulted.” (New Zealand Ministry of Pacific Affairs)

- Consultation must PRECEDE attempts to digitize cultural collections

## Challenges of “**responsible digitization**” (Singh/Blake, cont.)

- The IT community sees digitization as a cost-effective way of broadening access to objects/information
- However, culturally sensitive consultation before digitization is expensive and can take a long time.
- It is only through a sustained relationship w/ museum officials can there be an understanding of access restrictions, since at times it is prohibited even to speak of the access restrictions.
- Any attempt to combine different cultural collections in one database can also be fraught.

## Challenges of “**responsible digitization**” (Singh/Blake, cont.)

- Difficulties of consultation prior to digitization.

*Though curators of Pacific collections have been consulting for years with Pacific people about collections, there are no policy or practice documents on how a foreign museum officially consults Pacific communities and museums about digitization.*

*In practice, though, all curators we interviewed say they are dissatisfied with the time and resources available for consultation with Pacific communities.*

## Ethical Responsibilities

- Museums and the Law

*The law, as a rule, sets a lower standard than that required by ethical codes, but the legal standard has clout. [17]*

*Quite frequently codes of ethics have no enforcement mechanism. They depend on self-education, self-motivation, and peer pressure for their promulgation. [17]*

— Malaro, Marie C. “Why Ethics?” In *Museum Governance: Mission, Ethics, Policy*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994.

*...museums should move beyond what the law requires them to do and be guided by ethical principles in their consultations. Peter Anderson has said “The law as it stands is simply not a sensitive enough instrument to deal effectively with the management of spiritually significant material.”*

— (Quoted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resources Network 1995, 4-5).



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*Thank You!*