

The Dancing Trees: Objects, Facts and Ideas in Museums

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ABSTRACT. In this paper we consider the ways that museum objects have multiple and mutable identities through a focus on three objects from the southeast coast of Papua New Guinea. Our approach is to scrutinise the materiality of these three objects to understand the ways that an object changes physically and symbolically from the point of making, to collection, through to museum acquisition and potential exchange, conservation, exhibition and research. Through this approach we show how small ‘fact’ details about objects from museum documentation systems become entangled in ideas and notions far beyond those of the times in which the objects were created and collected. We conclude that to understand museum objects we need to recognise their roles in the socio-cultural worlds of their makers and those of the collector-museum.

A museum’s life revolves around objects, it is contact with them which renders the visit a unique experience for the public. Nevertheless it is not so much the objects’ existence in itself to be crucial, as the knowledge about them and the way in which it is transmitted [sic] (Gnecchi-Ruscone translation [2011: 176] of an observation by Maria Camilla De Palma).

Paradisea raggiana, Choqeri [Sogeri] district ‘fanava’ ... The plumed birds usually congregate in the morning and towards sunset on trees, called by the natives ‘Marrara’ (dancing) trees, sometimes in considerable numbers. The natives in this district catch them with a long string ... when pulled smartly, this catches the bird by the leg. This is how plumes are obtained from the coast natives, who trade with them with the inland tribes (Sharpe, 1882: 443 quoting a personal communication from Andrew Goldie).

Introduction: knowing about objects

This paper is in the realm of historically-oriented museum research that engages with the legacy of scientific knowledge-making practices in the museum context. As De Palma suggests (above) this legacy includes the ways objects are exhibited, as well as the information chosen to be associated with them. We are motivated by three objects obtained between 1875 and 1924 on the southeast coast of what is now Papua New Guinea which were coincidentally on exhibit in three different countries in 2018: a bag in Castello D’Albertis, Genoa, Italy, a feathered headdress in Royal Academy of Arts, London, Britain and another feathered headdress in the Australian Museum, Sydney, Australia. Our ideas are framed around the kinds of information that become attached to museum objects from the time of their

collection to exhibition today. We suggest that in order to make the most of the research value of the tens of thousands of collection items acquired in New Guinea and stored in museums across the world, we should reconnect objects to the cultural aspects not only of the society where they originated past and present, but also of the collecting, and specimen-making society. The need to find balance between knowledge systems can be seen in the work of ornithologist Miriam Supuma (2018) on the ethical and ecological gains that can be made in ornithology by connecting animals with their cultural histories. These ideas are encapsulated in the term ‘dancing trees’ (Sharpe, 1882: 443). *Marrara* relates to what zoologists call ‘lek grounds’, spaces created by particular species for competitive displays for mating. The specific ecological knowledge acquired in the Sogeri region was used by Sharpe as an important note identifying the trees

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