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CEREMONIAL EXCHANGE AND ART ON MOCE ISLAND (FIJI): A FUNCTIONAL INTERPRETATION OF A TAPA DESIGN*

The eastern periphery of the Fiji Archipelago is formed by the group of Lau Islands stretching in an approximately north-south direction over nearly 500 km. To the east the main islands of Tonga extend in a parallel chain, and for the Southern Lau Tonga is nearer than the main island Viti Levu. Tongan influence has long been important in the Lau, which is — to an even higher degree than the Fiji Islands as a whole — an area of transition between the cultures of Melanesia and Polynesia (Thompson 1938: 190ff., and Derrick 1950: 121).

Within the Lau Group the spatial distribution of land is unequal, the majority of islands and reefs being concentrated in two areas, one in the north consisting of the island of Vanua Balavu and a circle of some twenty smaller islands and islets, and the other in Central and South Central Lau. Here Lakeba, Moce, Oneata, Komo, Namuka, Kabara, Fulaga, and Ogea are the main islands. On each of them one or more of the other islands of the relevant cluster are clearly visible on the horizon. Nowhere in this midget archipelago is the distance from one island to the next more than 30 km, and when the wind is favourable such a crossing will take the experienced crew of an outrigger sailing canoe less than three hours.

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Sketch-map of the Fiji Islands

1 Lakeba	7 Fulaga
2 Vanua Vatu	8 Ogea Levu
3 Oneata	9 Ogea Driki
4 Komo	10 Vatoa
5 Namuka	11 Ono-i-Lau
6 Kabara	

The islands are connected by a network of intermarriage and kinship ties. These interinsular relations are closely interwoven with a system of barter and exchange of material goods. Indeed this exchange, which involves food and the products of traditional handicrafts, is of great importance due to the diversification of the physical milieu and natural resources, as well as the economic and technical specializations closely

connected with the possibilities offered by the natural environment.

Within this island cluster Moce is the main producer of food. It is a 'high' volcanic island with a base of dark basalt on which fertile erosion soils have been formed. On these soils, covering the wide valley-bottoms and the slopes of the hills, more yams, sweet potatoes, and manioc are grown than the inhabitants can consume. The surplus is exported to Ogea, Fulaga, and Kabara. Ogea and Fulaga are limestone islands and Kabara is partially formed of limestone. Here the soils are poor in nutrients and not well suited to horticulture. In addition, in periods of little rain, drought conditions prevail because limestone is porous and the soil dries out rapidly. Shortages of food occur here occasionally. Hardwood trees flourish on limestone soils, however, and there is an abundance of good timber. The people have developed woodworking as their special handicraft, and these islands produce a surplus of bowls and other vessels for the preparation of food and *yaqona* (kava), anvils and beaters for the manufacture of tapa, outrigger canoes, and lumber for building houses. These articles are much in demand on Moce, which lacks suitable wood because the hardwood species do not do well on volcanic soils. Thus a system of barter has developed between the Moce people and the inhabitants of the 'famine islands' in the south.¹ In addition, similar connections exist with other islands. On Lakeba and Kabara, for instance, the women specialize in mat-making and supply the women of Moce with beautiful mats with plaited design patterns and multicoloured woolen fringes which are the indispensable attributes of important ceremonies such as weddings and burials. These mats are exchanged for tapas the manufacture of which is the specialization as well as the pride of the Moce women.

Part of this transfer takes place at an individual level and in a non-ceremonial context. This form of exchange is considered materially balanced by the people, although 'reciprocity may be somewhat deferred' (Arno 1976: 80). In such cases it is evident that the exchange is essentially not balanced, which implies the continuation of mutual obligations and prestations. This individual, non-ceremonial form of exchange is connected with the mutual dependence of the island communities with regard to vitally important products. Part of this kind of exchange is formed by one-sided transfers occurring occasionally within the context of special kinship relations (Arno 1976: 78-81).

Contrary to the non-ceremonial transfer of products which is an individual affair, the ceremonial exchanges take place between groups and 'the participants act as members of groups, not as individuals'

(Arno 1976: 80). The groups meet in public in an atmosphere of festive excitement. Large quantities of food, perfumed coconut oil, handicraft products, and Western commodities, accompanied by the presentation of *tabua*² and formal speeches, are offered alternately by both parties and observed critically by all participants. Indeed the atmosphere of the feast is characterized by rivalry and competition, with each group trying to gain prestige and to elevate its status by outdoing the other side.

The mutual offering of presents and speeches on the occasion of a traditional Fijian wedding belongs to this category of ceremonial exchange. Those involved in the contribution to the wedding are arranged in two parties, consisting of both men and women, which are made up of relatives of either the bride or the groom. The main share contributed by the men of both groups consists of large amounts of food prepared in the *lovo* or earth ovens. This food is presented in the prescribed ceremonial manner with the appropriate formal speeches and gifts of *tabua*. During my research on Moce in 1973 I witnessed a *vakamau vakaturaga* ('chiefly wedding'), as the bride belonged to the family of the Chief of the island. The groom's family ranked lower and was also relatively small. The contribution of the men of the latter group consisted of only one *lovo*. The men of the bride's family, however, had supplied a spectacular amount of festive food, the contents of three *lovo*, thus confirming their superior status.

The feminine counterpart of the masculine ceremonial contribution is called *butu*. In the *butu* the bride and groom act as the central figures. They alternate in leading a group of their respective female relatives carrying a piece of *gatu vakatoga* (long runner-like tapa decorated according to a Tongan procedure; Kooijman 1977: 109ff., and 1972: 297-341) and a mat to the house chosen for the wedding by the other party (Plate 1). In the house the bride or groom — whichever has brought the gifts — takes off the festive garments of stencilled tapa, and leaves them there. They put on ordinary, everyday clothing made of woven cloth and return to the other house where they don a new festive attire. The number of times the bride and groom go to and fro is determined by the supply of gifts: *gatu vakatoga*, mats, and wedding garments.

According to Laura Thompson the 'ceremonial exchange of property' called *butu* is one of the manifestations of the *solevu* custom, which is defined as a 'competitive form of ceremonial gift exchange between rival, related groups' by which expression may be given to the spirit of

Fig. 1

Diagram of a *gatuvakaviti* showing the various sections and their names. The *tasina* half of the *gatu* is the part decorated in the Tongan style with rubbed and painted designs.

rivalry and prestige may be gained (1940: 208). This definition would imply that *butu* is on a level with the prestige-dominated masculine exchanges of food accompanied with the offering of *tabua* and the delivering of speeches. This, however, does not seem to be in agreement with the description of the *butu* of the wedding she witnessed on Fulaga Island. According to her report, the groom and his escort went to the house of the bride six times, each time leaving a mat and a ceremonial dress of *gatuvakatoga*. In return for these gifts, the bride and her female relatives presented five mats, a piece of *gatuvakatoga*, and six ceremonial dresses (Thompson 1940: 92, 93). Though no detailed information is given about the size and quality of the pieces offered by

the two parties, the description of this *butu* ceremony with its equal number of exchanged items does not suggest rivalry and prestige-hunting.

This was made perfectly clear by the *butu* which formed part of the chiefly wedding on Moce in 1973. The two partners and their female escorts visited each other's house three times. Each time a piece of *gatu vakatoga* and a mat, both of the same size and the same quality, were left behind, as well as the festive attire consisting, on both sides, of an equal number of pieces of stencilled tapa of the same type, size, and quality (Kooijman 1977: 82ff.).

Indeed, the *butu* ceremony appears to comprise a strictly balanced exchange of goods. Contrary to the masculine contribution to the wedding feast, which is dominated by feelings of competition and aims at gain of prestige and elevation of status, the feminine part of the ceremony is characterized by an almost perfect balance.

These principles of alternation and balance which are the essential elements of *butu* are also evident in another female contribution to the wedding, viz., the presentation of a large, impressive, beautifully decorated tapa called *gatu vakaviti*, which plays an important part at the end of the feast.

Gatu vakaviti are made and decorated with the utmost care. They are the products of the *matai* (experts) among the tapa-making women of Moce Island. *Gatu vakaviti* means 'gatu made in the Fijian way'. *Gatu* is a Tongan word, however, and the use of the term implies that this type of bark cloth contains a Tongan element. The latter consists of a Tongan-style pattern of rubbed and painted designs covering half the surface. The other half of the *gatu* bears a pattern applied by means of the Fijian stencil technique, which is also used on Moce for the decoration of large numbers of *masi kesa*³ for festive clothing and other ceremonial purposes, as well as for sale on the tourist market.

The stencilled pattern, carefully applied by one or more *matai*, makes the *gatu vakaviti* the acme of artistic expression among Moce women (Plate 2). In composing this pattern, the tapa-makers are bound by strict rules which leave little room for individual variation. Consequently there is a close resemblance between *gatu vakaviti*. These rules and this conventionality are connected with and even determined by the function of these cloths in the traditional wedding celebration. A *gatu vakaviti* is an indispensable attribute of the ceremony, being suspended folded double over a cord to partition off the end of the house in which this is to be held. The space behind it is furnished as

Plate 1

Part of the *butu* ceremony of the 'chiefly wedding' on Moce in 1973. The bride and her female escort — including the author's wife — carry a piece of *gatu vakatoga* (in front) and a mat (at back).

Plate 2

The stencilled part of the *gatu vakaviti* bearing the bridegroom's name, made for the 'chiefly wedding' on Moce in 1973 (Collection Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden) In Plate 3 the bride and groom are shown sitting in front of this *gatu*.

Plate 3

The bride and bridegroom sitting in state in front of the *gatu vakaviti* shown in Plate 2.

Plate 4

The central section (*potuiloma*) of the *gatu vakaviti* shown in Plates 2 and 3.

Fig. 2
Diagram of the pattern on the *potuiloma* of the *gatu vakaviti* shown in Plate 4.
A Distribution of the three differently designed triangles a, b. and c.
B Total number of occurrences of the respective triangles on either side of the dividing-line.
C Pattern of triangles facing each other across the dividing-line.

the bridal chamber. The part of the *gatu* facing the latter is the 'Tongan' half, with its rubbed and painted decoration. On the other side of the cloth the bride and the groom sit in state, with the beautiful stencilled pattern behind them (Plates 2 and 3). Here the final part of the traditional wedding, the 'eating together' (*kana vata*), takes place in the presence of the guests — who are all women. After the ceremony the women guests give the couple presents varying from traditional goods such as bottles of coconut oil, mats, and pieces of *masi kesa*, to Western products purchased at the Co-operative Store, for instance, bottles of kerosene, bars of toilet soap, and perfumed talcum powder.

During this concluding stage of the wedding feast the scene is dominated by the elaborate patterns of the stencilled half of the *gatu*. With regard to this the intriguing question is raised whether these patterns have a special meaning in the wedding ceremony, and if so, whether they are meant to put across some kind of message to the participants. Verbal information on these points could not be obtained from either the women involved in the making and decoration or other people attending the wedding party. Informants were only able to mention the names of the five longitudinal elements of the pattern, i.e., the central panel or *potuiloma* flanked by the two *qa ni vasua*, and the two bands at the sides called *potuisau*, *belena* or *tutuna* (Fig. 1). *Potu* is a word of Tongan origin meaning 'place', 'locality', 'side', 'end' (Churchward 1959: 417); it is one of the many Tongan terms in use on the Lau Islands in connection with the production and decoration of tapa. *Potuiloma* and *potuisau* mean 'inner part' and 'outer part' respectively, while the terms *belena* and *tutuna* are Fijian words and may be translated by 'edge' and 'border' (Capell 1973: 8, 244). The *qa ni vasua* band derives its name from the dominating triangular motifs which are called so after the triangular shells of the same name found on the beach. So these names give no information at all about the meaning and function of the pattern. In its smallest details the stencilled pattern is made up of fairly simple figures applied on the cloth in linear bands alternating with isolated motifs mostly of a rosette-like nature. All of these figures and motifs are named. Most of the names have to do with the particular resemblance to shapes from the animal and vegetable world and none of them is of any help in solving the problem of the significance of the pattern.

Since this line of inquiry does not bring us much closer to an answer, we shall try another approach, namely the analysis and interpretation

of the pattern in close relationship with the ceremonial function of the cloths. This will lead us to a fairly well-based hypothesis about the meaning of the stencilled pattern on the *gatu vakaviti*, as well as the non-verbal message conveyed by it.

The inner panel of the pattern, the *potuiloma*, which also contains the name of the bride or groom, is unmistakably considered the most important part of the *gatu vakaviti* (Plate 4). The wedding-couple sit in front of it and the guests' attention is focussed on it. There can be no doubt that this central section is the significant part of the pattern. The strips on each side of it are intended as space-filling and often vary appreciably from one *gatu* to the other. The *potuiloma*, however, are always strikingly similar. The only variation which sometimes occurs consists of differences in the filling-up of the triangular spaces.

The general pattern of the *potuiloma* comprises two diamonds set in an oblong frame. This pattern is made up of a combination of three different types of triangle, one with a filling of parallel dentated bands (a in Fig. 2), and the other two containing a different set of three *vutu ni drali* motifs, white rosette-shaped figures, on a dark field each (b and c in Fig. 2).

For a functional analysis, the vertical line in the middle is of significant importance, since it passes between the bride and the groom sitting in state in front of the *potuiloma*. When we compare the two halves of the pattern on either side of this dividing-line, we find an equal number of occurrences for each type of triangle (Fig. 2, B). In this respect both halves appear to be in perfect balance. The compositions on both sides of the vertical line show the same sequence of triangles: they would be each other's reflection if one of the halves were turned upside down. For an understanding of the present pattern the *potuiloma* should be imagined as being folded in two along the dividing-line. The triangles a and b (Fig. 2, A, top left) would then be covered by c and a respectively. The diagram showing the pattern of the triangles thus facing each other across the dividing-line (Fig. 2, C) will make it clear that in both squared frames of the dominant diamond figures the four triangles — two a's, one b, and one c — on either side of the vertical line have been arranged in an alternating position.

Another arrangement of the triangles in the opposite halves of the squared frame can be noticed by following the dotted lines in Fig. 2, A. Here we see a pattern of four sets of two triangles arranged in a strictly symmetrical way (ab-ba and ca-ac).

As a result of this analysis, the pattern of the *potuiloma*, the central panel of the stencilled part of the *gatu vakaviti*, is found to be dominated by the principles of balance, symmetry, and alternation.

For a full understanding of this 'alternating symmetry' in the composition of this impressive design, we should keep in mind that the final stage of the celebration dominated by the *gatu vakaviti* is introduced by the *butu* with its balanced exchange of material goods. Both the *butu* ceremony and the manufacture and presentation of the *gatu vakaviti* are women's work. In the *butu* the idea of exchange in its perfectly balanced form is made explicit by the alternating transfer of equivalent units of tapas and mats. At the climax of the feast, shortly after the final *butu* presentation, the same idea finds its artistic expression in the design pattern of the *potuiloma*, the central section of the *gatu vakaviti*. The non-verbal message it contains will not fail to come across in the atmosphere of perfect harmony which characterizes the end of the wedding. Then the bride and groom sit in state before the relevant part of the stencilled pattern in such a way that each partner is in front of one of the halves formed by the vertical line in the centre. Presently the plate of food will be brought in for the *kana vata*, the ceremonial 'eating together' marking the conclusion of the wedding. The house is full of women. More of them are waiting outside with presents to be given after the final ceremony. The atmosphere is relaxed and shows no trace of the tension and the spirit of competition characterizing the men's exchange of food, *tabua*, and speeches in an earlier stage of the ceremony.

This rather euphoric state of affairs is only temporary. It will not outlast the wedding for long, and is no more than a festive interruption of the structural rivalry and competition between the two parties involved and an ideal pattern visualized by the women during one of the highlights in the life of the community.

NOTES

- ¹ This term is used by Laura Thompson (1972: 3) to characterize the marginal nutritional situation on these islands.
- ² Sperm-whale teeth that are ceremonial gifts of great importance.
- ³ *Masi* is the Fijian word for tapa. *Kesa*, made of the roots of the *gadua* tree (? *Macaranga seemanni*), is the principal paint used in the stencilling process. For *masi kesa* and its manufacture, decoration, and functions, cf. Kooijman 1977: 20-108.

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