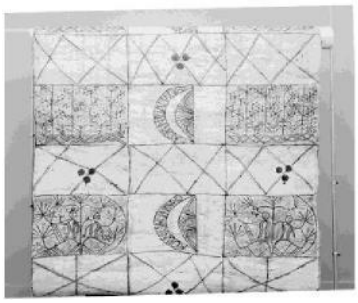

Object type: Barkcloth
Indigenous name: Ngatu
Culture/location: Tonga
Date: early to mid-20th century
Materials: Barkcloth, pigment
Dimensions: H. 72 x W. 58 in.
Institution and accession number: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979.206.1456

Object type: Female Figure
Indigenous name: n/a
Culture/location: Tonga, Ha'apai Islands
Date: early 19th century
Materials: Whale ivory
Dimensions: H. 5 1/4 x W. 2 x D. 1 1/2 in.
Institution and accession number: The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, 1979.206.1470

This summary compares and contrasts 2 objects from Tonga: a *ngatu* (barkcloth) panel and a female figure. I chose these objects because, when viewed together, they address themes of cultural change, artistic shifts, and indigenous materials. I found it intriguing that when Western missionaries considered certain art forms as non-dangerous, culture contact did not change art production. On the other hand, when art was seen as a sign of primitive practices, culture contact resulted in the extinction of those art practices. This comparison shows how cultural contact produced different types of change in artistic production in Tonga.

Before, during, and after Western missionary contact with Tonga, *ngatu* manufacturing techniques have remained largely consistent. A significant amount of *ngatu* continues to be produced, with Tongan people as the most prolific *ngatu* producers in the Pacific and around the world (Neich and Pendergrast 1997, 42-5). The production of *ngatu* in Tonga is considered the work of women (Herda 1999, 149). To make *ngatu*, Tongan women have “work parties” where they beat mulberry fiber into *ngatu* cloth and decorate the fabric with a wide range of motifs, both abstract and naturalistic designs or sometimes printed text (Neich and Pendergrast 1997, 42). At these work parties, women gossip, joke, and sing, actively building community with one another. *Ngatu* is one of the most important material items in Tongan culture, both in ceremonial functions and in economic value. Women are the members of society who transform the plain cloth into textile wealth, which is important because it suggests that womens’ work in society could be considered more valuable than mens’ (Herda 1999, 151).

According to Young Leslie and Addo, the barkcloth is used to envelop precious things, places, and bodies as a ceremonial clothing that protects, beautifies, identifies, and adds social significance. Barkcloth is seen as a tie between past and present. It is also exchanged between members of society as an essential method of forging kinship relationships (Veys 2005, 109). Many scholars discuss the ongoing production of the fabric despite intense culture contact with the West, including the adoption of Christianity, formation of a cash economy, and major political transformation (Herda 1999, 154). Culture contact with the West resulted in many other art forms being completely transformed or removed from Tongan culture, including figures of the goddess Hikule'o, which were no longer produced post-contact.

The figure I chose is referred to simply as a female figure. From my research, she appears to be the goddess Hikule'o. Most accounts of Hikule'o emphasize the power and status of this god as the main Tongan deity (Neich 2007, 252). Such figures were crucial to Tongan culture because they had a great deal of mana. This mana was transmitted through lineage and takes inspiration from a myth surrounding Hikule'o. Despite the highly refined features in this figure and the artistry that went into its production, much of the historical and contextual information surrounding the piece remains a mystery. Based on missionary documents from the 19th century, these figures were used in deity worship in Tonga until missionaries arrived to convert Tongan people to Christianity. In 1830, Wesleyan Methodists arrived and with their presence, culture and religion changed at a greatly accelerated pace. The missionaries sought to erase indigenous ritual in Tonga and replace it with Christianity. The Hikule'o sculptures were subject to multiple fates. They may have been confiscated by missionaries, turned over willingly by Tongan chief Tāufa'āhau, or turned over by Tongan civilians (Neich 2007, 232).

Hikule'o figures like this one may have had barkcloth covering. This would imbue the object with more mana and increase its value as a precious object. Unwrapping the sculptures was a sign of disrespect and disempowerment toward the goddess. Neich asserts that chief Tāufa'āhau, who was an advocate of conversion, may have stripped the figures to remove their power (Neich 2007, 253-4). This suggests that the figures' significance changed rapidly. Rather than precious ceremonial objects, they became emblems of conversion, trophies, and valuable goods to be traded for more utilitarian objects.

This example presents a stark contrast to the *ngatu* in Tonga. With culture contact, *ngatu* continued to be produced with the same techniques. It is still powerful and used for ceremonial functions and displays of wealth. Quite the opposite occurred with the Hikule'o sculptures, which were taken out of context and given to missionaries as a sign of conversion.

The power of culture contact and indigenous material production is seen quite aptly in this comparison. When Tongan art was considered taboo or idol worship, it was removed from Tongan culture. When art was considered non-threatening to Western missionary programs, culture contact did not change its production.

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