



2.6 Introduction to Pacific Collections: Material Culture of Vanuatu



The following summary provides an overview of material you are likely to come across in Scottish collections. These are written according to island region.

Vanuatu

Vanuatu is a Y-shaped chain of around 80 islands situated north east of Australia. Archaeological excavations of Lapita pottery have shown that early settlement took place around 3,000 years ago. Today there are 65 inhabited islands.

The first European visit to Vanuatu was during a Spanish voyage led by Portuguese Fernandes de Queirós in 1606. The ship landed at the largest island of the group which Queirós named Espirito Santo. The group was named the New Hebrides by Captain Cook who navigated the islands on his voyages in the 1770s. In the early 1800s the area was an important centre for whaling and trade, with sandalwood stations set up in a number of islands. Following visits from the London Missionary Society, the south of Vanuatu became a mission field for the Presbyterian church of Nova Scotia in 1848, closely followed by the Scottish Presbyterian church which sent out a missionary in 1852. Scottish missionaries lived and worked across the southern half of the islands until the 1940s. This strong connection is reflected in Scottish museum collections with most material tracing back to missionary collectors.

From 1907 until Vanuatu achieved independence in 1980 the country was a British and French condominium. At independence the country took the name Vanuatu, which comes from *vanua* meaning 'land', or 'home' and *tu* meaning 'stand'. As with many other places in the Pacific, the culture across the islands is distinct and diverse leading to identifiable styles from certain areas. Some of the cultural styles and material found on the southern islands has similarities to that found on the Loyalty Islands of New Caledonia.

Weapons

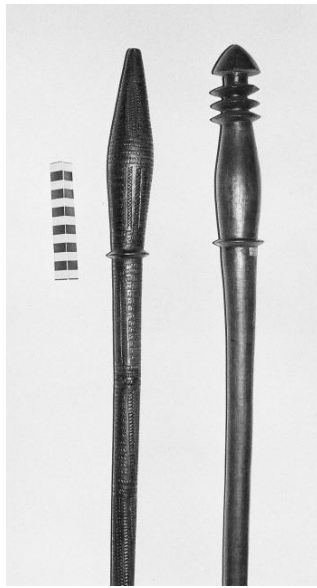
As with some other areas of the Pacific, early European visitors to Vanuatu were intrigued by practices of warfare on the islands. This may partly explain why there are a large number wooden clubs in museum collections. Missionaries also collected weapons, likely reflecting a desire to demonstrate the necessity for mission work and to provide evidence of religious conversion for people back home. Particularly distinctive are wooden clubs from Erromango, Tanna and Pentecost illustrated below:



Club of wood with star shaped head,
Tanna, Vanuatu, 19th century, *National
Museums Scotland, (A.1889.511)*



Head of club of wood,
Pentecost, Vanautu, *National
Museums Scotland*



Head of two clubs of wood,
Erromango, Vanautu, *National
Museums Scotland*



Club of wood, Erromango,
Vanautu, *National Museums
Scotland (A.1892.355)*

Wooden clubs from Erromango usually terminate in a flattened flared butt carved with a flower motif that echoes designs used on Erromangan backcloth.

Throwing weapons (*kawas*) of stone or coral were also used in south Vanautu. These are about a foot in length, cylindrical in shape with a diameter of around 3 centimetres.



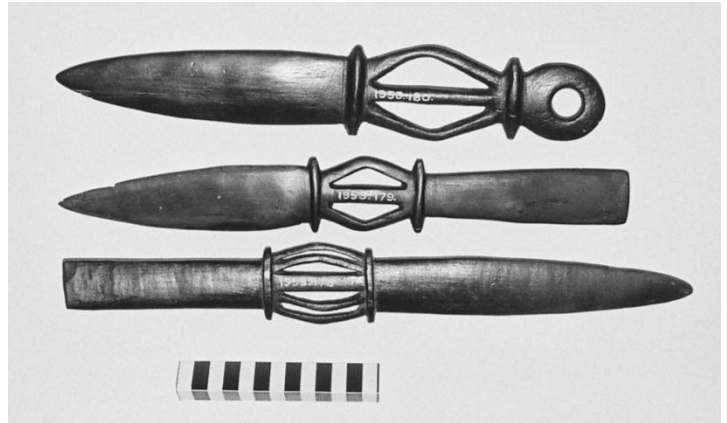
Throwing stone (*kawas*), Tanna,
Vanuatu, 19th century, *National
Museums Scotland (A.1889.524)*

Food knives

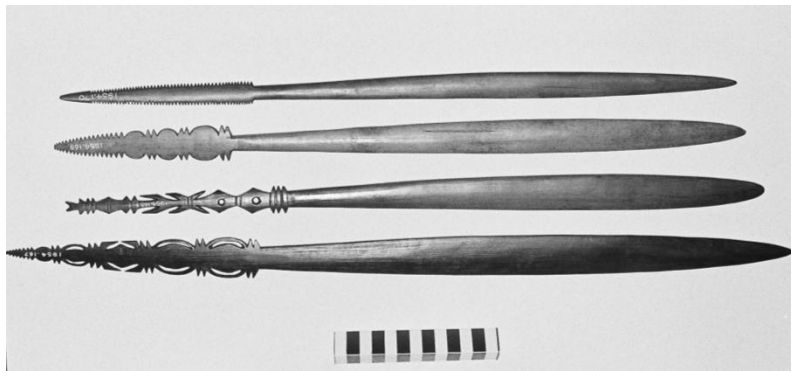
Knives of wood or bamboo for preparing food were used across Vanuatu. They became less common with the arrival of European knives in the 19th century but are still used in some places today. More elaborately carved examples are associated with status and with the cutting and eating of 'pudding' (*laplap*). They are often referred to in English as a 'pudding knife'. *Laplap* is made of grated taro mixed with coconut milk which is cooked with meat, such as pork, beef or fish in an earth oven covered with hot stones.

Food knives in museum collections are most commonly from the Banks Islands and the Torres Islands, both in the north of Vanuatu. Examples from the Torres Islands are long and thin with fine narrow handles carved in a series of geometric shapes the edges of which are often serrated. The wood used tends to be light, both in colour and weight. Banks Islands knives are made of heavier darker wood and generally incorporate one or more holes or loops in the handle. These are indicative of owner's status and represent the sacred fires in a men's house.

Food knife of wood, Banks Islands, Vanuatu, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1954.171)



Food knives of wood, Banks Islands, Vanuatu, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland* (From top down: A.1953.179; A.1953.178; A.1953.180)



Food knives, Torres Islands, Vanuatu, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland* (From top down: A.1954.170; A.1954.169; A.1954.168; A.1954.167)



Food knife, Torres Islands, Vanuatu, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1954.169)

Wooden platters and long carved wooden pounders are also associated with ceremonial food preparation.

Food platter, Santo, Vanuatu, 19th century *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA: 3076)*



Barkcloth

Barkcloth manufacture had declined considerably in Vanuatu by the end of the 19th century due to the availability of other cloth. Barkcloth in Scottish museum collections is usually from Erromango or Efate.

Erromangan barkcloth is characterised by a bold painted surface design incorporating black lines and orange/brown colours on a pale yellow ground. The design often has a pictorial quality incorporating abstract shapes and curved lines. These represent a range of elements including animals, birds, people, spirits, plants, the sun and the moon. Often the patterns tell a story or represent a historical event. There has been a resurgence of barkcloth manufacture in Erromango in recent years.



Barkcloth from Erromango, Vanuatu, 19th century

Barkcloth from the central area of Vanuatu (from the island of Tongoa to Efate) is less frequently seen in collections. The style likely to be identified is painted dark brown, often with a geometric black and white border edged with a fringe.

From Tanna come distinctive barkcloth belts which are still made today. These are produced, decorated and worn by men. Red and black pigments are predominantly used to decorate the cloth with a geometric, dentate design.



Barkcloth belt worn by men, Tanna, Vanuatu, early 20th century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery (1977.1503)*

Coconut arm ornaments

Rings of coconut worn as arm ornaments are associated with south Vanuatu (Tafea province) and were collected mainly in the mid to late 19th century. The exterior is decorated with fine engraved repeating lines often in triangular arrangements. Prior to the use of metal tools these engravings were made using sharp animal teeth.

Carved coconut shell arm ornaments, south Vanuatu, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland (A.1895.413.42)*



Beaded arm ornaments

Arm ornaments incorporating multiple beads are insignia of rank associated with grade taking ceremonies characteristic in the north and north-central islands (from Epi up to the far north Torres Islands). This is a hierarchical system relating to political power in which men gain influence and status through grade taking ceremonies. The grade system still exists to an extent on several islands. Older examples of this type of status signifier are made with shell beads. As trade increased with Asia and Europe, they were increasingly made with many glass trade beads. The beads are knotted onto a wide cuff of woven plant fibre to create bold geometric patterns.



Beaded arm ornament, Vanuatu, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland (A.1900.461)*

Mats

Long woven mats of pandanus leaves printed with purple-red designs are associated with the islands of Pentecost, Ambae and Maewo. These feature areas of openwork, particularly at either end of the mat, and follow a similar pattern of construction. Traditionally the dye is obtained from plants but today synthetic dyes are also used. These mats are made by women. On Pentecost they can be worn by both sexes with the men's mat being narrower and fringed. On Ambae the difference in use and type of mat is reflected by the weave pattern, length and other stylistic differences. On Ambae there are three main types of these mats: those used for furnishing, clothing and exchange; those that are much larger, never worn and exchanged or wrapped around the dead; and those that are small and finely made and symbolise status.



Mat, Ambae, Vanuatu, 21st century, *National Museums Scotland (V.2011.1)*

Waist mats from Efate found in collections generally date from pre-1900 and can be identified by the use of red and black pigmented pandanus leaves woven in a geometric design. These sometimes have feather adornments. The same red and black design can be seen on older baskets from Efate.

Food basket, Efate, Vanuatu mid-19th century, *National Museums Scotland (A.1889.547)*



Further reading:

Bonnemaison, J. et al (1996) *Arts of Vanuatu*, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press

Humphreys, CB (1926), *The New Hebrides: an ethnological record*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Speiser, F (1927) *Ethnology of Vanuatu: an early twentieth century study* [English language version published 1991 available at National Library Scotland