

Making Connections and Building Bridges

A conceptual discussion between Jean-Daniel Tokainiua Devatine (Centre des Métiers d'Art de la Polynésie française) and Jasmin Günther (James Cook University, Aarhus University)

Bridges connect places and people. If considered useful or important enough, they will be maintained and may stand for a long period of time. If not, they may be abandoned or even purposefully destroyed. In these instances, they will crumble or decay, be forgotten about or actively avoided. In common usage the word “bridge” most obviously denotes a structure built to enable a path to continue over a river or other obstacle. However, the term is also used to refer—more conceptually—to those times, places and ideas which serve as means of connection or transition between others. Because bridges are designed in accordance with the things they are trying to connect, they can come in a variety of shapes, including some rather peculiar forms.

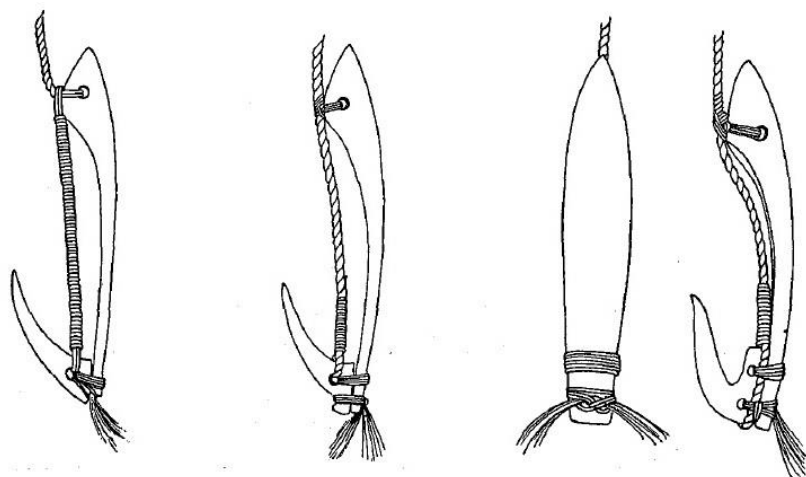
The bridge in this story is, in fact, an artwork. Created by Jean-Daniel Tokainiua (Tokai) Devatine, it is made up of more than 180 pieces of mother of pearl and was on display at the Museum of Tropical Queensland (MTQ) in Townsville from 2 August to 1 December 2019. The exhibition, entitled *Making Connections—French Polynesia and the HMS Pandora Collection*, was part of a broader project and PhD research on the HMS *Pandora* collection, for which Jasmin Günther had relocated to the island of Tahiti in



Above: The artwork (detail) created by Tokainiua Devatine for the Making Connections exhibition (August–December 2019) at the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville. Photograph by Sophie Price. Image courtesy of the Queensland Museum Network.

March 2017. The subsequent eleven-month-long stay enabled the exchange of knowledge about the *Pandora* collection, which is today stored and partly presented at the MTQ.

The British vessel HMS *Pandora* sank in August 1791 after a five-month search through Oceania for the mutineers of the *Bounty*. In 1977, the wreck was discovered on the outer Great Barrier Reef and over six thousand objects were



Above: Sketches of two-component bonito lures from Hawai'i [left], Tahiti [centre] and Manihiki (Cook Islands) [right], as depicted in Bengt Anell's *Contribution to the History of Fishing in the Southern Seas* (1955, Fig. 17, p. 175). Anell drew on publications by Te Rangi Hīroa (Sir Peter Henry Buck) to compile these sketches in order to discuss and compare the lures, including "Ethnology of Manihiki and Rakahanga" (1932).

transferred from the bottom of the ocean to the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville, Australia, through several seasons of excavation (Gesner 1–52). Among the objects retrieved from the wreck were parts of the ship, equipment, tools, instruments, personal belongings of members of the crew, natural history specimens as well as artefacts classified as Polynesian material culture.¹ The latter proved that the European seamen had engaged in collection activities during their voyage across the Pacific Ocean—an interesting subject matter that has been addressed in preliminary discussions of the Polynesian objects recovered from *Pandora's* wreck (Campbell 1–8; Fallowfield 5–28; Illidge 65–74). However, while previous research on these artefacts has mainly been undertaken from

an archaeological perspective with an emphasis on conservation science and reconstructing the past, Jasmin set out for Tahiti in French Polynesia, to follow their movements across space and time and into the present.

During Jasmin's stay in French Polynesia, her attention was drawn to the presence of similar objects, which led to an exploration of the ways in which people in Oceania today relate to their dispersed cultural heritage in museums worldwide. In discussion with artists based in Tahiti, the idea of a collaborative exhibition project started to take shape. Two short stays in 2018 and the beginning of 2019 allowed for the organisation of the exhibit, but also provided an opportunity to film conversations about Tokai's vision of the artwork and document the initial

¹ Two catalogues about the *Pandora* collection have been published in the *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* to date (Campbell and Gesner 2000; Gesner 2016).



Above: Tokai in the process of selecting shells of black-lip pearl oysters (*Pinctada margaritifera*) for his art installation. Tokai placed great emphasis on the importance of the choice of materials: the mother of pearl needed to be of a certain thickness and its colour of the right shade. In many ways like a fisherman, whose profound knowledge of the material allows him to fabricate effective tackle and catch fish successfully, Tokai relies on the same knowledge to lure people in with his artworks. Photograph taken by Jasmin Günther at the Centre des Métiers d'Art de la Polynésie française, Tahiti, in February 2019.

stages of its creation. With support and funding from the Centre des Métiers d'Art de la Polynésie française (CMA),² led by director Viri Taimana since 2006, Tokai travelled to Townsville at the end of July 2019 and personally set up his art installation at the MTQ.

The CMA is located in *Pape'ete*, the capital of

French Polynesia, which is made up of 118 islands spread out over more than five million square kilometres. The institution is a vital centre of contemporary creativity in the region and its goals are to leave traces of the past and present for the future, teach about Polynesian cultures, share their vitality, and ensure that they are sustained and continue to develop over time. Since 2009 and especially through the PŪTAHI network created in 2010 by Viri Taimana, Tokainiua Devatine and Donn Ratana, an artist and Senior Lecturer at Waikato University in Aotearoa, relationships with other people and institutions within Oceania and beyond have been developed and strengthened. This transnational network connects artists, academics and students from the Pacific through cultural and artistic events, traveling and gathering.

In the following responses to a series of questions about the exhibition a conversation emerges between Tokai and Jasmin, in which they discuss not only the organisation of the exhibition, but emphasise an ongoing desire to help create stronger bridges between places, communities and people.³

Question 1: How did the idea of making an exhibition in connection with the *Pandora* collection emerge?

Jasmin: While previous research on the *Pandora*

² The name translates to “Centre for Arts and Crafts of French Polynesia.”

³ The format of this article is inspired by “Discussion sur ‘Pina’ina’i : écho de l’esprit et des corps,” by Castro-Koshy et al.



Above: Once the perfect shells for the purposes of his art installation were selected, Tokai marked the desired shapes to be cut out. The processes of cutting and polishing are generally undertaken with the help of machines at the CMA, as they enable a much faster processing of the material. Photograph taken by Jasmin Günther at the Centre des Métiers d'Art de la Polynésie française, Tahiti, in February 2019.

collection was strongly focused on the past and the objects' roles in the context of eighteenth-century encounters and cross-cultural exchange, I also wanted to explore what relationships the Polynesian artefacts are part of in the present. Despite the inevitable loss of both materials and knowledge with the sinking of the ship, the artefacts continue to exist and therefore have the potential to make new connections or, differently put, become the foundation for new bridges to be built.

Since the beginning of my research, I had

hoped that a more tangible link between the collection and people in Oceania could be created and, in discussions with artists based in Tahiti, the idea of a collaborative exhibition project emerged. Apart from a few objects I had purchased during my stay, the display was planned to incorporate artworks specifically created in connection to the *Pandora* artefacts. I felt very lucky that Tokai, who is an artist, trained anthropologist and professor of Polynesian history and societies at the CMA, kindly agreed to create such an artwork.

Tokai: Prior to Jasmin's move to Tahiti, I was contacted by her primary supervisor, Rosita Henry, who informed me about her arrival. Rosita, who wanted to ensure that her student would be warmly welcomed, told me that she had suggested to Jasmin to visit the Centre des Métiers d'Art and to meet its director, Viri Taimana, and myself. Viri and I knew Rosita since participating in the symposium *Difference and Domination: The Power of Narrative in Ritual, Performance and Image* in 2014, for which she had invited us to Cairns to speak about the CMA.

Shortly after Jasmin's arrival in French Polynesia in March 2017, she visited us and presented her research topic and plan to the staff and students. She hoped to involve the Centre des Métiers d'Art in her studies, as it is well-known in Polynesia for its initiatives and teaching programme. On the one hand, the programme perpetuates the fabrication of certain artefacts

from Polynesia's distant past and, on the other hand, reassesses our relationship with our cultural heritage, as we create more contemporary pieces that result from our experiences of life in the present.

Knowledge of the past sheds light on creations of the present, which we hope to leave for the generations of the future. It allows us to regenerate and reclaim our heritage, while the contemporary perspective is of utmost importance to us. In sum, Jasmin's open-mindedness, which was reflected in how she conducted her research, as well as our own concerns and interests at the CMA led, quite naturally, to the development of a collaborative project that connected contemporary art from French Polynesia and the eighteenth-century Polynesian artefacts recovered from HMS *Pandora*.

Question 2: Which objects did you choose to work with and why?

Tokai: Due to the large quantity of the shell shanks that were recovered from *Pandora*'s wreck,⁴ it appeared appropriate to me to put forward an installation that relates to the fragments within the collection made from mother of pearl. These items were once the shell

shanks of bonito lures, whose exact places of origin remain uncertain, as they can potentially be attributed to various islands of the Pacific. In these fragments, I recognised certain shapes and materials that could help speak about Oceania, our (marine) environment and about the people that lived in or traversed it through the ages.

Jasmin: The initial stages of discussing the exhibition were very interesting to me, because I did not make any prior suggestions as to which objects or materials to work with and let the artists lead the way. Coincidentally and independently of each other, both Tokai and Hiro Ou Wen, who had also agreed to participate in the exhibition, made the decision to focus on the fishing tackle within the collection and to create artworks from mother of pearl. Considering the small amount of space for both objects and labels, their decisions provided a welcome opportunity for me to narrow the field and to concentrate on one particular object group and material.

The artworks were to be shown alongside a few items purchased by me during my time in French Polynesia, including three necklaces. I had bought them because I saw a resemblance—a connection—with the artefacts from HMS *Pandora*. One of the necklaces, for example,

⁴ Fishing implements make up the largest object group of the roughly 270 artefacts categorised as Polynesian material culture within the *Pandora* collection, with 100 of them having been identified as fishhooks or components of bonito lures or octopus lures. Although some are broken or fragments, more than 40 of these objects are presumed to be shanks of two-component bonito lures. Interestingly, only two hook points—both made from shell—have been recovered from the wreck to date.

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caught my eye because it featured a miniature bonito lure centered on the pendant placed in front of several pieces of cut and polished mother of pearl.⁵ For this reason, *Making Connections* seemed to be a suitable title for the display. Firstly, it highlighted the connections made by the artists, who created something new in dialogue with the artefacts. Secondly, it referred to the connections that I, as a researcher and curator, made and continued to make.

Looking at the photographs of the Polynesian artefacts present in the *Pandora* collection again, Tokai was particularly drawn to several smaller objects cut from mother of pearl, the iridescent inner shell layer of some molluscs also known as nacre. These so-called shanks were once components of bonito lures and attached to a hook point made from shell or bone. Tokai's installation would be made up of pieces of mother of pearl, which closely—and yet not necessarily fully—resembled these shanks. Because of their long history and usage, he understood them as things that connect the people of Oceania and wanted to highlight their similarities and shared histories.

Indeed, the shell shanks retrieved from

Pandora's wreck posed particular challenges for the identification of their potential places of origin. Unlike other fishing tackle, which can often be connected to a specific region or even an island due to relatively distinct “styles,” two-component bonito lures can be found across Oceania and only with minor variation in form and size. A provenance is therefore often more difficult to determine (Beasley np; Anell np; Fallowfield 5–28), which is especially true for the objects within the *Pandora* collection, because the shanks had been recovered as individual pieces. Over the course of the ship's 186 years underwater, the plant fibre cords holding the composite lures together had dissolved and, as a result, the shanks were separated from the hook points, which potentially could have helped to distinguish the fishing tackle.

Oceanic fishhooks and lures were highly specialised and made in a variety of sizes and shapes, depending on the fish they were intended for and the waters they were used in; their manufacture was intrinsically linked to people's deep knowledge of their environment. The coloration of the mother of pearl used for the shanks of bonito lures, for example, was

⁵ The necklace was made by artist Marc Bouteau.

considered critical: if it was not of the precise shade suited to the conditions, the fish would not bite (Nordhoff 137–173). The nacre for the lures was obtained from the black-lip pearl oyster (*Pinctada margaritifera*)—it is not only shiny and very beautiful, but also quite resilient. Because of its qualities, it is the perfect material for the creation of a variety of objects and is as valued now as it was in the past. In fact, mother of pearl remains an important component of bonito lures that are made in the present: while metal is used for the points and synthetic fibres have replaced the plant fibre cords, the shanks are still made from mother of pearl—reflecting the valued qualities of the material and the successful design of these lures.⁶

Question 3: What benefits do you see in artistic interventions in the present inspired by (museum) collections and artefacts from the past?

Tokai: Most of the time, it is not possible to know or identify the Oceanic authors, artists or makers of the past. Their old creations are remarkable. Some of them, for example, have inspired artists in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century to reconsider their relationship with their own artistic practices and their view of the world. It is important that Polynesian authors, artists and makers today—that we—open up ways to enable

reflection and come to rethink the role of our creations as well as our relationship with sensitive issues, aesthetics, and the world as a whole. In addition, we need to reflect on the ideas that have circulated within our Oceanic societies for over 250 years.

As processes of globalisation have accelerated, concepts of cultural hegemony do not cease to flourish or widen. In light of this, there is a need to reconnect with the creative vision and the boldness of our ancestors to develop our own models of today and tomorrow. The artefacts from the past act as a foundation (*papa*) on which we build and construct new expressions, which must be questioned through the prism of contemporary creators, derived from the societies that have produced and seen the works come into existence. In regard to my art installation, the artefacts recovered from HMS *Pandora* allowed me to address the questions “Where did we come from?”; “Who are we?”; and “Where are we going?” from a new angle.

First and foremost, the fishing tackle was of particular interest to me because it highlights the intrinsic knowledge of the marine environment, and fishing techniques and the methods of fabrication of tackle were distributed and shared among all populations of the islands in the Pacific Ocean. Secondly, the presence of the many bonito lure components within HMS *Pandora*’s wreck showed that Polynesian fishing tackle was

⁶ These matters are discussed at length in Jasmin Günther’s doctoral thesis, in the chapter devoted to mother of pearl and fishing tackle.

identified as important collection material by the officers and seamen on board. The artefacts revealed that the contacts and exchanges that occurred during the second half of the eighteenth century were carried out between people of the sea. In my view, the objects emphasised these past relationships, which partly shaped today's relationships between people in Oceania and “the West,” involving exchanges and trade, as well as the transfer of (marine) technologies in both directions. Lastly, the shell shanks were polished, bringing out the material's iridescence and giving them the appearance of stylised fish. This visual analogy leads to a special consideration of the material itself, the mother of pearl, apart from the object, for which it was used for and worked.

I enjoy inverting the conventional association between things. Here, the fishing lures can be understood to belong to another, new reality—not only a means for catching fish, but as a means to depict the subject of fishing. Hung on nylon strings within the showcase, the individual pieces of mother of pearl take on the appearance of fish swimming in the ocean. These fish remind us of the fragility of the oceans themselves. Likewise, they point to the fragility of coral reefs, including our own and, notably, the Great Barrier Reef. With my art installation, I also wanted to address global issues, which have both positive and negative effects that play out locally within our region and that concern the ocean to a large extent as well.

The artefacts allowed me to speak of shared



Above: Tokai installing his artwork at the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville at the end of July 2019. Photograph by Jasmin Günther. Image courtesy of the Queensland Museum Network.

(hi)stories, the purpose of which was to strengthen the ties between the *Pandora* collection at the Museum of Tropical Queensland and the Centre des Métiers d'Art, between countries within Oceania, between “the West” and Oceanic peoples, especially the Oceanic makers both in the past and the present.

Jasmin: I liked that the pieces of shell were hung inside the showcase in a way that would give the impression that they were moving. Like the objects that had been exchanged and collected and sailed across the Pacific Ocean onboard HMS *Pandora*, these shells were not to be at a standstill, but rather represent a continuous journey. Across the bridge of these shells, and through their movement, people across gulfs of time and space are connected.

Furthermore, I am reminded of a particular discussion that Tokai and I had during one of our

meetings at the CMA. Elaborating on the reasons for his participation in the project, he told me that he wanted to see the old and the new—cultural heritage and contemporary creation—enter into dialogue in one place. According to him, research on the history of Polynesian artefacts in museums is important, but it is equally crucial to listen to what the people of Oceania say about these materials and objects today, and I agree. At the same time, I would like to point out how future-oriented our discussions were; Tokai often spoke of extending the ancestors' voyages⁷ and about leaving traces for the generations to come.

Question 4: What do you think are important outcomes for this type of initiative?

Tokai: I think it is important that these kinds of initiatives develop to allow for the making of connections between institutions, whether they are universities, art schools and museums, or artists, creators and other holders of culture and heritage. They can lead to a better representation and discussion of philosophical, social, cultural, political, economic, technical and environmental contexts from which the artefacts of interest to the institutions derived. In my view, this can help with the development of new scientific approaches and methods and new protocols

concerning the (re)production of knowledge through artistic research converses with scientific research, building bridges.

Jasmin: As traces from the past that continue to exist today, the Polynesian artefacts recovered from HMS *Pandora*'s wreck were shown to be a potential foundation to build upon. As new artworks were created in direct connection to them, tangible links were formed. Gifted to the museum, Tokai's art installation was incorporated into the MTQ's collections after the *Making Connections* exhibition had come to an end. Remaining at the institution, the shells continue to help maintain, strengthen and extend relationships in time and across space. We hope that we have succeeded in connecting the *Pandora* collection and French Polynesia in a meaningful way—and that visitors might look at the artefacts from a slightly different perspective as a result.

We started this story by saying that bridges may crumble or decay, be forgotten about or avoided. Yet, as humans we are not only known for our capacity to destroy, but also for our ability to create. New bridges can be constructed—old ones rebuilt—no matter how deteriorated their ruins may seem. While there is the possibility of connection there is hope.

⁷ In line with other applications of metaphors associated with voyaging (and canoes, the primary instrument of voyaging in the Pacific), Halena Kapuni-Reynolds (2018) elaborates on the suitability of this term for research within a museum context. Oceania looks back at a long history of voyaging traditions, which connected people and places across the Pacific Ocean. The term speaks not only to the region's rich heritage but also to the global relevance of voyaging today, as it is considered important for the (re)connection of people across Oceania.

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The exhibition being discussed here, *Making Connections—French Polynesia and the HMS Pandora Collection*, would not have been possible without the generosity and kindness of many people. We are greatly indebted to the Queensland Museum Network and staff at the Museum of Tropical Queensland. The enthusiasm and assistance of Sophie Price (Assistant Curator, Anthropology), in particular, have significantly contributed to the realisation and success of the project. We wish to thank the professors and the students of the Centre des Métiers d'Art de la Polynésie française and especially director Viri Taimana.

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We pay our respects to the Oceanic people – past, present and emergent – and especially to the unknown makers of the Polynesian artefacts recovered from *Pandora's* wreck that inspired us to learn, move and create.⁸

⁸ Jean-Daniel Tokainiua Devatine would also like to suggest that more recent publications and artworks by authors, poets and artists from Tahiti are being published by *Littérama'ohi*, which can be found at <https://ile-en-ile.org/litteramaohi-numero-22/>.

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