

## I String games

*Once I had to make a piece of string, from the leaves of harakeke or New Zealand Flax. This was a project for a university paper called Te Kete Aronui: Maori Art and Material Culture, taught at the University of Auckland. The lecturer was Maureen Lander, an installation artist of Maori, Scots and Irish descent, who showed us how to harvest the leaves in such a way as to ensure the survival of the plant. We then learned to haro or strip them using a mussel shell, to extract the muka, the silky blonde fibre within. A thin hank was rolled along the thigh to make a ply, before being doubled over and rolled together in a technique that required some practice to master. Finally, after several attempts, I had my piece of string.*

*The aim of the exercise was to take the string and make a loop suitable for whai – ‘cats-cradle’ or string games. We had to find someone to teach us a Maori string figure, then document the stages of the game using images and text. It was a complex task, translating the movements of hand and string into pictures and written description. The final test was whether a novice could complete the game from the instructions.*

*Some years later, I showed the project to a friend, and tried to remember the game. I went through my own instructions, but couldn’t complete the figure, called Te Whare o Tawhaki – the house of Tawhaki, the ancestor who brought knowledge to earth. I tried over and over again, but it was soon clear I had missed a crucial step. I closed the book in frustration, picking up my string to try one more time . . . and there it was – I had executed the figure perfectly. Somehow, in the process of being taught each stage over and over by my instructor Merimeri Penfold (fig. 1), and repeating it so many times in the course of documentation, the game had become part of me. I knew how to do it, not in the abstract, but in my hands and their engagement with the string. This was knowledge that did not come from text, language or images – in fact these got in the way. It was the kind of understanding that could only be gained by thinking through things.*

### Thinking through things

The circulation of goods follows that of men . . . All in all, it is one and the same. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (1925)

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**Figure 1** Merimeri Penfold teaching the string game *Te Whare o Tawhaki*, New Zealand, 1996. Photo by Amiria Henare.



This book is a historical ethnography of Scotland and New Zealand, places linked by imperial, colonial and post-colonial ties. It is also a ‘material’ ethnography, grounded in artefact-based research, and a history of ideas. The research looks at how anthropological theories emerged in the theatre of Empire, to be recycled as colonial policies and practices articulated ‘at Home’ and abroad. Unusually among historical accounts of imperialism, it approaches these processes through museum collections, studying the circulation of concepts and relationships in artefact form. In this way it is ultimately concerned with the mutual constitution, or rather indissolubility, of material, social and intellectual ‘worlds’. Here the research is distinct from projects within anthropology that emphasise the way in which meanings become attached to things or the roles objects play as vehicles for human agency. Instead (or rather as well), it explores how artefacts *constitute* and *instantiate* social relations, and how they therefore do not simply ‘represent’, ‘symbolise’ or even ‘embody’ meaning – they help bring it into being.

At the heart of this story are things that find their way into museums. The paths they travel through space and time act as a map, marking a way through the complexities of this particular ‘field’. These objects were produced and gathered through processes of imperial expansion: exploration, emigration, immigration and settlement, along with other forms of travel. They endure in the present, and are still considered worthy of preservation in museums that ensure their accessibility for future generations. This is a history, therefore, but one with a distinctively anthropological interest in the present-day importance of things. Focused on two outposts of the British Empire, it draws comparisons and traces

connections that shed new light on the unfolding of imperial and post-colonial relationships.

In studying artefacts, and how they enter museums, I have chosen to focus on a special category of things that instantiate and perpetuate relationships through time. Artefacts may be broadly understood as material objects that are or have been in touch with people. Here the term applies not only to items of human manufacture, but also to natural specimens, though the emphasis in this work is on 'ethnographic' material. Artefacts already have a history when and if they enter a museum. They have been 'made', in a sense, by people, whether picked or plucked from the 'natural' environment, forged, moulded, stuffed, carved, woven or preserved. Following this initiation, many of these objects then travel, through time and between places, by way of processes of exchange. As Mauss observed above, things move with people, and people move with things. Objects are bought and sold, stolen, gifted and traded by way of social relations, which at once are constituted by the very movement of things, such that the two are in many ways 'one and the same'. As they move among people, things themselves develop life histories that cut across generational time and interweave with human genealogies. They may be treasured and passed on with ceremony, or used and thrown away. If they are exchanged, they may move through different regimes of significance and value, from commodity to gift to heirloom, for example, their meanings and value changing as they pass through different hands.<sup>1</sup> Yet they can also endure, enacting continuity in their very substance and forms. Some lead unexceptional lives; others may go on to play vital roles in history, passing through matrices of relationships, places and times.

The purpose of an ethnographic study centred on things is to investigate social life in ways that generate new and unusual understandings. While Daniel Miller has noted that 'the point that things matter' has by now been made in anthropology,<sup>2</sup> many in the discipline have yet to translate this theoretical insight into practice. Material methodologies continue to be regarded as peripheral rather than central to the practice of fieldwork, and ethnographic collections are routinely dismissed as an 'oppressive burden' on university museums,<sup>3</sup> themselves derided as unseemly relics of anthropology's colonial past. Yet the importance of artefact-based

<sup>1</sup> A. Appadurai (ed.), *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> D. Miller (ed.), *Material cultures: why some things matter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. J. Haas, 'Power, objects and a voice for anthropology', *Current Anthropology* 37 (1996), p. S9.

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research – why it is worth defending – is that it raises different questions from the study of texts or images, or from simply talking to people. In the humanities and social sciences, theories that revolve around language have become commonplace, and artefacts are often either put to one side or referred to as ‘texts’ or ‘signs’ in some alternative system of signification. This is a substantial departure from earlier analytic methodologies that embraced the study of objects as a useful if not indispensable strategy for the production and dissemination of knowledge. Anthropology was once a discipline centred on museums, where the collecting of artefacts and comparative analysis of their form, function and material properties were key techniques in the understanding of human existence. When social anthropology moved into universities, however, interest shifted from collecting material manifestations of culture to the gathering of utterances and textual descriptions of social life (at least in theory). As W. H. R. Rivers, a leading advocate of this change, noted at the time:

It is a widespread popular idea that the chief tasks of the anthropologist are the measurement of heads and the collection of curious or beautiful objects for museums . . . In recent years, however, the whole movement of interest, especially in our own country, has been away from the physical and material towards the psychological and social aspects of the life of Mankind.<sup>4</sup>

This rhetorical turn toward structures of society and of the mind placed new emphasis on language, through which, it was argued, the underlying patterns of human nature would be revealed. Linguistic methodologies became central to the discipline, and theoretical advances in the study of language were eventually applied to ethnographic material, including the study of things. As Alfred Gell has noted, since the 1970s many writers engaged in the Anthropology of Art have analysed artefacts as visual ‘signs’, components of (culturally distinctive) semiotic systems united by a stylistic language or, in Gell’s term, ‘visual-ese’.<sup>5</sup> In Material Culture Studies, too, scholars have spoken of ‘reading material texts’, sometimes constructing formal ‘grammars’ through which to unlock the meanings encoded in objects, though the use of linguistic analogies has become more attuned over time to the distinctive properties of words and things. The problem with these strategies is that in likening artefacts to writing, speech, and linguistically structured thought, one can lose sight of the qualities

<sup>4</sup> W. H. R. Rivers, ‘The government of subject peoples’, in A. C. Seward (ed.), *Science and the nation: essays by Cambridge graduates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917), pp. 306–7.

<sup>5</sup> A. Gell, *Art and agency: an anthropological theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

that make them special – their substance, their being in one place at one time, their complex sensuality. Objects, particularly those held in museums, may have words inscribed upon them, or textual labels attached – they may even be books or manuscripts – but in such cases it is even more important to appreciate what is distinctive about the artefact *qua* artefact, that it might instantiate meaning in a different way than language.

Other writers have sought to understand the role of objects in social life by likening them to people, a tactic often employed in economic anthropology and the study of systems of exchange. Marcel Mauss, and later writers including Arjun Appadurai, Igor Kopytoff and Alfred Gell, have all argued along this line. Some, like Mauss and Gell, use ethnographic evidence to show not only that objects may usefully be *compared* to people in a metaphorical sense – in the possession of animate forces, life histories, cultural biographies or social agency, for example – but that their relations with people in some societies are so close as to confound the separation of people from (certain kinds of) things. These writers call into question what is often regarded as a peculiarly Euro-western conceit – the subject/object dichotomy, the assumption of a radical disjuncture between (animate) persons and (inanimate) things. As Gell points out, anthropology, of all disciplines, has long concerned itself with transgressions of this boundary, from Tylor's sceptical study of primitive 'animism' – the attribution of life and sensibility to inanimate things – through Frazer's investigations of magic, to Mauss' analysis of gift exchange as the giving of parts of oneself.<sup>6</sup> One might add more recent examples of work that breaks down these old oppositions, like Strathern's 'partible personhood', Latour's networks, or Ingold's 'dwelling' and 'skill'.<sup>7</sup> In illuminating other ways of conceiving such basic 'facts' about the nature of existence, anthropologists have placed themselves at the heart of a debate on the relationship of mind and matter which has preoccupied philosophers for centuries.

Likening objects to people is useful, because they *do* share many characteristics, and *are seen to* in many societies (including, as Gell notes, those in the West). We share with artefacts a corporeal presence in the world – an ability to *instantiate* or bring things to a focus – a condition that leads to the objectification of people and

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. M. Strathern, *The gender of the gift: problems with women and problems with society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and *Partial connections*, ASAO Special Publications No. 3 (Savage: University Press of America, 1990); B. Latour, *We have never been modern* (London: Harvard University Press, 1993); T. Ingold, *The perception of the environment: essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill* (London: Routledge, 2000).

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personification of things that goes on in cultures across the globe. The kinds of body we have are also important. More than other animals, people need things to get by – we use stuff to build our shelters, collect and prepare food, warm and protect our bodies, and generally ensure our survival. Materiality is integral to human existence, and to sociality, not an inanimate substrate upon which meaning and culture are built. The interdependence, indeed indissolubility, of persons and things gives an intimate quality to our relationships – we use them to clothe and decorate ourselves, to give birth upon, to kill our enemies and to bury our loved ones. In this sense, people are shaped by things as much as artefacts are crafted by people. And we surround ourselves with them not just out of necessity, but also for pleasure. Objects excite our senses with their smells and tactile qualities, their colours and forms, and the sounds they make when engaged with our bodies, battered by rain or blown by the wind.

And yet, despite the intimacy of our relations with them, things are not always people either. One might argue that although there are distinctive assumptions about what separates persons and things, most people would agree that what Euro-westerners call ‘people’ and what they call ‘artefacts’ are not precisely the *same kind* of thing. Our bodily presence in the world, for instance, is limited by mortality, and by the perishable nature of the stuff from which we are made. Our personhood is inevitably compromised by death – even if our bodies are mummified, our heads preserved or our bones picked clean, allowing us to maintain a physical presence among our descendants, we are never quite the same. To stay in the world, we must do so in a form that is fundamentally altered. We need new bodies, or find our personhood manifested, in a different state, in images, relics, or objects like Maori *poupou* (wall-carvings) or the Australian *churingas* discussed by Lévi-Strauss.<sup>8</sup> A key distinction is this: certain things made and owned or appropriated by people have the capacity to outlast them – to achieve greater longevity and a more stable and enduring corporeal presence in the world than that afforded by flesh. For artefacts, this peculiar (potential) longevity constitutes one of the most important and singular features of their social existence, and helps to explain the particular roles they perform in social life.

In many societies, artefacts collapse spatial and temporal distance, bringing people together who would otherwise remain quite literally out of touch. As the anthropological literature on exchange makes clear, the selling, gifting, barter and trade of objects (among other things) is ‘a universal feature of human social

<sup>8</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, *The savage mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 238.



life and, according to some theorists, at the very core of it'.<sup>9</sup> Things are exchanged to fulfil immediate needs and desires, and to initiate and cultivate ongoing relationships between individuals, kin and other social groups. Artefacts generate ties by moving across territorial and cultural boundaries, sometimes crossing oceans to create and affirm social bonds. Anthropologists have traditionally emphasised the synchronic features of networks of exchange like Malinowski's *Kula* ring, partly due to their internal complexity, but also because of methodological limitations associated with the practice of fieldwork and attendant theoretical preoccupations. Yet such exchanges may also be usefully analysed *through* time. Indeed, in many exchanges (including the *Kula*), properties accrued across time are of the essence, and the age and past ownership of an artefact are of central concern to the transacting parties. Age can add value, and the association of an artefact with particular individuals, living or dead, or with important events, can influence the outcome of a transaction.

More importantly, insisting on a narrow temporal scope for anthropology can obscure the significance (and even existence) of exchange networks that traverse generations.<sup>10</sup> In many cultures, artefacts are passed down and across lines of descent, providing substantive links between people who will never meet 'in person'. Enacting such ties through exchange may indeed be integral to the lives of those groups, crucial to their particular ways of being. Among Maori, for example, *taonga* or treasured artefacts such as carved meeting houses help bring descent groups into being.<sup>11</sup> Ornate wooden panels, photographs and carved figures do not merely represent but *are* ancestors, and these and other *taonga*, like woven cloaks, jade ornaments and weapons, are gifted to create and sustain bonds between kin groups over time. These practices are long-established among Maori and endure in the present, where ancient *taonga*, whose life histories extend far back in time, are still held and passed on in rituals that persist alongside more prosaic transactions. For more than two hundred years, furthermore, Europeans and others have been bound into these networks of exchange. The names of ancestors linked by the trajectories of such *taonga* are often preserved, and these old exchanges may continue to animate relations between their present-day

<sup>9</sup> I. Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things', in Appadurai (ed.), *The social life of things*, p. 68. Lévi-Strauss argued in *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1949) that all social life, particularly kinship, may be understood in terms of exchange.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. A. Weiner, *Inalienable possessions: the paradox of keeping-while-giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> M. Jackson, 'Aspects of symbolism and composition in Maori art', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 128 (1972), pp. 33–80.

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descendants.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, new *taonga* are produced for these and other purposes, to be exchanged among family, *iwi* or tribal groups, friends and heads of state, or sold on the commercial market. The significance of earlier transactions has become a topic of intense debate, in disagreements over the care of *taonga* within kin groups, arguments about the legitimacy of European collecting, and calls for the repatriation of Maori artefacts from museums.

In Euro-western societies too, the role of artefacts in linking people across generations is a central feature of social life. The inheritance of property has been a key practice and preoccupation, informing the development of social lives and social theory alike. Its importance is by no means diminished today, and relations between people continue to be marked both by its material effects and by changing attitudes toward it – manifested in debates about the legitimacy of inherited wealth and power, economic policies designed to redistribute these, even revolution. Museums may be viewed as a peculiar manifestation of inheritance or, as it is often called in this context, ‘heritage’. Initially assembled as private collections, often by those possessed of inherited wealth, museums have changed over time to become repositories of public, democratised wealth and knowledge, collections for and of ‘the people’. They are storehouses of heirlooms for the societies that create them, caring for the treasures in their collections, encouraging public access through exhibition. Just as Maori meeting houses or the Yurok and noble European houses described by Lévi-Strauss enact kin groups, museums, through their ‘immaterial as well as material wealth’,<sup>13</sup> enact heritable communities of people and things.

Some writers have argued that museums interrupt flows of exchange, ‘enclaving’ objects that might otherwise continue on their journeys across time and space, uniting new groups of people.<sup>14</sup> Yet such a view obscures the work that objects continue to do within museums. Artefacts in collections still generate and perpetuate social ties – at the very least they are visited and studied, conserved and periodically taken out for exhibition. Preservation keeps them alive, and in time they may continue travelling the

<sup>12</sup> P. Tapsell, ‘The flight of Pareraututu: an investigation of *taonga* from a tribal perspective’, *JPS* 106 (1997) and *Pukaki: a comet returns* (Auckland: Reed, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, *The way of the masks*, translated by S. Modelski (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), p. 179. See also J. Carsten and S. Hugh-Jones, *About the house: Lévi-Strauss and beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 6–21.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Appadurai (ed.), *Social life of things*; K. Pomian, ‘The collection: between the visible and the invisible’, in S. Pearce (ed.), *Interpreting objects and collections* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 161–2.



world. They are sometimes sent out on loan to other museums, and (in New Zealand at least) may be released temporarily into the community for ritual purposes. They attract scholars, descendants, artists, curators and other people who come to study them, draw inspiration from their forms, conserve their substance and observe them on display. Of course museums restrict the geographical mobility of things, in not allowing them to be bought and sold. But this is for reasons that have everything to do with ensuring their ongoing participation in networks of exchange. Museum objects are kept to hold something of the past for present and future generations. They are chosen with a view to their potential longevity, and a primary task of museums is to preserve and conserve them for the future. This means that their mobility across space is restricted precisely *in order to enhance their ability to move through time*. The initial exchanges through which museum pieces were acquired, whether by donation, bequest, barter or sale, thus continue to unfold as they attract people now and into the future. Historical transactions remain active in the present, bringing us in touch with those who lived long ago and generating new associations. Rather than putting an end to the social lives of things, museums have become nexi for their ongoing relations with people.

Like exchange, museums (contrary perhaps to popular belief) do not exist outside of time. They are not ahistorical time capsules where nothing ever happens, where people come and go without leaving a trace. Museums and their collections are eminently historical institutions, whose present state is illuminated by reference to their past development. From personal treasure houses to repositories of imperial booty, from storehouses of science to places of memory, museums have adapted their collecting and exhibiting practices in relation to changing historical milieux. When we visit a museum today, we do not only see representations of 'how things used to be' or 'how things are' in the form of exhibitions about history and 'primitive' cultures. We also see things themselves, artefacts through which past lives and social relations reach into the present. These accumulations were built up across time, through sequences of exchange, the vestiges of which have arrived (often purposefully) in the present. To understand them we must follow the movements of things, trace the unfolding of their lives across time, and examine the histories that brought them into our presence and into museums, the stratigraphy of contemporary collections.

### **In the presence of the past**

In the course of fieldwork in Scotland and New Zealand during 1998 and 1999, I drove some 20,000 miles and visited more than a hundred museums. Some were visited once for a period of

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hours; others I returned to again and again, in some cases spending months working with their staff. I was immersed in many histories, and encountered treasures and detritus left in the present by retreating tides of time. Among these were objects whose trajectories linked the land of my birth – New Zealand – to Scotland, the land of my ancestors.

In many Scottish museums, carved and woven Maori *taonga* (treasured artefacts) lay in the stores and, less often, on display in ethnological exhibitions. Records showed that these had travelled to Britain as gifts, specimens, souvenirs, and trophies from as early as the eighteenth century. In the course of their sojourn, some had been visited by scholars and artists, often people of Maori descent who had travelled to greet and touch these ancestors so far from home. Other things too had arrived in Scotland from New Zealand, artefacts of European settlement and colonisation that came back with mail ships and returning relatives, agents of imperial expansion.

Likewise, New Zealand museums held many Scottish items in their collections – snuffboxes, Gaelic bibles, Ayrshire christening gowns. Some were identified by accompanying labels and documentation, others by their form and character – *crusie* lamps, Paisley shawls, *mutch* bonnets and sporrans. Many were brought out from Scotland on emigrant ships, made there, or owned by Scottish people. Others exemplified the fashion for Scottish style in the Victorian culture of Empire – publications by Walter Scott and relics of Robbie Burns, images of pipe bands, and products bearing tartan and thistle motifs. Most had been kept as heirlooms, souvenirs and mementoes before finding their way into museums.

Through these treasures and left-overs, in the very form of objects and in their supporting texts, I learned of lives lost to history, forgotten technologies and triumphs long surpassed. On top of this complex stratigraphy was built an architecture of interpretation, exhibitions articulating ideas in the form of artefacts, space, structure, images and texts. Here those objects not sequestered in the stores of museums were artfully arranged for public display. Walking around these spaces with other visitors, I absorbed meanings, drew maps of exhibitions, took photographs and made notes. Behind the scenes I sometimes met the curators and designers responsible for these displays, people with a passion for collections. We discussed the exhibitions, the ideas they wanted to put forward, their backgrounds and politics – threads woven through the displays, clues for interpretation.

As institutions, museums are unique in the way they use objects to link diverse places and times. And they are popular. In their encouragement of public access, it can be argued that museums reach a wider audience than do, for example, academic texts.