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Return into Pacific Lights: The German “Welterkunder” Georg Forster on Captain Cook’s Second Voyage and his Tongan “Curiosities”

Abstract:

This article focuses on two sorts of artifacts from Tonga that Georg Forster—a German naturalist and explorer of the late eighteenth century—translocated from Oceania to Europe. Forster traveled aboard Captain Cook’s ship Resolution on Cook’s second voyage (1772–75). During the voyage, Forster and his father, Johann Reinhold Forster, collected Pacific art objects, many of which made their way to Wörlitz, Germany. This collection was featured in a permanent exhibition (Georg Forster South Sea Exhibition) at the UNESCO World Heritage site at Wörlitz. A parallel installation celebrating Tongan art and material culture was established in Nuku’alofa, Tonga. This article follows the migration of Tongan objects to Europe and the cooperation which arose between the artists, curators, and academics involved in the ‘Amui ‘i Mu’a/Ancient Futures project and their counterparts in Germany. The resulting relationship was instrumental in the formation of the two exhibitions.

Keywords: ‘Amui ‘i Mu’a/Ancient Futures, Tonga, Georg Forster, Cook voyages, art, material culture, koloa, talanoa, exhibition, collections, Dessau-Wörlitz Foundation.

In 2007, while doing research at a museum in London, I was fortunate to encounter two drawings of Tongan creatures—of a red shining-parrot (*Prosopiea tabuensis*) and a Pacific hawksbill sea turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata bissa*)—that were nearly 250 years old.¹ Both drawings were by eighteen-year-old Georg Forster, who accompanied Captain James Cook on his first visits to Tonga: to ‘Eua in October 1773 and Nomuka in June 1774. Subsequently reading Forster’s rich and colorful travel report titled *A Voyage Round the World*, I became even more fascinated by Tonga—the land, its people, and their history and culture.² I traveled

again and again to these engaging islands over the next decade, making films, writing books, and organizing exhibitions in Germany about Forster's exploration of Polynesia.³

In October 2019, I had the honor of taking part in the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures conference in Tongatapu, Tonga. On the same trip, I had the wonderful opportunity to open the Cook Forster Pavilion in Nuku'alofa, associated with the Tongan objects that Georg Forster and his father collected, and information they recorded, 250 years ago. The outstanding collection of Tongan artifacts the Forsters acquired are held today at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Dessau-Wörlitz, a small castle town in Germany.⁴ During this scientific and personal journey I learned many things, but most importantly, I got to know astonishing people. The staff at the Dessau-Wörlitz Foundation allowed me to bring back to light the surviving thirty artifacts the Forsters had collected during Cook's voyage: rare "curiosities" given to the Duke of Anhalt-Dessau, among them eighteen objects from the "Friendly Isles," as Tonga was called at the time.⁵

From 1990 to 2018, these ethnological objects were kept in storage to protect them from mold and insect damage. In 2017, as curator of the permanent Georg Forster exhibition at Wörlitz Castle, I was entrusted with creating the exhibition *Return into the Light*. I experienced immense support, not only to restore and conserve fragile artifacts from Oceania, but to involve people from Tonga, Tahiti, and New Zealand in the creation of a contemporary presentation of the Wörlitz Forster Collection and connect them with their ancestral culture.

Gradually, more people got involved, including friends and colleagues from Bremen and Munich. German ethnologists and anthropologists arranged meetings with the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures project team: University of Auckland academics and artists who were researching late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Tongan arts and their legacies.⁶ Fortunately, the Ancient Futures team was already working in Europe when we began the revision, documentation, and cataloging of the Wörlitz Forster Collection. In September 2018, we had the opportunity to get together at the Wörlitz depository to inspect the time-honored pieces collected by the Forsters: clubs, bows, fishhooks, octopus lures, necklaces, ceremonial combs, bags, baskets, and other artifacts and instruments. After nearly 250 years, Tongans—artists Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck and Sopolimalama Filipe Tohi—were able to touch these objects, *their* objects. It was an emotional moment, as feelings we Germans never could have had surfaced. But we were able to witness it, to feel this strong connection, and were deeply moved.

I also had questions regarding objects in the Wörlitz Forster Collection. The barkcloth—was it really eighteenth-century *tapa* from Tahiti, as the old Wörlitz

catalog suggested, or could I trust my research and speak of it as Tongan *ngatu* ‘uli (black barkcloth) and *ngatu tahina* (decorated barkcloth)?⁷ The wooden pounder (*tuki*)—did it originate from the Society Islands, as the old catalog claimed, or, was it of Tongan origin (which Adrienne Kaeppler and Dieter Heintze suspected it was, and suggested after I emailed them photos of the piece)?⁸ By examining the objects in detail, the experts of Ancient Futures helped us attribute their provenance.

Half a year later, on May 5, 2019, Phyllis Herda, Billie Lythberg, Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, and Andrew Mills were invited again by the Wörlitz Foundation to fly from New Zealand and the United Kingdom to celebrate with us the *Return into the Light* exhibition of the rearranged and restored Wörlitz Forster Collection and the publication of an up-to-date catalog. They also took part in an international symposium on Forster at Wörlitz, where they shared more of their knowledge with us.⁹ We learned that clubs (*‘akau tau*) were historically treated with oil in Tonga, while the ones in Wörlitz and other European museums had been kept strictly dry for nearly 250 years.¹⁰ Another discovery was that the Wörlitz *ngatu* was possibly a piece cut off of a larger barkcloth panel that the Forsters had gifted to Oxford University.¹¹ We were also interested to learn that in traditional Tongan society, women are the ones who convey ancient genealogical knowledge.¹² Most importantly, we learned magic words: *talanoa*, to talk critically yet harmoniously, and *tauhi vā*, to tend the space connecting people and other entities.¹³ An aspect of the generous and generative qualities of both is the idea of enriching social relationships by the exchange of gifts.

These wonderful Tongan concepts had inspired the project teams of Wörlitz and Ancient Futures while working together at the Wörlitz depository in 2018. The team noticed that some of the objects Forster had collected had been three-dimensionally replicated in the late 1980s by East German curators. These replicas were substituted in for the stressed originals on display, which were then preserved in climate-controlled storage. Sopolamalama Filipe Tohi came up with the idea of transferring the reproductions of these objects to Tonga, as they are both very true to the originals and made out of synthetics, which will last well in a tropical climate. In addition, he noted that, unlike the originals, the replicas could be physically handled—something that would be important to Tongans. The Wörlitz Foundation readily agreed to create another set of replicas for this innovative idea. In contrast to objects made out of fiber or tree bark, wooden (*toa*) artifacts in the Wörlitz Forster Collection proved to be suitable for the copying process; the created set consisted of a pounder (*tuki*), a neck rest (*kali*), and two finely-incised clubs (*‘akau tau*).

Two months later, in November 2018, Filipe Tohi and I met on Tongatapu to find an appropriate home for the replicas, which contained, in a visual and textual context, the entire story of the Tongan artifacts from the times when the Forsters explored the Pacific, returned to Europe with the objects, then arranged for their transfer to Wörlitz and, finally, their return to the Tongan Islands. Once again, I got to know people committed to the appreciation and understanding of Tonga's past, this time at the cultural village of Ancient Tonga, near Nuku'alofa. Ancient Tonga is a family-run business offering training courses in barkcloth making, tattooing, and dancing, among other skills. The owner and manager, Ofa Simiki, and her daughter, Jessica Afeaki, had made plans to create a small museum on their grounds, but this had been delayed by the devastating Cyclone Gita, which had hit Tonga earlier in the year. A handshake of trust between Ofa Simiki and me, witnessed by Filipe Tohi, affirmed our shared goal of establishing a Cook Forster Pavilion at the cultural village within the next year.

Six months later, the team at Ancient Tonga had erected a building to host the Wörlitz replicas—a place not only for locals and visitors to learn about Tongan designs created before encounters with European explorers, but also for young Tongan people to get in touch with, and literally touch, the archetypes of their ancestors. And perhaps, as intended by the outstanding *lalava* artist Sopolamalama Filipe Tohi, they would re-carve these beautiful ancient Tongan designs that so deeply impressed Georg Forster. As one learns from the information labels now in the pavilion,¹⁴ the young German testified:

The clubs of the people of this isle, were of an infinite variety of shapes, and many of them so ponderous, some that we could scarce manage them with one hand. . . . By far the greatest part were carved all over in many chequered patterns, which seemed to have required a long space of time, and incredible patience. . . . All the different compartments were wrought and divided with a regularity which quite surprised us, and the whole surface of the plain clubs was as highly polished, as if our best English workmen had made them with the best instruments.¹⁵

The delicate fabrication of a new set of high-quality replicas of the Tongan objects took several months in Berlin, but the process was completed just in time for them to be brought to the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures conference in Tonga in October 2019. Brigitte Mang, director of the Wörlitz Foundation and curator of the Cook Forster Pavilion, and I were welcomed by the Ancient Futures project team at the Nuku'alofa airport. We felt that we were meeting up with friends—

that people from Europe and Oceania had become connected not only by the exchange of gifts but through friendship.

During the conference, we felt a strong interest in our efforts to intensify contact with Tongan culture.¹⁶ Panel members offered a multitude of ideas and inspiration for our work in Germany and for an ongoing cooperative relationship, including critical debate (*talanoa*) about the tough situation for museums in Tonga. This was prompted by a moving statement by Lord Vaea, a longtime champion of research on and conservation of Tonga's past. As the former chairman of the Tonga Traditions Committee, he claimed a serious reflection on the values Tongans attach to their cultural heritage in the modern kingdom.¹⁷



Figure 1. The presentation ceremony of Wörlitz replicas of Tongan objects to the cultural village of Ancient Tonga, Tongatapu, October 12, 2019. Left to right: Ofa Simiki, Phyllis Herda, Brigitte Mang, Frank Vorpahl, Sopoemalame Filipe Tohi, Billie Lythberg, and Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck. Photograph courtesy of Martin Chaudhuri

On October 12, 2019, the last day of an intensive conference week in which we had enjoyed critical, harmonious, generous, and generative conversations, a prayer was performed at the presentation of the Wörlitz replicas to the cultural

village of Ancient Tonga (Fig. 1). This transfer of objects from Germany to Tonga was then celebrated by traditional dances and short speeches.¹⁸ King Tupou VI's niece, Princess Frederica Tuita, honored the ceremony by cutting the red ribbon to open the Cook Forster Pavilion. The spirit of *talanoa* and *tauhi vā* flew high when the princess picked up one of the displayed Wörlitz artifacts. It was, she joked, the first pounder (*tuki*) she had ever held in her hands. Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi joyfully shared a ceremonial club (*'akau tau*) with the Tongan Minister of Tourism, who posed for Tongan and German TV cameras while Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck expressed a common aspiration of the Ancient Futures and Wörlitz project teams: that young Tongan people, college students, and artists-to-be get a chance to study the patterns of their past at this place. The *talanoa*—the ancient Tongan concept Dyck had reflected on so enthusiastically at Wörlitz castle—had reached fruition. Georg Forster had had similar thoughts. He called “free conversation” the true soul of enlightenment.¹⁹

Frank Vorpahl, a German historian, author, publisher, filmmaker, and exhibition curator, has studied Captain Cook's voyages for three decades, focusing on Georg Forster, the German Enlightenment thinker and naturalist on Cook's second voyage. After emphasizing Forster's critical reflections on the European “discovery” of the Pacific, he shifted his attention to Cook's Indigenous Polynesian pathfinders. He organized the permanent exhibition Back into the Light: Georg Forster and the Southseas Collection of Wörlitz in Germany, as well as a parallel installation celebrating Tongan art and material culture at the Cook Forster Pavilion in Nuku'alofa, Tonga. He holds a PhD in philosophy from the University of Kassel.

Notes

¹ Forster's drawings: Frank Vorpahl, *Reise um die Welt: Illustriert von Eigener Hand. Mit Einem Biografischen Essay von Klaus Harpprecht und Einem Nachwort von Frank Vorpahl*, ed. Michael Naumann (Frankfurt am Main: Die Andere Bibliothek im Eichborn Verlag, 2007), 274, 416.

² George Forster, *A Voyage Round the World* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag: [1977] 1989). It is generally agreed that Georg's publication is based on the journal of his father, Johann Reinhold Forster—see Michael Hoare, *The Resolution Journal of Johann Reinhold Forster*, vol. 1 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1982), 68 and Georg Forster, *A Voyage Round the World*, ed. Nicolas Thomas and Oliver Berghof (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), xiv–xviii, xx.

³ Books and publications: Frank Vorpahl, “Der Seefahrer, Sein Chronist und die Entdeckung der Natur des Menschen,” in *James Cook, der Entdecker und Fragmente über Captain Cooks Letzte Reise und sein Ende*. Hrsg. und Mit Einem Nachwort Versehen von Frank Vorpahl. Mit Farbtafeln von Forsters Eigener Hand, ed. Frank Vorpahl (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn Verlag: 2008), 151–73; Frank Vorpahl, “Georg Forsters Naturwissenschaftliche Zeichnungen in der State Library of New South Wales,” in *Georg Forster Studien XIII*, ed. Stefan Greif and Michael Ewers (Kassel: Universitätspresse: 2008), 275–89; Frank Vorpahl, ed. *Georg Forster: The South Seas in Wörlitz* (Munich: Hirmer: 2019); Frank Vorpahl, *Der Weltekunder: Auf der Suche nach Georg Forster* (Berlin: Galiani, 2018); Documentaries: *Expedition in die Südsee - Georg Forster* (1982); Exhibitions: *Georg Forster – Der Weltekunder in Wörlitz and Rückkehr ins Licht: Georg Forster und die Südseesammlung im Schloss Wörlitz*, Wörlitz Castle, ongoing, <https://www.gartenreich.de/en/exhibitions/georg-forster>.

⁴ The Wörlitz Forster Collection was given by the Forsters (including an items list) to the Duke of Anhalt-Dessau in 1775. It has never been distributed, shared, or exchanged.

⁵ Frank Vorpahl, “After Almost Two-and-a-Half Centuries, a New Perspective on the Wörlitz Forster Collection,” in *Georg Forster: The South Seas at Wörlitz*, ed. Frank Vorpahl and the Kulturstiftung Dessau-Wörlitz (Munich: Hirmer, 2019), 86–91.

⁶ Dieter Heintze, the former director of the Übersee-Museum in Bremen, and Hilke Thode-Arora, Deputy Director at the Museum Fünf Kontinente in Munich.

⁷ Ernst Germer, “Georg Forsters Polynesien-Sammlung in Woerlitz,” in *Georg Forster. Naturforscher, Weltreisender, Humanist und Revolutionär: Seine Beziehungen zu Wörlitz* (Wörlitz: Staatliche Schlösser und Gärten Wörlitz, Oranienbaum und Luisium, 1980), 61–92, 68–70, 90; Frank Vorpahl, “After Almost Two-and-a-Half Centuries,” 127–29.

⁸ Frank Vorpahl, “After Almost Two-and-a-Half Centuries,” 125; Germer, “Georg Forsters Polynesien-Sammlung,” 65, 90. Both Adrienne Kaeppler and Dieter Heintze reflected on the same example of a wooden Tongan pounder (*tuki*) at the Cook exhibition in Bonn, Bern, and Vienna; see the exhibition catalogue *James Cook und die Entdeckung der Südsee* (München: Hirmer: 2009), 194.

⁹ The combined Forster symposium of the Kulturstiftung Dessau-Wörlitz (Wörlitz Foundation) and the Georg-Forster-Gesellschaft (Georg Forster Society) took part on May 4, 2019, at the Gasthof Zum Eichenkranz.

¹⁰ Andrew Mills, an expert on Tongan weaponry, shared his knowledge with us during his presentation.

¹¹ Billie Lythberg, a researcher of Polynesian artifacts, made this very likely assumption in her presentation.

¹² Phyllis Herda, a well-known scholar of Tongan history, connected the findings of her gender studies in Polynesia with the transfer of ancient knowledge and genealogy in the Tongan archipelago.

¹³ In her presentation, artist Dagmar Vaiklalafi Dyck drew from her Tongan, Dutch, and German ancestry to relate the concept of *talanoa* and its different social aspects in ancient and present-day Tonga.

¹⁴ As curator of the Wörlitz permanent Georg Forster exhibition, Ancient Tonga entrusted me to curate the Cook Forster Pavilion in Nuku'alofa, resulting in a curator's gift of twelve fit-for-the-tropics images and information plates generously created by gewerkdesign, Berlin-based exhibition designers.

¹⁵ Forster, *A Voyage Round the World*, 305.

¹⁶ I gave a presentation titled "Return into Pacific Lights: The German 'Welterkunder' Georg Forster on Captain Cook's 2nd Voyage and his Tongan 'Curiosities'" on the opening day of the 'Amui'i i Mu'a/Ancient Futures conference, October 8, 2019. Brigitte Mang gave the presentation "On the History of the South Sea Collection in Wörlitz" on October 9, 2019.

¹⁷ Due to this situation, the Wörlitz replicas were given to *Ancient Tonga* as a permanent loan under a contract with the Wörlitz Foundation that must be renewed annually according to the ongoing condition and display of the objects.

¹⁸ Speeches were by Ofa Simiki and Jessica Afeaki for Ancient Tonga, Brigitte Mang for the Wörlitz Foundation, and myself as curator of the Cook Forster Pavilion.

¹⁹ Georg Forster emphasized freedom in thinking, speaking, and disputing in his famous German phrase "freie Ventilation" ("free conversation") published in his editor's preface for the first German translation of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*.