

DIGITISATION OF PACIFIC COLLECTIONS AND THE UPPER SEPIK-CENTRAL NEW GUINEA PROJECT

**Barry Craig, Senior Curator of Foreign Ethnology,
South Australian Museum
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On Friday 17th September 2010, a one-day Symposium organised by Smart Services CRC at RMIT University took place at the Australian Museum. The title of the Symposium was *Casting the Net; a forum exploring issues of intellectual property and traditional knowledge in digital cultural collections*.

Many of the papers assumed that digitisation of Pacific collections (photographs linked to documentation in museum registers) was already or would soon be accomplished and that the issues to be addressed are those relating to placing these collections on-line: eg. copyright (indigenous and metropolitan) and other legal considerations, ethical issues of consultation with and involvement of representatives of indigenous communities, secret-sacred issues, and the suspicion that digital access is a way of avoiding physical access and repatriation. A further assumption with some of these issues is that the relevant indigenous individuals and communities have the means for accessing collections on-line.

The points I want to make in this paper are:

- Many museums do not have a digital version of their registers, let alone photographs of the items in their care.
- Museum collections must be digitised (high-resolution photos of objects and a database of information):
 - First** for in-house use,
 - Second** for inter-museum co-operative research, and
 - Third** for putting on-line/on website for the public.
- Digitisation requires knowledgeable curators/researchers who can review the information that is associated with the objects to ensure accuracy BEFORE the database ever becomes available on-line. If we want to understand Pacific arts and material culture, we must ensure our data is as valid and reliable as possible. One of the major considerations is to identify exactly where an object was collected from, if not exactly where it was made.
- There are many ways in which errors get into the information associated with objects. This suggests that placing datasets on-line must be done progressively as the research is done and the content has been verified, rather than all at once. Putting information with mistakes online is useless and counter-productive. Museums won't be able to verify every bit of information but they should make their best efforts to collect and publish quality data. They should also place a disclaimer on the Website and encourage more information or corrections from users.

- Researchers reviewing information about collections should have full co-operation from other museums to optimise the flow of correct information and to gather as much data as is possible for the purpose of research. Museums should also share high-resolution photographs of objects with each other. Museum curators' and researchers' methods and analyses must be replicable and our conclusions contestable which implies accessibility to collections.
- Although access by indigenous peoples to the Web is not yet widespread, it is increasing rapidly. The peoples from among whom these collections were made should be able to access museum collections and results of research on-line and to provide feedback as a form of collaboration. A mechanism should be put in place for corrections and additions to data to be sent to Website managers by visitors to the Websites.
- Issues of sensitivity around showing certain categories of artefacts to the public should now be clear; it is fairly well known which categories of objects require checking with peoples of origin, but it would be impractical and unnecessary to check with every group of people about every type of object in a museum collection. In any case, digitisation and research are necessary to know what objects are in collections and where they are from; otherwise consideration of whether they should go on-line can't even commence, let alone be resolved.
- Concurrently with museums working on the digitisation of their own collections, research projects should be funded that have a geographical focus e.g. the Upper Sepik-Central New Guinea Project (USCNGP). This project maximises accuracy by gathering up data and images on all collections across the world relating to a specific geographical region, provides a 'one-stop shop' for peoples of origin to connect with their dispersed cultural heritage, and provides a dataset for significant research initiatives.
- On-line databases do not have to be complicated and expensive. The USCNGP dataset is in the process of being loaded on-line and is not expensive. The USCNGP website (www.uscngp.com) also provides the opportunity to provide contextual data such as a Gallery of images, and Papers providing additional cultural information. There is also the opportunity to call for feedback, and corrections to errors in the dataset, particularly from members of source/creator communities from which the objects originated.

Preconditions to digitisation

In their important book, *Symmetries of Culture*, Washburn and Crowe wrote;

If the aim of history, art history, archaeology and anthropology is to describe and study the products of human behaviour which consistently reoccur and thus form non random patterns, and if we treat these patterns as manifestations of ideas held in common by makers and users of artefacts, then we must first of all give our attention to classificatory aspects of those phenomena which relate to those non random ideas and patterns of behaviour. The problem of why people do things similarly, or differently, is pervasive, profound and not trivial. It deserves our best systematic efforts.¹

¹ Washburn, Dorothy K. & Donald W. Crowe, 1988, *Symmetries of culture: theory and practice of plane pattern analysis*, University of Washington Press, p.41.

This is analogous to the procedure that has been adopted by the natural sciences and which has provided much fruitful understanding of the nature and evolution of the world around us, and of ourselves as biological entities.

A precondition to giving our attention to classificatory aspects of ethnographic objects (that is, taxonomy) is to know **exactly where** those objects came from. A lot of people look down on taxonomy; considering that there are more important things to say about cultural artefacts. However taxonomy is important if you want to understand the evolution of material culture, if you want to understand why objects or patterns are different here to there, or why men do things in a way that's different to the way women do things. The basic precondition is to know exactly where those objects came from. If you don't know where they came from, you cannot do this kind of analysis, and it's also not very useful for digitisation if you don't know where things came from. If it is not possible to know where they were made, then at least exactly where they were recorded or collected, and preferably who made them and how they got there. That might sound like a simple, basic precondition, but most of the objects in museums can't satisfy those preconditions.

Registration entries in museums and private collections should be treated with scepticism.

The first thing a researcher who is digitising or selecting things for research or exhibition must do is treat all museum documentation with scepticism. Errors can be made and/or information can be lost by the field collector. Errors can occur before an object enters a museum or private collection after it has been collected. Errors can occur during or after a museum's registration process; or in the setting up of exhibitions, or publication in books. Errors can be found at any of these stages in the 'biography' of an artefact, so one must question the data at each and every stage.

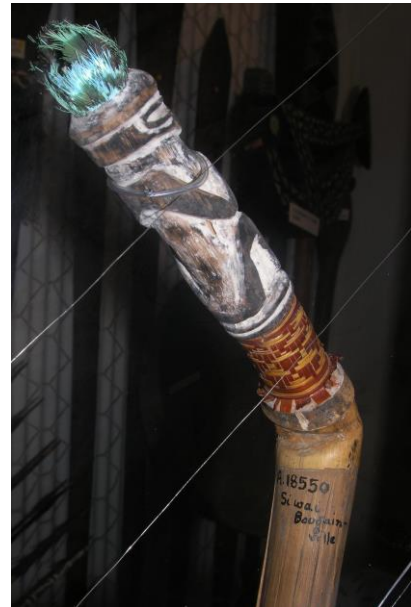
Errors can be made and/or information can be lost:

- By the field collector. Field collector error can occur through failure to make a detailed record of the transaction or to enquire exactly where an object came from. For example, collections from the upper Fly River of Papua New Guinea and from the Telefomin area of central New Guinea were made by Stuart Campbell and Ward Williams during a gold exploration expedition in the 1930s. Campbell's collection was obtained by the Australian Museum and Ward Williams's collection went to the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. Unfortunately, the lack of documentation for each item in these two collections means that the material from the expedition's base camp in the vicinity of Kiunga on the middle Fly River is mixed up with material from their base camp at Telefomin in highlands of central New Guinea – different tribal groups with different cultures and different languages. Comparison with other, well-documented collections from these two regions may well enable attributions to be made to the Campbell and Williams collections but they are not likely to be useful for analysis until inter-museum co-operative research has already progressed. An example in the South Australian Museum is of a hair ornament (A10406), part of a collection owned by Major Cummins and purchased in Rabaul by SA Museum Director Edgar Waite in 1918. Because most of the Cummins collection was from the Sepik River area, this hair ornament also was attributed to the Sepik. Comparison

with a similar ornament (A18550) obtained in 1932 from Rev. F. Brasher, who worked for years in the Solomon Islands and whose documentation may be relied upon, demonstrates the work that has to be done to check data in museum registers.



SAM A10406, 'Sepik River'



SAM A18550, Siwai, Bougainville

- Data can be lost before objects enter a museum or private collection. Errors can occur due to loss of collector field notes, or of the field collection labels attached to the objects, and subsequent reliance on memory. For example, a person I know collected from two different ethnic groups in Central New Guinea; when I wanted to find out exactly where he got the objects from, he couldn't remember which ones came from which area. So, all of that collection is now unavailable for detailed research. Another growing source of incorrect information is the attributions provided to objects being auctioned, even by the supposedly reputable auction house, Sotheby's. Two objects from the Papuan Gulf sold at high prices recently in New York and Paris have incorrect information attached to them. If these items are subsequently obtained by a museum, the incorrect information is likely to go into the museum's register. If they are published with the incorrect information, this wrong data gains currency and damages the validity of research involving those objects.

Lot 88, Sotheby's New York, 14 May 2010.

There is no Kerewa River and this figure did not come from Ubuo village in the Kikori River Delta but from Meagoma on the Wapo River, 55 km north-east of Ubuo. Correct information had been supplied by the field collector, Schultze-Westrum, with this object when he sold it to John Friede. Sotheby's should have endeavoured to validate the information. The 'spin' highlighted in red/bold is completely wrong and misleading.



LOT 88

KERWA RIVER SPIRIT BOARD, GOPE OR KAIAIMUNU, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

70,000—100,000 USD

Lot Sold. Hammer Price with Buyer's Premium: 278,500 USD

- [READ CONDITION REPORT](#)
- [EMAIL THIS LOT TO A FRIEND](#)
- [BUY CATALOGUE](#)
- [CONVERT CURRENCY](#)
- [KEY TO LOT SYMBOLS](#)

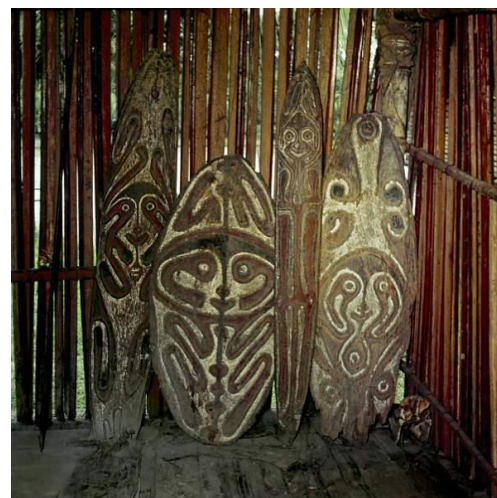
MEASUREMENTS: height: 38 7/8 in (98.7 cm)

PROVENANCE: Collected in situ by Thomas Schultze-Westrum, Ubuo village, 1966. Marcia and John Friede, New York, acquired from the above

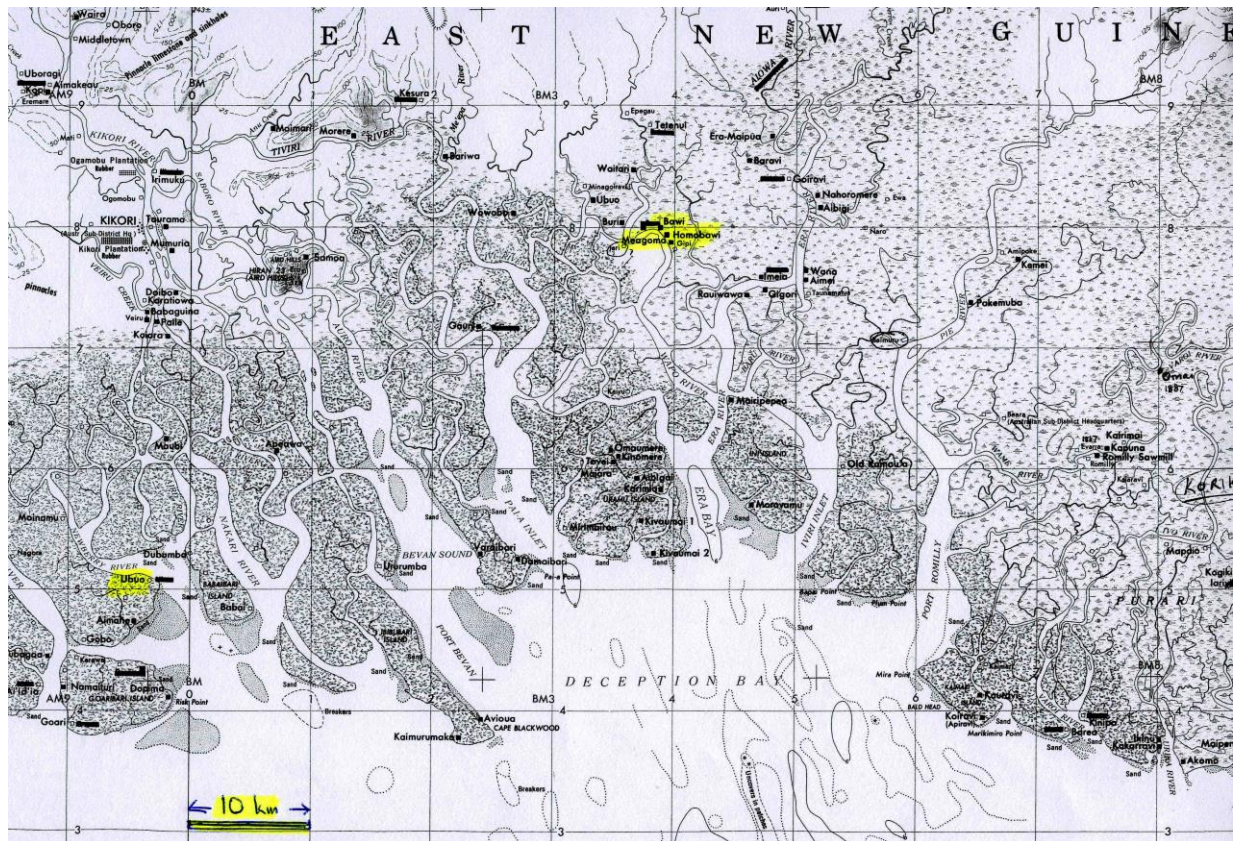
EXHIBITED: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, de Young Museum, San Francisco, October 15, 2005 - February 14, 2010

LITERATURE AND REFERENCES: John A. Friede et al. (ed.), *New Guinea Art. Masterpieces from the Jolika Collection* of Marcia and John Friede, San Francisco, 2005, pp. 501 (vol. 1) and 165 (vol. 2), cat. 477

CATALOGUE NOTE: This magnificent Kerewa spirit board, one of the celebrated masterpieces from the Friede Collection, was collected in 1966 by the German scientist Thomas Schultze-Westrum in Ubuo village in the Kikori River Delta of the Papuan Gulf region. The board's outline frames a large standing spirit figure of red color with white features. Visible within this figure's body are the white silhouettes of three smaller spirit figures: one dancing figure in profile on each side and a frontal figure with bent legs in the center which seems to be jumping over a starfish. Its head and arms form the mouth and eyes of the underlying larger red spirit figure. The painful expression of the red figure stands in contract [sic] with the joyful attitude of the white figures. This multi-layered rendering of joy and pain as integral parts of human existence makes the Friede Board one of the great icons of art from the Papuan Gulf Region.



Lot 88 NY (centre), field photo, Meagoma, Lot 55 Paris (left), field photo, Epegau. Both images courtesy of and copyright Thomas Schultze-Westrum



The Gulf of Papua. Ubuo, bottom left, is 55 km from Meagoma, centre, where Lot 88 (NY) was collected; Lot 55 (Paris) was collected at Epegau, c.10 km north of Meagoma on the Wapo River

Lot 55, Sotheby's Paris, 30 November 2010. This carved and painted bark panel is also not from the Kikori River; it was collected by Thomas Schultze-Westrum at Epegau on the Wapo River, on 27 Feb. 1966.



LOT NO. 55

PLANCHE VOTIVE, RIVIÈRE
KIKORI, GOLFE DE
PAPOUASIE, PAPOUASIE
NOUVELLE-GUINÉE

VOTIVE BOARD, KIKORI RIVER,
PAPUAN GULF, PAPUA NEW
GUINEA

ESTIMATE

± 18,000 - 25,000 EUR

Collection Marcia et John Friede, New York

CATALOGUE NOTE

Le biologiste allemand Thomas Schultze-Westrum (qui publia en 1972 *Neu-Guinea : Papua – Umwelt im Aufbruch*) se rendit à plusieurs reprises dans le Golfe de Papouasie lors de ses missions de recherches. Il y revint à la fin des années 1960 et collecta un très grand nombre d'œuvres, dont les plus significatives entrèrent dans la Jolika Collection de John et Marcia Friede. Il écuma en particulier les villages des groupes Era et Urama, et le bassin de la rivière Kikori, sur les pas de l'explorateur australien Frank Hurley puis du journaliste américain John W. Vandercook. Tandis que trente ans auparavant, les villageois refusaient de se séparer de leurs objets de culte, l'abandon des rituels et des performances masquées permirent au biologiste d'acquiescer plusieurs œuvres photographiées en 1936 par Vandercook (Welsch *in* Welsch, Webb et Harara, 2006 : 91 et Friede, 2005 II : 20-21).

Collectée en 1966, cette planche votive constitue un rare témoin de l'art ancien du bassin de la rivière Kikori. A l'instar de la planche votive *gope* de la Jolika Collection (Sotheby's, New York, mai 2010, n° 88), le visage se caractérise par sa forme cintrée, définie par le mouvement souple des lignes contourant aux plus près les traits expressifs – yeux ronds et bouche aux commissures relevées. La remarquable dynamique du décor linéaire, jouant sur la dramatisation des traits rehaussés de pigments rouges et noirs, est accentuée par le mouvement incurvé du support en écorce – très rare. Comme les autres planches *gope* du Golfe de Papouasie, « elle était conservée dans l'alcôve du clan, dans la maison longue, et représentait l'ancêtre spécifique du clan » (Kaufmann *in* Peltier et Morin, 2006 : 424).

Votive board, Kerewa group, Papuan Gulf, Papua New Guinea

- During or after a museum's registration process. The Theodore Bevan 1887 collection from the eastern Papuan Gulf region of the south coast of Papua New Guinea came to the South Australian Museum in 1888; some of the collection was from first contact between the inland Purari River people and Europeans but it isn't clear whether individual objects once had labels with exact provenance. Formal registration at the SA Museum didn't begin until 1911. In the meantime, labels got lost, bits of paper got lost or got misplaced and couldn't be found, and so almost the entire collection ended up being labelled 'Old Collection. (Other museums in Australia also have collections from 'Mr Old'!) This means the identification of many collections requires painstaking research aided by chance discoveries of old photographs and documents, in this case, photographs taken of the Bevan collection in Sydney at the end of the 1887 expedition.



Part of Bevan's 1887 collection in Sydney. Photo by Bell & Langford, Melbourne. Archived: Royal Geographical Society, London, D009/008353.

1. *Hohao*, Dublin 334:90. Cf. Newton 1961, Illust. 245
2. 'Taboo', SAM A7426
3. Wood club, SAM A7633
4. *Aiainunu* mask, Dublin 351:90. Cf. Newton 1961, Illust. 227; Edge-Partington 1890-98, II: 186, No.1
5. Mask, SAM A7437
6. *Aiainunu* mask, SAM A8554
7. *Ehara* mask, SAM A7444 (pair to this is in Dublin: Edge-Partington II: 186 No.2)
8. *Hohao*, SAM A7680
9. *Ehara* ('crocodile-man', pair to one at centre), SAM A7440

- Errors can occur in the setting up of exhibitions and publication in books. Once published, errors tend to replicate themselves for decades, misleading a series of curators and becoming accepted as ‘correct’ knowledge. Data from publications then ends up on labels in exhibitions, and so what was once fairly obscure publication data ends up in the popular understanding. How many times are we taking on trust particular information we see about an object in a museum register, in a catalogue, in an exhibition, or in a book? For example, a black wooden figure (A33410) came to the SA Museum from W.O. Nottage in 1944 with the provenance ‘probably Papua New Guinea’. It was subsequently attributed to ‘Gulf of Papua, Purari River’ by Carl Schmitz (1969 *Oceanic Art*, Plate 139) and was displayed in a Papuan Gulf case in the Museum’s Pacific Gallery. Comparison with an *urar* figure (E73925) from Bougainville in the Australian Museum, published by Anthony Meyer (1995 *Oceanic Art* Vol.2, Plate 437) reveals the error.



SAM A33410 in Papuan Gulf case; in Schmitz 1969 Plate 139; and AM E73925

All this highlights problems for digitisation of collections.

When digitising collections, collection managers, curators and researchers should not rely solely on what they read in the museum register. It's no good digitising collections just by putting everything that's on the register online, because a lot of it will be wrong. The way to proceed is to do careful archival research, compare relevant collections in one's own and other museums, and obtain as much information from that process as possible. It may be found that a number of museums have 'sister collections' of material collected from the same area, even from the same collector, and these make for excellent sources of comparable data.

This brings me to a crucial point. As a prerequisite not just for digitisation but for any type of meaningful collection research, museums must employ knowledgeable curators and researchers to ensure the best possible documentation is made available for the collections. Museums must understand and acknowledge that digitisation takes time and resources. It is not only pointless but also counter-productive for museums to get rid of curators and researchers, as seems to be an increasingly popular managerial initiative to cut costs. Keeping collections in storage with only collection managers to care for their physical wellbeing is a huge waste of the research potential and knowledge that these collections represent. We have to have people who can spend their time doing research.

Museums all around the world are cutting their research staff, they're cutting their curatorial staff, they are trying to save money because of government pressure on museums to reduce budgets. Already many museum budgets have been cut to the bone, with sufficient funds only for essentials such as salaries and running costs: electricity, water, email, telephone. Many museums have little or no money for exhibitions or for research. They are expected to get the money from external grants and from commercial sponsors, and to have a small army of volunteers to do what should be done by salaried staff. Digitisation cannot proceed under such circumstances. There have to be people who will spend their time making sure that the documentation of collections is correct, and adding to that documentation, digging up the information that adds value to this material.

When Edgar Waite went to New Ireland to collect for the SA Museum, the people called him 'Masta bilong faiawud'. The villagers would say, 'Oh, he's just buying firewood'. That was because the function of various carvings as ritual objects was completed when the ceremonies ended. But we want objects to be more than just firewood when they come into a museum. We want collections to be useful for educational and research purposes, and we have a responsibility to care for these items and their documentation, as they represent the cultural heritage of other peoples.

A geographically focused research project based on access to many collections worldwide

For the past six years, I have been managing the Upper Sepik-Central New Guinea Project (USCNGP). During the 1960s and early 1970s, I collected thousands of objects from this region of New Guinea for several museums, so I know the objects from that area reasonably well. These and related collections by other anthropologists are kept in museums and private collections around the world.

- The USCNGP focuses on a **specific geographical region** to explore the relationship between material culture on the one hand and language, propinquity, environment and subsistence systems on the other, taking into account the effects of trade, warfare, marriage systems, ritual and population movements.
- The project received two grants totalling **Aust. \$370,000 over six years**, from the Australian Research Council, the South Australian Museum and Ok Tedi Mining Ltd.
- Person-time was **1.5 full-time equivalents**.

- **12,000 objects** were recorded in 15 museums and 6 private collections worldwide; 58% from the Upper Sepik and 42% from Central New Guinea.
- **9000 objects** have accurate data on exactly where they were collected and are available for rigorous analysis.
- The USCNGP website (www.uscngp.com) was created for around \$15,000, costs \$1200 per year hosting and each object can be added to the on-line dataset for about one dollar.
- Documents can be uploaded in a few minutes through WordPress and images can be added to the Gallery via Flickr.

Results of the Project:

- In 2008 Andrew Fyfe completed a PhD at the University of Adelaide: *Gender, mobility and population history: exploring material culture distributions in the Upper Sepik and Central New Guinea*.
- I published a paper in 2008 on sorcery divination among the Abau in the *Journal of Ritual Studies* 22, 2: 37-51.
- Fyfe published a paper in 2009 reporting preliminary analyses of attributes of (women's) string bags and (men's) arrows in *Oceania* 79: 121-161.
- The USCNGP website at present makes available progress reports, papers, and a gallery of over 250 photographs of people, places and things; the Dataset (including images of the objects) is being uploaded progressively. Technical papers, including artefact taxonomies and statistical analyses of material culture attributes, by Andrew Fyfe and Jill Bolton, have been placed on this site and further papers are in preparation.

Getting the funding to digitise collections.

This is the major challenge facing museums. Digitisation requires major funding which won't be at all easy to get. Fancy, costly websites should not be funded until the basic work has been done.

It seems apparent to me that most state governments will not put up the money for this. Therefore federal funds will be necessary, or a shared responsibility – perhaps an offer by the federal government of 50% with the states putting in 50%.

Based on our USCNGP experience, I estimate that 50 objects/day (=1000 per month) could be digitised by two persons working full time on the process of photographing and measuring objects, and recording existing information, plus a researcher working full time on checking that information. That suggests three people at a rough estimate of a total of \$200,000 per annum (including on-costs) to record and verify 12,000 objects in one year. The Australian museum with 60,000 Pacific objects would therefore require that amount of annual funding for three people over five years ie. one million dollars. The SA museum with about 18,000 Pacific objects would require three people for 18 months - ie. \$300,000. Unless we can get this kind of funding, all the talk-fests in the world are useless and fancy websites with limited datasets are mere window-dressing.