

TRAVELLING HOUSES: TRANSLATION, CHANGE AND AMBIVALENCE

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Travelling Houses

The paper begins with four accounts of my personal experiences when encountering four Pacific houses in different places outside of their countries of origin, between 2005 and 2014. The first is of a Samoan fale that started our research project: it is now based under the huge steel dome of the Tropical Islands Resort close to Berlin, Germany. Next is Hinemihi o te Ao Tawhito, whom I first saw during a Kohanga Reo hangi of Ngāti Ranana, the London Māori ex-pat community, in 2012. I was submerged in the anonymous crowds of mostly British people when suddenly the grounds in Clandon Park transformed into a marae with the karanga beginning the pōwhiri and it felt like home. The third is Rauru, in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Hamburg, whom I came across at the turn of a corner, down some steps into a specifically constructed room on the 3rd floor of the building. It was two years after the 100th anniversary of his first exhibition of which I had seen video clips. He surprised me. Finally, in 2014, I visited the PCC in Lai'e, and particularly the Māori and the Samoan villages. They are striking in their double role and function as showgrounds for tourists and home bases for locals in the Hawai'an diaspora.

These houses are examples of a larger group from Aotearoa and Samoa that departed from their original locations between 1879 and 2004 to be exhibited in the US, UK, Germany, and the larger Pacific (Japan and Hawai'i). As their roles and states of being changed, I argue, their relationships with both their source communities and those in the diaspora strongly influenced their status and the role they played in their new environments.

While conscious of important historical and contextual differences between the individual houses, in this paper I look for relationships and similarities, attempting to bring together the perspectives of the houses' current local contexts and those of their source communities. In the diaspora, Sean Mallon's notion of a "tangible representation of something 'Pacific'" takes on a new meaning: things that might appear disparate in the Pacific can seem related at a distance.

I – Travel: Changing relationships

In this section, notions of exchange and change are explored as part of the houses' travelling stories. Their contexts tended to change from potentially sacred settings to short lived, spectacular encounters and some houses also lost the connections with their source communities. Others maintained theirs, and new relationships to new communities in the diaspora arose. Collectively, the houses' states have ranged from shelter and taonga, to commodity, museum specimen, garden folly, theme park exhibit, transcultural meeting space, home away from home, and icon of diasporic identity, to name a few.

To provide a level of concreteness for the following reflections, the paper then gives an account of the transformations which Hinemihi o te Ao Tawhito, Rauru, the Apia fale at Tropical Island resort and the Moata Samoa at the PCC underwent en route to their destinations.

There are some aspects worth noting here. Hinemihi, for instance, was from the beginning conceived in a double, or even triple role: as the wharenuī of Ngāti Hinemihi, as a venue to host tourists and, implicitly perhaps, as a manifest part of the articulation of the relationship between two hapū. Also important is the periodic continuity of her relationship with Aotearoa: Māori battalion soldiers reconvalescening in Clandon Park in WWI discovered her. She remained present in tribal account and seems to have been the first whare in Europe whose source community reconnected officially after WW2.

Rauru's early history started with carvings commissioned by a local rangatira who, having broken tapu during production, suffered

great personal losses and sold the carvings to a local hotelier. The latter employed a carver to integrate them into a wharewhakairo he called Rauru. Very unusually, Rauru was consecrated twice (probably to increase its value on the art market) and soon sold and shipped to Hamburg, where his source community began to visit in the 1970s or 80s.

The Samoan fale at Tropical Islands was commissioned by a Malaysian multi-millionaire in 2004 to appeal to a German yearning for the South Seas. Tufuga constructed it in Apia and reassembled it at the resort. A group of dignitaries and a performance troupe participated in a blessing at the resort, and the performers stayed on for several months. With their departure, the fale fell into oblivion and eventual decay.

By contrast, the fale at the PCC are still used by Samoan performers and visitors. Commissioned by the centre and built by tufuga from American Samoa, they provide both a venue for tourist entertainment and for the exploration of fa'a Samoa by Samoans who do not get the chance elsewhere, even in Samoa – something members of the performance troupe at Tropical Island also told us. The performer at the Samoa village form a tight community and the fale are clearly not forgotten, serving as a home away from home in some ways.

II – Translation: Sharing the world

From place to place and ground to ground

This section of the paper looks into the notion of translation to show how change can be a possibility for something to emerge more clearly. For example, to see how the ground of one's position changes in the translation into someone else's language provides new insights into one's own assumptions. For me, as a native German and fluent English speaker, with limited knowledge of Māori and few words of Samoan, the assumptions that were cleared away were mainly mine. However, repeated attempts at mutual translations have also created touching points between the languages and the different ways of perceiving the world.

To theorise translation and re-translation in the houses' travelling stories and relationships, the notions of exchange and change are

important. The paper performatively brings together Pacific and European theorists and writers, for example, Hirini Moko Mead, Bob Jahnke, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi, Walter Benjamin, Paul Ricoeur, Mario Erdheim, Epeli Hau'ofa, Sean Mallon and Roger Neich. The resulting ambiguities I want to engage as a potential to create space, through mutual translations that expand both Pacific and European thinking.

From Shelter to specimen

The term *translation* can be rendered as “**moving from one place to another**”, and as passing “to the other side of a division or difference”. As a conceptual tool, it helps explore how the houses’ move from shelter to specimen might affect their performance and meaning.

While attitudes amongst contemporary museum curators have changed from imperial to collaborative attitudes, from the desire to control collections to that of collaboration with the strangers who are originally associated with the houses, their relationships with the source communities is often ambivalent. In the negotiation of lasting agreements, the ways in which different languages operate to carve up the world can be both a problem and an opportunity. Where Western approaches precisely separate and reassemble, Pacific approaches operate perhaps more contextually and poetically. Only when both are affected by the other in a mutual equivalence can they expand and deepen and something new might emerge in the interplay between kinship and mutual foreignness.

When translation seeks “a correspondence without adequacy”, linguistic hospitality balances “the pleasure of dwelling in the other’s language” with “the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home”. Māori notions of *manaakitanga* (hospitality), but also *whakapapa* (genealogy) and *utu* (reciprocity), have a similar thrust. Our common world is “produced as a result of visiting” (Peng, 2008: 74). Local cultures are revitalised as they engage with strangers and visiting others in one’s imagination helps understand their standpoint – at the same time as the distance from the familiar extends one’s own thought. Translation, then becomes “a way of sharing the world” in mutuality and in multiple directions.

III - Change and ambivalence: global re-translations

An important shift in recent scholarship acknowledges that ambiguity and ambivalence constantly transform relationships. Their plurality and energy can shift our perception from settled conventions to as yet unnoticed possibilities. This occurred also in the contact of Hinemihi and Rauru's current guardians and their source communities – increasingly so as their involvement grew. In their speaking and thinking, curators in London and Hamburg are now trying out new ontological and epistemological possibilities. If some still feel uncomfortable with the new perspectives is no surprise – it is a long way from regarding something as a specimen in one's collection and control to recognising it as a taonga, or even an ancestor over whom there is no ownership. *Ambassador* is a notion that can more easily be consolidated with a European perspective and is therefore used extensively by both Māori and Europeans in their negotiations.

A Benjaminian translation and re-writing of history is thus changing relationships: in the West, objects are isolated from their contexts to better circulate as commodities. In the Pacific, the exchange of objects ideally strengthens relationships. Hamburg Museum Director Köpke is still confused. When asked in an interview whether the museum would return Rauru if Te Arawa requested his repatriation, he answered no and insisted that the question is not a legal but “a spiritual matter” and that Te Arawa would have “to accuse [the museum] of neglecting” its caretaker role. Translations lean towards epistemic violence when they involve interpretations in which self-assurance overshadows the interest in the Other. When, however, ambivalence and antagonism properly open up a space of engagement, and no party assumes to know the other in advance and on their own terms, new translations and re-translations can evolve.

In the case of the houses that concern us here, the different weight given to profit by museums and theme parks co-determine the space of engagement. However, edutainment and exoticism operate in both environments, and in both it is possible under certain conditions for the houses to nurture arts traditions and diasporic communities. A comparison between the fale at the PCC and at Tropical Islands resort suggests that the participation of the

houses in the lives of their people, both 'at home' and 'away from home', both in actual practice and in narratives, makes a difference. There is also a difference between Māori and Samoans attitudes towards houses overseas, probably due to different experiences with colonialism.

Insofar as source communities continue to be engaged with their houses, Indigenous peoples' identity politics have helped Western scholars and curators to become aware of the blind spots of their cultures. This realisation has somewhat changed the politics of display concerning Pacific houses, while multi-perspectival discussions between museums and the artefacts' source communities articulate connections between Pacific and Western types of knowledge. Thus, models of shared ownership are tried out as Māori gain more control over their cultural heritage and influence the ways in which these taonga "maintain, reinforce, or construct their identity" in a "real living relationships with their taonga".

This makes it easier to think of the houses' changes in more than one direction. The idea of an irretrievable loss of authenticity is being replaced by the exploration of *integrity*, indicating "a relatively unbroken connection between the image or object and the culture in which it is made and used". Changes in the relationships the houses are embedded in will almost certainly change the houses status as *taonga*, shelter, artefact, specimen or commodity – long or short term – in more than one direction, as Mataatua whareniui has clearly shown.

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