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Northwest Coast Uses of Polynesian Art

CAROL S. IVORY

The first European to meet and trade with the Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest Coast was the Spaniard, Juan Perez, in July, 1774. He was followed four years later by the famed British explorer, James Cook.¹ From the beginning of this contact, Euro-American explorers and traders have noted and commented upon the readiness of Native Americans to acquire those non-native objects and goods which enhanced and expanded their traditional lifestyle. Shrewd traders, they obtained from the Euro-Americans iron, blankets and other materials which they incorporated into an already rich and elaborate culture.²

It is interesting to note that the Euro-American component, although by far the most significant, was not the only culture with which these Northwest people came in contact nor the only source from which new objects were introduced. Evidence suggests that prior to Euro-American contact, the wreckage of Japanese vessels drifted on prevailing currents to the Northwest Coast, some even with surviving crew members.³ As early as 1788, if not before that date, Polynesian people and material culture were known to at least some Native Americans and had begun physically to reach the Northwest Coast of North America.

Although not a major influence on the development of Northwest Coast culture and history, the Polynesian presence has left its mark in a number of rather intriguing artifacts of Polynesian origin or derivation used or found on the Northwest Coast. A discussion of the historical background will precede a survey of

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a few examples of such objects, and one possible instance of the reverse phenomenon.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The primary conduits of contact between the cultures of Polynesia and of the Northwest Coast were the Euro-American ships that plied the waters between North America and the South Pacific. They carried not only their own crews, but also the natives of these two culture areas who travelled on these ships.⁴ Although the exact routes which brought the objects examined here to the Northwest Coast will most likely never be known, it is indisputable that the means for them to so travel existed.

Connections between the Pacific Islands, especially Polynesia, and the Northwest Coast were established by the 1770s. Explorers, fur traders, and whalers who visited the Northwest region, to name only the most prominent groups, criss-crossed those parts of the Pacific that contain many of the islands of Polynesia, most notably the Hawaiian Islands, the Society Islands (including Tahiti), the Marquesas Islands, and New Zealand. Before Cook reached the Northwest Coast during his third voyage in 1778, he had already stopped over at New Zealand, the Cook Islands, Society Islands (Tahiti), Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) and others. Portlock, Dixon and Meares in the 1780s all had visited Hawai'i en route to the Northwest Coast, and Vancouver in the early 1790s had visited Tahiti, Rapa, the Marquesas, and Hawai'i.⁵

John Meares recorded one of the first exchanges between Polynesians and Native Americans on the North Pacific coast of America. In 1788, the Hawaiian, Tianna, sailed with Capt. William Douglas aboard the *Iphigenia*, one of two boats commissioned by Meares to take part in the growing fur trade.⁶ Meares's description of their visit to the village of the Nootkan chief Maquinna (here called Macquilla) indicates that Polynesian-Northwest Coast contact was already under way by this time:

The Sandwich Island Chief [Tianna] did not, as we first expected discover any surprise at the sight of Macquilla and his army: but the frequent communication of the *Iphigenia* with the natives along the coast, from Cook's

River to King George's Sound . . . had rendered them and their manners no longer an object of novelty . . . Tianna and Comekela [a Nootka Indian] were old acquaintances but by no means intimate friends, as the former held the latter in a very low degree of estimation: . . . As Comekela had been in the Sandwich Islands, on his first leaving America . . . he was qualified to give Maquilla [his brother] an account not only of Tianna but the country from whence he came . . . ⁷

By 1788, then, not only were Polynesians arriving on the Northwest Coast, but Native Americans had already visited Polynesia. If relations between the peoples were somewhat restrained and cool, the interest of Northwest Coast peoples in new products and goods was not. Capt. George Dixon described the introduction of Hawaiian *kapa* (*tapa* or barkcloth) to the Northwest Coast in 1787:

One of the chiefs who came to trade with us, happening one day to cast his eye on a piece of Sandwich Island cloth, which hung up on the shrouds to dry, became very importunate to have it given to him . . . and the Indian was perfectly overjoyed with his present. Soon after daylight the next morning, our friend appeared alongside, dressed in a coat made of the Sandwich Island cloth, given him the day before, and cut exactly in the form of their skin coats.⁸

Tapa cloth, as it turned out, was not a suitable material for the colder and wetter Northwest Coast, but the readiness of the people to experiment and to try it out was obvious.

With time the number of Polynesians, especially Hawaiians, or Kanakas as they were called, dramatically increased on the Northwest Coast. In fact, they became active participants in both the maritime and land-based fur trades that soon began to develop there and served as crew on the ships that sailed the Pacific waters. In 1811, Astor's ship, *Tonguin*, recruited twenty-four Hawaiians, twelve to work on the ship and twelve to assist in building Astoria, while the *Beaver* a year later brought five Canadians, seven Americans and twelve Kanakas to the Northwest Coast. Fort Walla Walla had thirty-two Kanakas and thirty-eight Iroquois in 1818.⁹ The men at Fort Okanagon in February, 1814

were described as half Canadian and half Sandwich Islanders.¹⁰ Taro-root is among the foods recorded as eaten there at that time.¹¹ The American, Lt. Charles Wilkes, enlisted fifty Kanakas to replace seamen whose enlistments had expired during his exploring expedition of 1838-1842.¹²

Polynesians remained important when the Hudson's Bay Company began its operation, and it was Polynesians who built and operated the first HBC saw mill in 1828 near Fort Vancouver.¹³ By 1836, twenty-eight were living there.¹⁴ A Kanaka village was recognized on the Columbia River near Fort Vancouver by 1844, and Polynesians were documented at Forts Langley and Simpson.¹⁵ Missionaries, too, including the Whitmans at Waiilatpu among the Cayuse and the Spaldings at Lapwai among the Nez Perce, employed Polynesians.¹⁶

Of at least nine servants at Ft. Umpqua during this period identified as Polynesian, four were most likely Hawaiian, three Tahitian and one Maori.¹⁷ This indicates that Hawaiians were not the only Polynesians to come to the Northwest, though most likely they were all categorized under the general term "Kanaka."

Finally, whaling and other Pacific trade facilitated contact between these two parts of the Pacific. The islands of the Pacific, especially Hawaii, but also Tahiti and the Marquesas, were routine layover stations for virtually all ships heading for the Northwest Coast. According to Samuel Morrison, New Bedford and Nantucket whalers "flocked" to Hawaii for fresh provisions and Kanaka seamen, with 60 ships stopping in 1822 and over 400 by 1844.¹⁸ Because many whalers deserted, new crewmen were needed, and Polynesians were excellent sailors.¹⁹ As a result, there was a steady stream of ships plying the Pacific and providing innumerable opportunities for the movement of people and goods between Polynesia and the Northwest Coast.

After 1849, the Polynesian presence on the Northwest Coast declined. New political discrimination resulted from settlement of the area. In 1845 a tax was placed on employers of Kanakas for each one in their employ, and after the organization of a territorial government in 1848, Polynesians were denied their petition for citizenship and the right to own land because "if allowed to come to Oregon, they will commingle with our Indians, a mixed race will ensue, and the result will be wars and bloodshed in Oregon."²⁰ At the same time, the lure of gold in

California encouraged them to head south in large numbers. But most returned home, although a few remained and inter-married with the native population.²¹

As can be seen from this brief overview, a considerable number of Polynesian people were in the Pacific Northwest up to the middle of the nineteenth century. Given this history of contact between the two areas, what is surprising is not that *some* material evidence remains, but that there is so little.

THE OBJECTS

We know frustratingly little about most of the objects found on the Northwest Coast that seem to have a link with Polynesia. Some objects are quite convincing; others remain much more mysterious, their Polynesian origin only speculative.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of Northwest Coast adoption of a Polynesian artwork is the Society Islands gorget or breastplate (*tá umi*) seen in two late nineteenth century photographs of Tlingit chiefs in ceremonial dress taken at Angoon, Admiralty Island, around 1900 (Fig. 1&2). The gorget, which was both worn and carried, was regarded as a symbol of status and was displayed along with other highly valued clan possessions at an important occasion such as the funeral shown in Fig. 2. The photographs appear in *Form and Freedom*²² and more recently, along with others, in an essay by Adria Katz which focuses specifically on this piece.²³ It was collected on Admiralty Island in 1923 by Louis Shotridge and now is part of the collection of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania. Katz details the history of the gorget, known as the "Raven Cape," and concludes from the historical record and oral tradition that the gorget was traded to the Deisheetaan clan by some of the earliest white visitors to Alaska, most likely before the end of the eighteenth century.²⁴

Unfortunately, this is the only instance in which photographs vividly document the Northwest Coast inculturation of a Polynesian object. Other examples exist, but without this striking visual evidence. Such an object is the Marquesan war club now in the Princeton University Museum (Fig. 3). According to museum records, the specimen was obtained by gift or exchange from Lt. George Thornton Emmons, USN Ret, in February 1915, and



FIGURE 1. Angoon, ca. 1890. Holm and Reid, *Form and Freedom*. Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1975:60. Original photograph by V. Soboleff, Alaska Historical Library (neg. no. PCA 1-19).

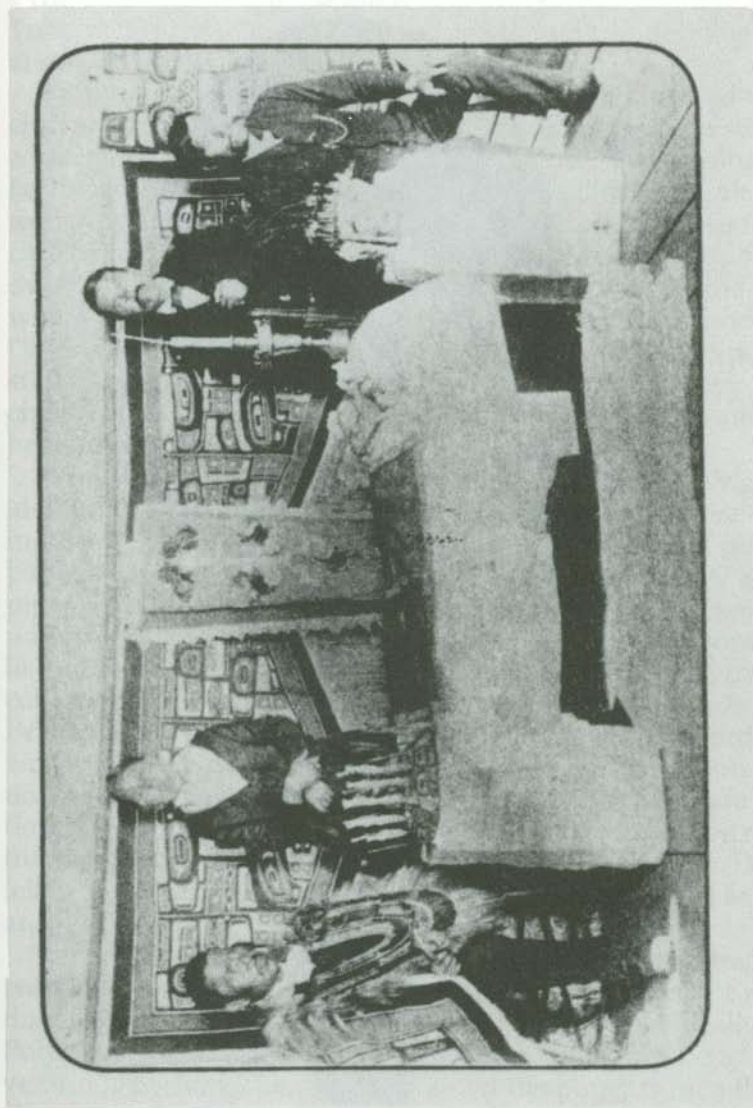


FIGURE 2. Angoon, ca. 1890. Holm and Reid, *Form and Freedom*. Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1975:60.



FIGURE 3. Marquesan Club. Museum of Natural History, Princeton University (5161), photograph courtesy of Donald Baird.

"was found in the possession of a Tlingit Chief of the Chilkat Tribe, who said that it had descended to him through five generations of Chiefs."²⁵

Although the club is identified in museum records as a "War club from the Solomon Islands" stylistically it is unquestionably a Marquesan club. As has been noted before, the Marquesas Islands were a frequent stopover point for sailors from the eighteenth century to at least the mid-nineteenth century, so that the club certainly could have been in the family's possession for well over a hundred years by 1915. One must guess at the use to which it might be put on the Northwest Coast, but service as a Chief's talking stick would be a logical possibility. Speakers' staffs or talking sticks were important symbols used by Tlingit chiefs, and the Marquesan club has a form which would have been identified easily with this well-known emblem.

In her study of Haida argillite pipes,²⁶ Dr. Robin Wright has identified two wooden ship pipes dating from just before or during the 1840s which included in their accoutrements pieces of paper with Hawaiian words on them. Of the over 900 argillite pipes and thirty-six wooden ones studied, only four have paper with printing or writing on them. One has numbers somewhat like navigational or nautical charts. Another, in argillite, from the collection of Aberdeen University, has the English words "Love Peace . . ." Two wooden pipes contain Hawaiian words. The words in these two pipes, one from the George Simpson collection now at Cambridge (Fig. 4), and the other in a private collection (Fig. 5), have not been translated, but what can be read of them indicates that they are Hawaiian: "A ike aku . . . Davida, lele . . . nai luna mai . . . le Halo ke ale . . . ai, a lai lei kalio la" and "na wahieuk . . . uolohi nei."²⁷

Since these pipes were made primarily for the tourist trade, the reason for the presence of the words in the pipes is not readily discernible. Perhaps they were placed there specifically for a Polynesian who was buying or commissioning a pipe as a souvenir. Or perhaps the carver obtained the paper from a Polynesian whom he knew and used it purely for decoration. Wooden ship pipes were elaborately inlaid with whalebone, baleen, glass, and metal, and paper was another type of material used to enrich the surface. In any case, the pipes form an interesting example of the intersection of the two cultures.

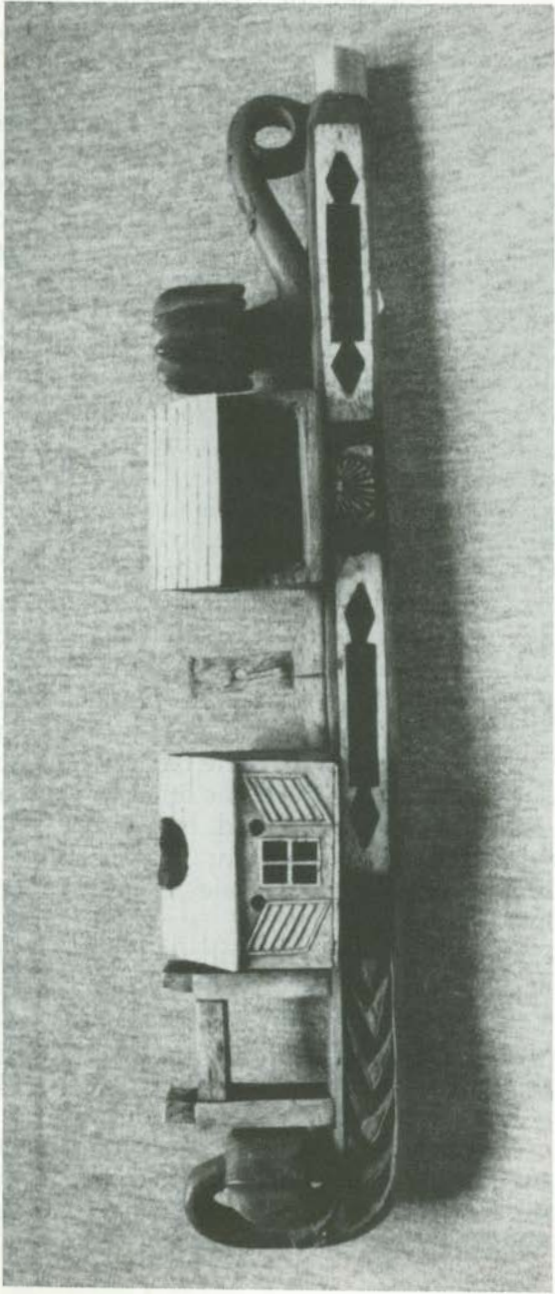


FIGURE 4. Haida Pipe, George Simpson Collection, University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge University (54.128), photograph by Bill Holm.

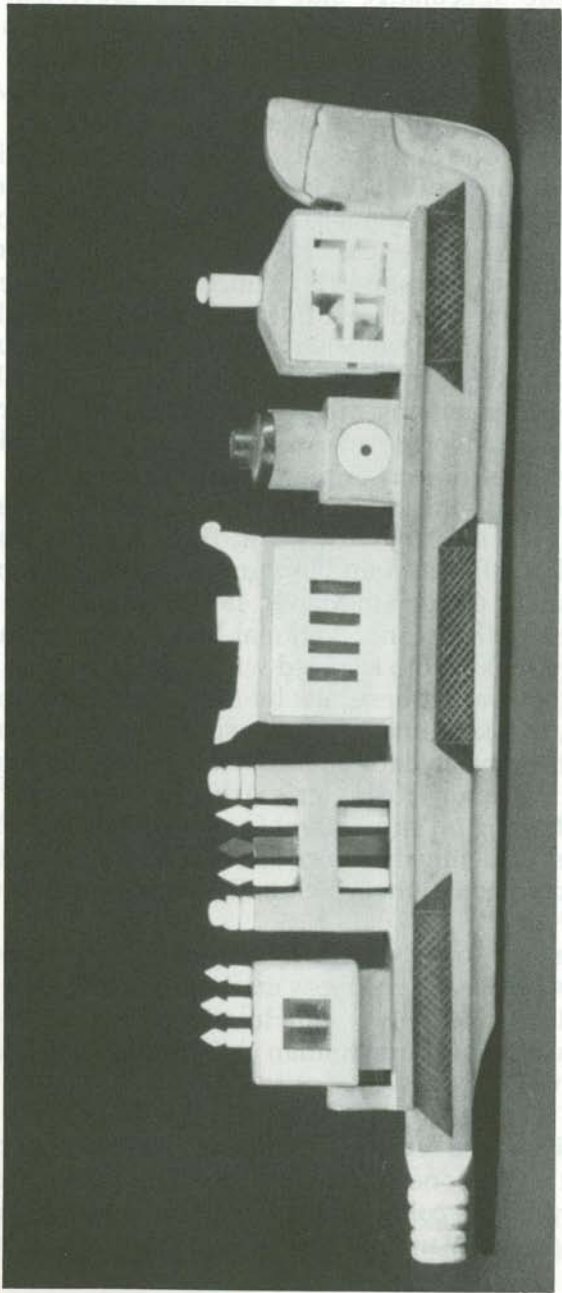


FIGURE 5. Haida Pipe. Private Collection. Photograph by Paul Macapia.

On the more speculative side is a club previously in the Museum of Native American Culture in Spokane, WA, and now in the collection of the Burke Memorial Museum at the University of Washington (Fig. 6). According to James Nason, Adjunct Curator at the Burke Museum, the club was collected around 1910 by a medical doctor from Native Americans near Celilo Falls in Eastern Washington. It was in use at the time as a fish club, used to beat fish and kill them as they were brought into a boat. Comparison with another club in the Burke's collection accessioned as a Samoan club shows a distinct decorative pattern similar to the first club. Inlaid lime in triangular patterns placed in three bands forms the decorative program for both clubs. How such a club found its way to Eastern Washington is not known.

Several clubs resembling Maori war clubs of stone and bone have been found in North America.²⁸ A rather remarkable detective story involves not an original Maori *patu* or club, but an eighteenth century brass imitation of one. Brass or metal *patu* have been noted in a few entries in the *Journal of Polynesian Studies*.²⁹ Such a *patu* was found in a grave on the Columbia River opposite Umatilla, Oregon in March, 1897, and is now in the collection of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.³⁰ Joseph Banks, who traveled with James Cook on his first voyage, had several of these cast by Mathew Boulton of Soho, Birmingham, to take with him on the second voyage. An example (Fig. 7), clearly depicting Banks's name and coat of arms, is published in Adrienne Kaeppler's *Artificial Curiosities*.³¹ Banks ended up not going on subsequent Cook voyages, but the clubs or similar ones evidently did, since an account of the third voyage relates an exchange in which a club like Banks's was given to a Maori chief.³²

The bronze club found on the Columbia River is quite worn, but the letters "BA" and the cross marks of Banks's coat of arms are just barely visible. It was Bill Holm who made the connection and identified the Smithsonian club as one Banks had commissioned in England. Its journey from England to the Northwest Coast remains a unique but untold tale.

The final object is a reverse example of the phenomenon just discussed. It is a stone hammer (Fig. 8), now in the Burke Museum, which was collected between 1890 and 1900 eighteen miles inland on the island of Hawaii. The collection information

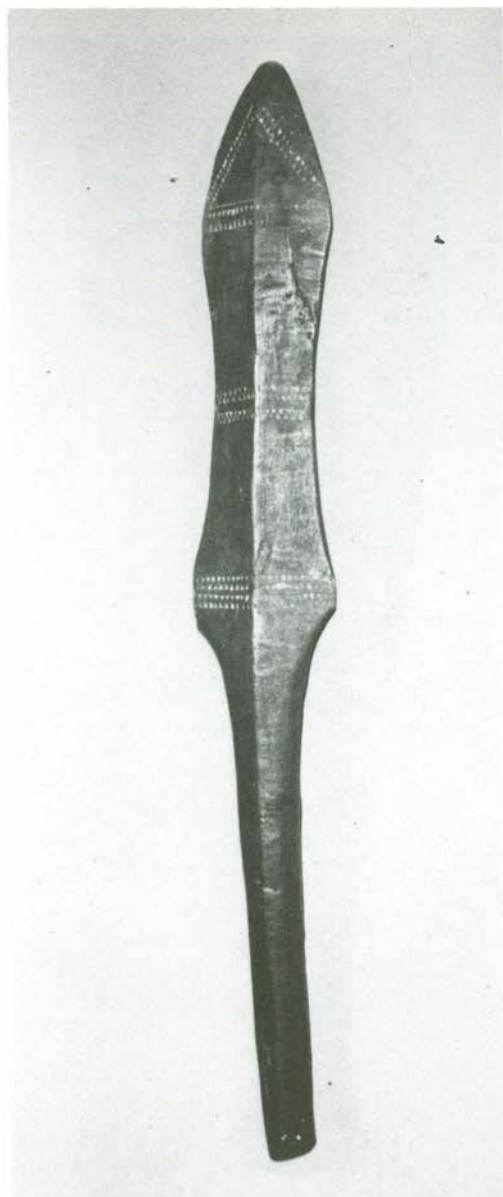


FIGURE 6. Samoan (?) Club. Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum (9.2E336), photograph by the author.

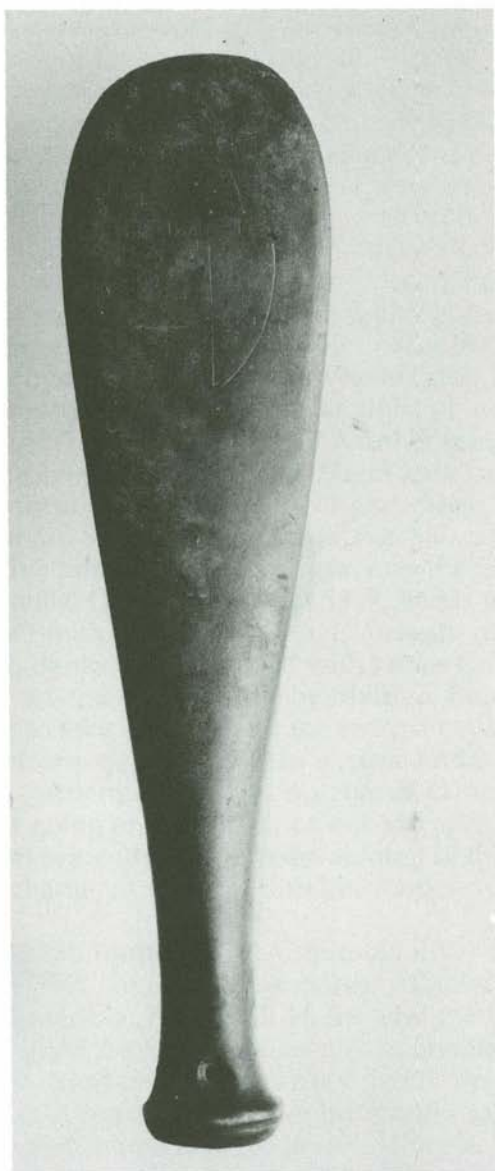


FIGURE 7. Bronze "patu," John Hewett Collection. Kaeppler, *Artificial Curiosities*. Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum. 1978:Fig. 12.



FIGURE 8. Hammer. Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum (4.13098), photograph by the author.

notes that although found on Hawaii, the hammer closely resembles hammers from the Northwest Coast, rather than Hawaiian ones. Comparison with a typical Northwest Coast stone hammer, also in the Burke Museum and collected by James Swan in 1909, confirms the similarity in shape between the two pieces. Both have a fairly straight vertical shaft, flat top and bottom, with slightly flared rims, the lower rim being larger. They both are distinctly different from a Hawaiian poi pounder, typically Polynesian with its curved top and its swelling, bell-shaped form. Given the two-way nature of travel across the Pacific, it is certainly not impossible that an actual hammer was brought to Hawaii, or that a Native American who travelled to Hawaii on board ship might have traded it for some object he wished to take home.

CONCLUSION

This brief examination of some objects of Polynesian derivation found on the Northwest Coast, and one of the opposite phenomena, a piece with seeming Northwest Coast roots found in Hawaii, illustrates in a visual way the interchange between these two cultures. Contact across the Pacific to the Pacific Northwest can be documented from at least 1778 and continued with great constancy at least through the mid-nineteenth century, with most of the objects discussed likely dating from this period of time.

Interest in foreign or exotic products on the part of Northwest Coast Native Americans was not limited to those from the Anglo-American culture. Rather, the peoples of the Northwest Coast were open to objects from other cultures, especially those, such as the Tahitian gorget or the Marquesan club, which would enhance their status or prestige, or those like the Samoan club, which would be practical substitutes for implements in use in the culture. In both cases, the Native Americans sought not to change their culture, but to expand or enhance it through exotic, innovative or unusual objects. That these objects were Polynesian is not as important as the fact that they were both different from and adaptable to Northwest Coast life. Yet it is interesting to note the little known role of Polynesians in the history of the Pacific Northwest Coast and these intriguing remnants of their sojourns there.

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32. Note 420, *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 36 (March 1927): 84.