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Vicki Luker

Whaling, Tabua, and Cokanauto



Figure 1: Tabua. Whale tooth presented in 1967 by the government and people of Fiji to the governor general of Australia, Lord Casey, on the disappearance of the Australian prime minister, Harold Holt. Ceremonial whale teeth have changed little in appearance since early nineteenth-century Fiji. “Whale Tooth with a Rope Attached to it,” National Library of Australia.

Cokanauto (ca. 1810–1851), also known as Mr. Phillips, was a high chief of the Fijian polity of Rewa.¹ He received the paramount Rewan title Roko Tui Dreketi in 1845. Although no integrated treatment of his life is available, the widely read colonial historian of Fiji, R. A. Derrick, described him as a “whaler.”² As will be seen, commercial whaling in Fiji and Cokanauto’s involvement in the industry warrant a description that is more precise. Yet this paper argues only that whaling could be a *chiefly* pursuit—giving Cokanauto access to the highest chiefly valuable: tabua, or whale teeth (Figure 1). During his lifetime, the supply of tabua increased due to commercial whaling, and many changes in Fijian politics, including war, can be attributed to tabua. One might be reminded of Judy Bennett’s thoughts on the Second World War: that the human dimension of nonhuman worlds interests environmental historians.³ Although whales and their teeth are the

1 Following convention in Fijian spelling written “c” is pronounced “th” in English, written “b” is pronounced “mb” and “d” as “nd.”

2 R. A. Derrick, *A History of Fiji* (Suva: Government Press, [1946] 1974), 57.

3 Judith A. Bennett, *Natives and Exotics: World War II and Environment in the Southern Pacific* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009), 21.

precondition for this paper, it is the human dimension of Cokanauto and his people that concerns us. First, some background information on Fiji, Fijian chiefdoms, whaling, and tabua is needed.

Fiji and its Chiefdoms

Fiji is an island group in the southwest Pacific. Some one hundred of its three hundred islands are inhabited. The three largest are Viti Levu, Vanua Levu, and Taveuni (Figure 2). These large islands are to the west of the Koro Sea, in which several important islands exist. The east of the Koro Sea is fringed by the Fijian islands of Lau, and beyond them, further to the east, lies the Tonga group.

Figure 2:
Map showing Fiji, Tonga, and neighboring islands. CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.



Today Fiji is home to nearly 900,000 people. More than half are Indigenous Fijians or Taukei. The next biggest group is Indo-Fijian, its members mostly descended from labourers indentured under colonialism. Britain ruled Fiji from 1874 to 1970, but the importation of laborers from India effectively ceased in 1916.

Cokanauto's home of Rewa, through which flows Fiji's largest river, the River Rewa, is a short drive from Suva, Fiji's capital city. A short distance from Rewa is the small island of Bau, home to Cokanauto's cousin, widely known as Cakobau (ca. 1815—1883), who led the chiefs who ceded the Fiji Islands to Queen Victoria in 1874.

In 1840, Fiji consisted of some 1,400 villages, a Taukei population of perhaps 300,000 people, several mutually unintelligible languages, and fiercely independent polities. Bau, which missionaries and others labelled the most powerful chiefdom, might have directly ruled some 15,000 people. The Rewa delta hosted one of the largest concentrations of people in the Pacific, supported by the intensive cultivation of swamp taro. The chiefdoms of Bau, Rewa, and Cakaudrove (to the north, occupying most of Taveuni and some of Vanua Levu) expanded in the early nineteenth century through war, marriage, and trade. The latter included commercial whaling and related industries.

Whaling and Tabua

Whaling in Fiji should be placed in scare quotes. While whaling was important in different ways for many Fijian communities in the nineteenth century, the commercial exploitation of whales, and the traditional hunting of whales or the harvesting of the odd beached whale, appear to have been activities undertaken elsewhere. Yet from the late eighteenth century, whale teeth or tabua were items of great chiefly power in Fiji. Tabua were central to affairs of state. The increased supply of tabua owing to commercial whaling was therefore politically significant.

Tabua, often with a wa (or cord) attached, came from the teeth of the sperm (or cachalot) whale. The whale usually has 42 teeth on its lower jaw. Sperm whales migrate north from the Antarctic to equatorial waters, where they breed. It was in these equatorial waters that commercial whalers hunted them. Americans and Britons dominated commercial whaling.

From at least the eighteenth century, sperm whales passed through Tonga and the small number that beached there furnished Tongans with whale teeth. During the late 1700s, Tongans came in great numbers to live permanently or temporarily in Fiji.⁴ Among the

4 Thomas Williams, *The Islands and their Inhabitants, Fiji and the Fijians*, vol. 1 (London: Heylin, 1958; Suva, Fiji Museum, 1982), 94. Page reference refers to the 1982 edition.

goods they brought with them were whale teeth. If tabua were originally made from other materials, as Ratu Deve Toganivalu and his brother Pita Emosi Tatawaqa averred, then exchange between Tongans and Fijians perhaps resulted in the equation that tabua = whale teeth.⁵ Indeed, the whale teeth most prized by Fijians were “red” tabua; that is, whale teeth smoked after the Tongan example to achieve that color.⁶

Although some sperm whales evidently passed through Fijian waters in the nineteenth century, as they continue to today, observers followed the views of Charles Wilkes of the United States Exploring Expedition, who, when noting a pod that passed near the island of Ovalau in 1840, remarked on how local seafaring did not cater for the hunting of whales, and although tabua were highly valued, “natives” from thereabouts seemed ignorant of the animals from which they came.⁷ When some Fijians, including the young Cokanauto, encountered a whale near Tahiti in 1834, they were reportedly much afraid and ignorant of the creature; when informed that whale teeth came from “these fish,” Cokanauto erroneously thought that the sperm whale could be killed by the shot from a musket.⁸

Tabua aside, whaling was significant for Fiji in several ways. Many ships and much shipping, although not intending to profit directly from whales, partook of whaling ship design, culture, infrastructure, and personnel. Ships and shipping, whether whalers in narrow or broader senses, used whaling centers as bases for provisioning and recruiting. Some Fijians passed through port towns such as Levuka on Ovalau or later Galoa Bay on Kadavu to join the wooden world of ships, from which they encountered foreign parts of the Pacific or travelled further. Becoming a crew member was a way for any Fijian to see the world and prove his worth.⁹ And it worked the other way too. David Whippy, a

- 5 Deve Toganivalu, “Ai Yau Kei Nai Yaya Vakaviti (Fijian Property and Gear),” *Transactions of the Fijian Society*, 1917; Emosi Tatawaqa, *Transactions of the Fijian Society*, 1914.
- 6 Interpretation board “Tabuadamu, Smoked Presentation Whale’s Tooth Sperm Whale Ivory, Presented by Manueli and Karalaini Babana, 1983 (FM 83/8),” Suva, Fiji Museum, viewed 12 September 2017.
- 7 Charles Wilkes, *United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842, Tongataboo, Feejee Group, Honolulu*, vol. 3 (Suva, Fiji Museum [1845] 1985), 194.
- 8 Cheever, *Emerald log*, 25 July 1834, microfilm, Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History, Australian National University, cited by Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 233.
- 9 Herman Melville went to sea in 1841 and spent much of his time in the Pacific. Although Fijians and Fiji were not as prominent in his fictional accounts of whaling as other persons and places, Fiji was clearly a part of his whaling world. See Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, [1943] 1949), 13. Chappell estimates that by the mid-nineteenth century, about one fifth of whaling crews were Oceanian. David A. Chappell, *Double Ghosts: Oceanian Voyagers on Euroamerican Ships* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharp, 1997), 12, 42, 163.

founder of Levuka and a large family of descendants in Fiji, acted as interpreter between Fijian and Euro-American cultures. He came to Levuka as a young man, having set out in a Nantucket whaler. The whaling and related maritime industries overlapped.

Therefore, captains involved in the sandalwood (1804–1813) and *bêche-de-mer* (1828–1850) trades in Fiji imported into Fijian societies whale teeth from commercial whaling. Such traders were more numerous than whalers narrowly defined. Whale teeth helped Europeans obtain from their Fijian collaborators access or services required for obtaining tradeable sandalwood and *bêche-de-mer*, or more generally for securing Fijian crew, provisions, and repairs. Whale teeth were indeed a reason for ships to call by Fijian ports: captains had an item for which local chiefs were willing to exchange.

Tabua were currency for Europeans. On his inaugural visit to Fiji, the US *bêche-de-mer* trader and Cokanauto's close collaborator, Captain John Eagleston, presented the first chief he encountered with a whale's tooth—he understood whale teeth were valued by Fijians—and explained to his hosts that he had come to trade.¹⁰ The man after whom Cokanauto was informally named, “Mr. Phillips,” organized trading expeditions to Fiji while based in Salem in Massachusetts, and shipped 571 whale teeth on the *bêche-de-mer* brig *Spy* in 1832.¹¹ In her contribution to this volume, Nancy Shoemaker describes whale teeth as secondary products of whaling, with a market in Fiji.

Toganivalu remarked that whale teeth were Fiji's premier chiefly valuable.¹² The Fiji Museum has noted: “Huge undertakings in the history of Fiji have been made possible with the presentation of tabua.”¹³ Tabua featured in a range of exchanges between Fijian chiefly parties as gifts to allies, or would-be-allies, in order to win their support in war, to assassinate a rival chief, to embody the marital alliances between ruling chiefs,

10 John Eagleston, “Barque *Peru* of Salem: Two Voyages to the Islands in the Pacific Ocean 1830–33,” in the John Henry Eagleston (1803–1884) Papers (Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts) microfilm PMB 450.

11 R. Gerard Ward, “The Pacific Beche-de-Mer Trade with Special Reference to Fiji,” in *Man in the Pacific Islands: Essays on Geographical Change in the Pacific Islands*, ed. R Gerard Ward (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 109, table 4.1.

12 Deve Toganivalu, “Ai Yau Kei Nai Yaya Vakaviti (Fijian Property and Gear),” *Transactions of the Fijian Society* (1917): 8.

13 Interpretation board, “Na Uluniyau: The Most Valuable of Items,” Suva, Fiji Museum, viewed 12 September 2017.

to build houses for gods and chiefs, or to secure the care for a chiefly child.¹⁴ In the early 1800s, the role of *tabua* in war-making and killing was prominent.

There are many examples of the power of *tabua*; take for instance the ransom demanded in about 1838 by Cokanauto's half brother, the high chief Veidovi, of the whale ship *Nimrod* from Port Jackson (present-day Sydney). Veidovi was a Rewan chief, but Veidovi's mother was from Kadavu, an island conquered by Rewa. The *Nimrod* had arrived in Kadavu to organize provisions. Veidovi had allegedly observed that the *Nimrod*'s mate possessed large whale teeth, so he captured the mate and crew, and demanded from the captain "fifty whale teeth, four axes, two plates, a case of pipes, a bundle of fish-hooks, an iron pot, and a bale of cloth."¹⁵ Veidovi appreciated that, for foreigners, whale teeth were tradeable, but for Fijian chiefs whale teeth were much more—they could "make things happen." Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Veidovi demanded so many whale teeth and that they topped his list of demands.

Other examples are the use of whale teeth in the war between Rewa and Bau (1843–1855), which Marshall Sahlins describes as the biggest war in the Pacific prior to the Second World War.¹⁶ According to Tatawaqa, the war began with whale teeth obtained from the first "whaling ships" arriving in Fijian waters. These teeth were acquired by Cokanauto's uncle, Tanoa of Bau, and Cokanauto's half brother, the then Roko Tui Dreketi.¹⁷ While Bau was nominally ruled by the *vunivalu* (literally "root of war") Tanoa, the real ruler was said to be Tanoa's son and Cokanauto's cousin, Cakobau. In the war, Cokanauto did not side with Rewa. Importantly, because Cokanauto's mother, Adi Salawai, was Tanoa's sister, Cokanauto identified with his cousin's and uncle's Bauan party. And this party prevailed. According to Mary Wallis, wife of a *bêche-de-mer* trader, Cokanauto hoped to win "kingship" of Rewa through the predominance of the Bauan military house. Cokanauto therefore demanded that several villages *soro*—that is, ritually submit to him through offerings of earth and whale teeth.¹⁸

14 Marshall Sahlins, "The Discovery of the True Savage," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Essays in Honour of Greg Denning*, ed. Donna Merwick (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, The History Department, 1994), 60.

15 Wilkes, *United States Exploring Expedition*, 138.

16 Marshall Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 15.

17 Pita Emosi Tatawaqa, "The *Tabua*," *Transactions of the Fijian Society* (1913): 2.

18 Mary Wallis, *Life in Feejee, or Five Years among the Cannibals by a Lady* (Boston: William Heath, 1851; Suva: Fiji Museum, 1983), 168. Page reference refers to the 1983 edition.

No longer do whale teeth in Fiji exercise their former command. Chiefly politics, among other things, have changed. Some functions once performed by whale teeth are now performed by money. Tabua remain, however, compelling marriage offerings and convey great political respect.

Cokanauto

Cokanauto (Figure 3) has been commemorated as a gifted individual; a collector of European curios, a speaker of many languages, and a leader with, implicitly, European ideas for future rule.¹⁹ He also had high ambitions for power in Rewa, and as *vasu*, or “sister’s son,” to Tanoa, he was by custom the most important person in Fiji.²⁰ Glimpses of his role

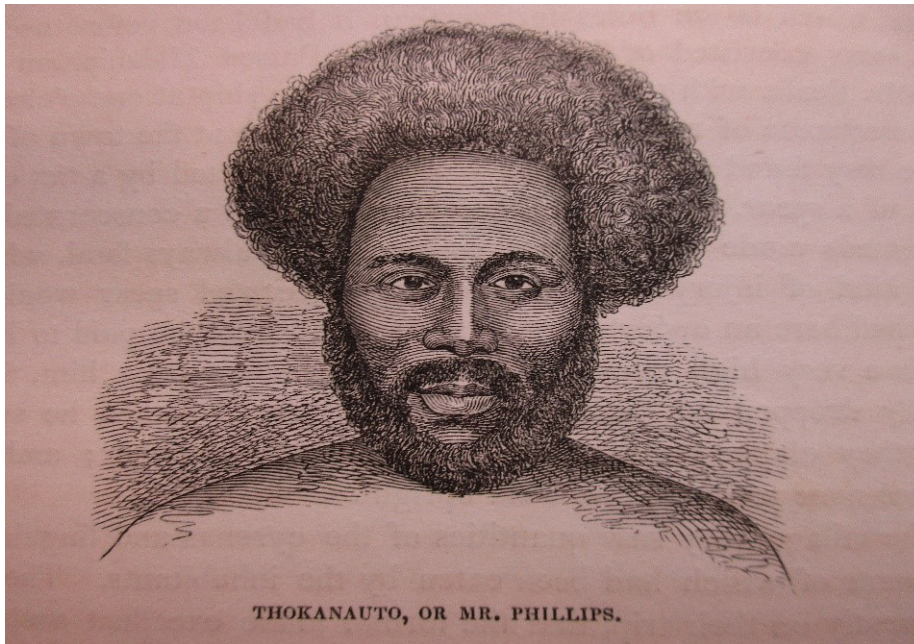


Figure 3:
Woodcut of Cokanauto. From Charles Wilkes, *United States Exploring Expedition*, vol. 3: *Tongataboo, Feejee Group, Honolulu* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1845), 122.

¹⁹ For Cokanauto as a collector, see Stephen Hooper, *Fiji: Art & Life in the Pacific* (Norwich: Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, 2016). For languages, see Derrick, *A History of Fiji*, 96; for his ideas, see Wilkes, *United States Exploring Expedition*, 135.

²⁰ The institution of *vasu* was elaborate in early nineteenth-century Fiji. See the account by Thomas Williams, *The Islands and their Inhabitants, Fiji and the Fijians*, vol. 1 (London: Heylin, 1958; Suva, Fiji Museum, 1982) (Suva: Fiji Museum, [1858] 1982), 34–47. Page reference refers to the 1982 edition.

in the succession disputes in Rewa, in which he and the other highborn sons of Tabaiwalu—often of different mothers—vied for paramountcy, as well as in the Bau-Rewa War, have been caught in the historical record. Cokanauto also fathered an illustrious line of leaders, including the politician and current Roko Tui Dreketi, Ro Teimumu Kepa. Scurrilously, he was also known for parties, alcohol (which was said to have killed him), and sexual tastes attributed to the “shameless” activities of ships’ crews.²¹

R. A. Derrick and his source, the founder of the Fiji Museum Colman Wall, described Cokanauto as a “whaler” who had been to America and back.²² It appears that Cokanauto—though he reportedly spoke US shipboard slang—had never been further than Tahiti.²³ Although Cokanauto was keen for good relations with ships’ captains, he was not a whaler in the narrow sense of the term. Known to many Europeans and Americans as Mr. Phillips, Cokanauto may have seen himself like his namesake, businessman and entrepreneur Mr. Stephen C. Phillips of Salem, who was a great orchestrator of the *bêche-de-mer* trade and of shipping generally—activities that returned huge profits to backers such as Stephen C. Phillips as well as a wealth of power, through *tabua*, to Fijian chiefs like Cokanauto.

21 David Cargill, *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Cargill, Wife of the Reverend David Cargill, A. M., including Notices of the Progress of Christianity in Tonga and Feejee* (London: John Mason, 1841), 276.

22 Derrick, *A History of Fiji*, 57; Colman Wall, “Sketches in Fijian History (Part II),” in *Transactions of the Fijian Society* (1918).

23 Wilkes noted that “It was not a little comical to hear a Feejee man talk of ‘New York highbenders,’ ‘Boston dandies,’ ‘Baltimore mobtowns.’” Wilkes, *United States Exploring Expedition*, 111. I would like to thank Nancy Shoemaker for her insights on whether Cokanauto reached America or not.

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