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Flying the Pacific, Culturing Oceania : Human-Bird Entanglements and Austronesian Worlds

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Flying the Pacific, Culturing Oceania: Human-Bird Entanglements and Austronesian Worlds

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Abstract

What does it mean to be human in a world full of other lives? This question has long preoccupied thinkers of many intellectual traditions, including the indigenous oral wisdom of Taiwan and North America, Buddhist texts, and European philosophy. Through ethno-ethological research in Taiwan (the Truku and Sediq communities) and Japan, I explored questions of human-bird entanglements as humans and birds encounter one another in a variety of different contexts. This provided the experiential background for an exploration of the collections at Minpaku for artefacts of material culture, or items representing the human-bird relationship as lived in Taiwan, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Japan. Taking a hint from a Rukai student that objects are living ambassadors of the peoples that produce them, I consider material culture as living things that emerge from the generative fluxes of the world. Through this perspective, a spectrum of parts of birds (feathers), bird parts used to create other things, and representations of birds in art and ritual were found. These things reveal much about the societies they represent, the nature of humanity, and the creative evolution by which humans weave *nature* into *culture* everywhere.

I. Introduction

My reflections on material culture began with a serendipitous conversation in Taiwan. The College of Indigenous Studies at National Donghwa University has a seminar room and exhibit space called *Taluan*, meaning meeting house in the Amis language. In March 2018, before leading a talking circle there, I took the time to inspect the artefacts on display from various Formosan indigenous peoples. I admired a piece of Paiwan pottery adorned with a figure of the hundred-pace viper, the feared and venerated snake known as the *Deinagkistrodon* in international herpetology. The Paiwan and Rukai people are alike in admiring the snake, which is woven into their legends and material cultures. With a snake pattern built up on the surface of the pot, this kind of earthenware pot is known in Paiwan as *venaleiage lageinawang*. As I stood there looking at the pot, a Rukai student engaged me in conversation. ‘Our elders tell us’, she said, ‘that these museum

pieces are not just objects. They are alive. They are ambassadors from our people and have something to say if you take the time to listen.’ Those words echoed in my heart after I returned to Osaka to continue working as a visiting scholar at the National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku). I have since looked at museum objects with a renewed sense of awe and respect.

That student’s observation that museum objects are alive resonates with new thinking in anthropology about materiality. Tim Ingold points out that much has been said about materiality, but almost no attention has been paid to the materials themselves. Like that student, and like peoples around the world said to have animistic cosmologies, Ingold sees things as alive. This is because they emerge from ‘the generative fluxes of the world of materials in which they came into being and continue to subsist’ (Ingold 2007: 12). Staying for a moment with the clay pot, we can see that it emerged in southern Taiwan from soil that is itself a mixture of minerals and decomposing organic beings. The clay was extracted from the earth, kneaded into form, shaped into a pot adorned with an image inspired by a snake, and then fired to make it hold this form. The pot thus came into being, not only through clay, but also through the stones used as tools to shape the clay, the trees that provided the firewood, and the surface of the table that held the pot, and even through the snake that inspired the pattern, and the human artist who brought everything together. The pot is thus not merely an object made by humans, but a thing that brings together the spirits of humans and non-humans in the entangled lines of bodily movement and material flow that Ingold famously calls the ‘meshwork’ of life (Ingold 2012: 435). Humans can then bring these things into life through various activities, including rituals (McGraw and Krátký 2017). The objects and rituals that make use of them are thus entanglements of lives in specific places and times. They are alive, and have histories. Coming back to the *venaleiage lageinawang*, we can think of what we call Paiwan cultures as emerging from the entanglement of human minds and hands, snakes slithering at night through the forest, trees, clay, and fire. These elements came together, each with its own sense of duration but in patterns across time that we may call history. Philosopher Henri Bergson, one of Ingold’s sources of inspiration, reminds us that even the tiniest cells, amoebas, horns (and presumably feathers) have a unique history. The evolution of life from the humblest origins to the most complex forms in existence are all animated, part of a ‘single indivisible history’ (Bergson 2014: 37).

These musings about the entanglements of human and non-human, coming together as things and rituals, as cultures and histories, are relevant to me as I embark on my own wayfaring through the worlds of humans and birds in the Western Pacific. For the past year in Japan and for the past six years in Taiwan, I have been researching human-bird relations. This is now part of a much broader research programme entitled *Austronesian Worlds: Human-Animal Entanglements in the Pacific Anthropocene*. In order to make some sense of the meshwork of life on this planet, I have chosen to interact closely with birds, in the companionship of other humans who have been interacting with these same birds for many years of their lives. This provides the larger context within which, while wandering through the Minpaku and its collections, I look at birds, see their enmeshment with other lives, and their transformation into things and rituals we then perceive as the

objects and rituals of human cultures. In this article, I thus flitter back and forth between museum collections, experiences in the field, and the written records of those who followed these paths and seaways before me. How has the entanglement of human and avian lives come together in the things we see before us? What does this mean for the coming into being of various cultures and societies across the Western Pacific?

II. Ways of Learning about Human-Animal Entanglements

This article is intended to contribute to an emerging new field in anthropology, which Eduardo Kohn has baptised an ‘anthropology of life’. This is, ‘an anthropology that is not just confined to the human but is concerned with the effects of our entanglements with other kinds of living selves’ (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010: 545). This new anthropology appeals to me because of some things that I have learned from listening closely to the *sejiq truku* (Truku people) and *seediq tkedaya* (Tkedaya people) of Taiwan. For nearly two decades, I have undertaken research with ordinary, rural people who talk about dogs and pigs, wild boars, flying squirrels, and birds as if they were all intentional beings and important parts of their life-worlds. They are immersed in a way of life called *Gaya*, a political philosophy and legal imagining that predates colonialism and bureaucratised indigeneity by millennia. An anthropology of life seems to be a better way to convey those life-worlds to an international audience than the traditional anthropological concern with discrete cultures, a project which dovetails too well with official, state-centric multiculturalism in Taiwan. When they affirm that they are ‘*Seediq balae!*’ (real people), they are staking out an ontological claim to humanity that goes far beyond being just one patch in the multicultural quilt of contemporary Taiwan. I agree with Tim Ingold, who problematises the genres that imagine others to be imprisoned by culture, whereas only the relativist anthropologists can place themselves as rational observers in ‘an ethereal, cultureless void’ (Ingold 2016: 37). Instead, I have chosen to immerse myself in the life-worlds of the *seediq truku*, and in those of diverse people across the Western Pacific as they interact with birds and other living things. My primary methodology, of spending time *in situ* outdoors with people and birds, might best be called ‘ethno-ethology’ (Brunois 2005).

A year at Minpaku, during which I undertook field research on human-bird relations, and also explored the library and collections, provided me with new ways of seeing the Western Pacific, and Japan’s place in it. The project ‘Austronesian worlds’ is rooted in Formosa but reaches out through Austronesia, to western Pacific islands such as Ponso no Tao (Orchid Island), Belau (Palau), and Guåhan (Guam). Japan is an integral part of this world, not only because the Japanese language may have been influenced by Austronesian languages (Benedict 1990), but also because of the history of Japanese interaction, colonial administration, and military interventions in the region. No matter how we look at it, Austronesian worlds were created in historical processes that included Japan. I know this very well when I work with *sejiq* on Formosa, especially with older people who speak to me in Japanese and share stories of their lives under Japanese administration before 1945. Like the Minpaku Regional Exhibitions, this article will thus

be partially about the place of Japan in the world.

In terms of methodology, I began by carefully exploring Minpaku's Regional Exhibitions, looking in the displays for every trace of birds across Oceania, Formosa, and Japan. I then explored the vast research collection of the museum, examining items I found by searching the catalogue of items from the region for anything containing *bird* (*tori*), or *feather* (*hane*). I found a vast diversity of things, including feathers, traps for catching birds, feathers, other bird body parts incorporated into other things, and then representations of birds in art and ritual. Recalling that each thing in the museum is alive and is an ambassador of other lives, I took the time to sit with each object, hold it in my hands when possible, photograph it, and reflect on what it can tell us in the context of multispecies relations and materiality. Through reflection on the materials from which each thing was made, I could see that each thing was indeed an ambassador, not only of human societies, but also of other living things. They speak to the way in which Austronesia has been constituted over time as an evolving meshwork of human, avian, and other lives. I thus take the reader through my observations of the Regional Exhibitions and highlights of the research collection before reflecting on what these things mean in a wider ecological and social context.

III. The Minpaku Regional Exhibitions

The Minpaku Regional Exhibitions, at least if one follows the official recommended route, begin with a breathtaking tour of Oceania. The foyer is dominated by the imposing outrigger canoe *Chechemeni*, constructed by Rumai in the Satawal Island of the Federated States of Micronesia. The canoe with a large triangular sail was once used for fishing and traveling between islands. In the 1970s, it sailed 3,000 km from Satawal to Okinawa, after which it was acquired by Minpaku. As one stands and admires the artistry of the canoe, wondering what it was like to ride in it over lurching waves, through storms or under the heat of the sun, one realises that one is standing on a shiny map of the Pacific Ocean. One can stand on Japan, looking south-easterly toward Belau, Guåhan, Hawai'i, and beyond. It is as if one has left the canoe and begun a flight across Oceania. Since one can see very far, it is obviously a perspective from a great height, certainly much higher than even the frigatebirds (*Fregata magnificens*) can go, who soar 4,000 meters over the Pacific. On the opposite side of the hall, one's attention is drawn to a video about human navigation across the Pacific and a map of Austronesian dispersal. Coloured arrows on the map indicate a first migration about 50,000 years ago that brought humans to Australia and New Guinea, followed by a second migration about 3,300 years ago that took humans from the Asian mainland to Formosa, Luzon, and beyond all of Oceania. A reconstructed Lapita pot is on display, with the explanation that these migrants took pottery, domesticated animals, and cultivated plants with them on their journeys. Looking back at *Chechemeni*, one wonders what it would be like to cross the ocean in a relatively small canoe with a human family, dogs, pigs, chickens, and Lapita pots filled with food.

As an ethnological collection, the focus is on humans, but other lives are clearly

present. Ornithologists would recognise that humans navigating eastward across the oceans passed through the north-south migrations of birds along the East Asian-Australasian and West Pacific flyways. Fish and other marine animals also have their patterns of movement. Following the exhibit, one can see the interactions between all these living beings. There is a display about tools used for fishing. There are exhibits of cloth plaited from the fibres of pandanus, cotton, and banana, as well as ropes made from coconut. Tools were crafted from bricolages of stones, shells, bones, teeth, and plants. Some of these plants were brought to the islands by humans, and others through the dispersal of seeds by birds, but basically every single thing on exhibit is an entanglement of plant, animal and human lives.

These lives are intrinsically in motion. In fact, it is motion, made possible by contact and resistance against air and wind, water and waves, earth and gravity, that enables animation in all our lives. As Ingold wrote:

The bird is its flying; the fish its swimming. The bird can fly thanks to the currents and vortices that it sets up in the air, and the fish can swim at speed because of eddies set up through the swishing of its tail and fins. Cut out from these currents, they would be dead. (Ingold 2010: 7)

This article is a reflection on what actions make the *Homo sapiens* human, but first let's think about birds. The motions of these animals can create magnificent spectacles. Many a seafarer has surely marvelled at the sight of streaked shearwater (*Calonectris leucomelas*) flights (Photo 1) called dynamic soaring because the bird flies against the slower winds near the waves, gains altitude and catches the stronger velocity winds, then flies back down to the sea. The Japanese name for the bird *oomizunagidori* means 'the birds that scythes down the waters'. In the evening, thousands or tens of thousands of them may form dramatic 'bird pillars' before swooping down to their burrows on an



Photo 1 Dynamic soaring of shearwaters approaching Kanmuriijima, Wakasa Bay, Japan (May 2018, Simon)

island (Wiest 2016).

Humans may seem amazingly inept compared to frigatebirds, shearwaters and dolphins, but they compensate for physical weaknesses with a combination of ingenuity, the ability to communicate difficult instructions, and hands with opposable thumbs needed to construct canoes, fashion fishing lures and traps, weave ropes and cloth, and shape pottery. Humans have the social skills necessary to trade with other humans, even to bend them to their will. In addition to seeking comfort from objects at hand, and combining their work with products made by other people, humans also have the imagination and the will to try to harness unseen forces through magic and ritual. All of these human actions involve movement, no less than the flying of the bird and the swimming of the fish so poetically invoked by Ingold (above). Ingold did not, in a similar way, reduce the human to its walking, perhaps because humans are not as limited as other animals to what they can accomplish with their own bodies and with their own movements through the world. Humans alone harness such a diversity of plants, animals, minerals, and even the labour of other humans to their advantage, creating social institutions far more complex than any flock of birds or school of fish. So, if the bird is its flying, and the fish its swimming, perhaps the human is its making. We might even go further and make culture into a verb. In that case, the human is its culturing. All anthropology explores this human ingenuity, and Minpaku puts it on display. The things found there are living ambassadors of human and other lives, as well as the meshwork that constitutes them.

Anyone looking for birds in the Regional Exhibitions will not be disappointed. Birds have always been useful to hungry humans for their meat, and their dispersal of seeds has quickly spread plants across the planet that are useful for human consumption. But it is above all the feathers that leave material traces for museum collections. It seems that humans, fascinated by the capacities of birds, have long tried to harness their beauty and powers through the use of feathers. This human urge is very present in the Minpaku collection. From the Truk Islands of Micronesia, a comb (item K0000898) is decorated with black feathers three times the length of the comb. Feathers mediated the relationships between people, as can be seen from the bright red coil of feather money (item H0086151) collected from the Santa Cruz Islands of the Solomon Islands. Papua New Guinea has spectacular masks decorated with feathers, as well as masks fashioned into the shape of birds for use in ritual. It is worth taking a closer look at the feather money, as evident in these photos I took of the exhibit below (Photo 2).

Each item is a multi-species assemblage of lives, as we can see by just closely examining the feather money, known as *tiale* by the bush-people who made them and as *tau* by the coastal people who used them. The red feathers were obtained from the scarlet honey-eater (*Myzomela cardinalis*), known as *mungau*. Specialist bird catchers caught them by using decoy-birds placed near branches they covered with the sticky sap of the paper mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) (Houston 2010: 57). The red feathers were plucked from the birds, which were then probably eaten, but would have died at any rate if released because of their lack of feathers. Conservation zoologist David Houston estimates that at least 20,000 male honey-eaters were killed annually for this currency,



Photo 2 Santa Cruz feather money displayed at Minpaku (May 2018, Simon)

adding a 12% mortality rate to the bird population, but did not lead to extinction because of the paucity of other non-human predators (Houston 2010: 63–64).

Methods of both production and storage of feather money were complex multispecies assemblages. The feathers were placed into half a coconut shell and covered with pandanus or other leaves, then sold to other specialists. The red feathers were cut into sections, which were then mounted on small pigeon feathers with paste made from the fruit or seeds of a plant used to manufacture *tapa* cloth to make coils known as *lendu*. All of this was done with wooden tools. The resulting coils of red feather money were high-denomination currencies, used for transactions such as the purchase of an ocean-going canoe, or bride-price. The holders always took special care of the *tau*, keeping it clean and light by storing it in a dry place, usually near a fire. If taken care of well, it was light and elastic like a bird, but if neglected it would become damp, heavy, and lifeless (Pycroft 1935: 181).

Each *tau* could become assemblages of other lives, as when pigs' teeth and stones with religious significance, or perhaps turtle shells and cowrie, were attached. Part of the value came from the colour red, rare in nature, which was seen to be an attribute of the gods (Beasley 1936: 381–383). These red-feather money coils are thus ambassadors of the inland people who trapped the birds, the coastal people who manufactured the money and traded with it, and the plants and two bird species used in its creation. They may even really bear testimony to the creativity of a man named Metali, who first made the money after observing a scarlet honey-eater stuck to the branch of a paper mulberry tree (Beasley 1936: 380). The public exhibitions provide only a small sampling of the objects collected by Minpaku.

IV. Traces of Birds in the Minpaku Collections

In addition to the exhibitions, Minpaku has a collection of approximately 343,600 artefacts, of which 283,300 can be found in an artefact catalogue. Not all have photos and, for various reasons, not all are accessible for viewing. I did my best however to find, hold, contemplate, and photograph all relevant items. A search for the term bird (*tori*) turned up 1,184 items, and feather (*hane*) turned up 593 items. I then narrowed down the selection by looking only for those items found in Taiwan and Oceania. The richest collections among these are from Papua New Guinea, but due to the geographical focus of my larger research project, I decided to first look at artefacts from Taiwan (7 items) and Oceania excluding Papua New Guinea (21 items).

The bird items at Minpaku may be divided into four categories. First, there are the birds themselves, including a bag of ancient feathers that I regarded in delight, imagining those unknown avian lives in flight. Second, are bird traps and weapons for shooting birds. Interestingly, five of the seven items from Taiwan were in this category and two were very similar to traps I have seen in use in Hualien during field research. Third, there were bird body parts incorporated into other things, such as the feather money from the Santa Cruz Islands discussed above. And fourth, there were representations of birds in both art and ritual. With reference to the museum collection, in the paragraphs below I discuss bird traps from Taiwan, as well as Taiwanese (including Ponso no Tao) and Vanuatu artistic representation of birds. I then look at representations of the sacred Yatagarasu crow (*yatagarasu*) I encountered during field research in Japan.

1. Taiwan (Formosa and Ponso no Tao)

The Taiwanese artefacts include tools for catching birds, feathers incorporated into other objects, and representations of birds. I find it interesting to note that there are differences in material cultures between the societies categorised by Taiwanese anthropologist Huang Ying-kuei as chief societies (type A) and big-man (type B) societies. In his taxonomy, the Paiwan and Rukai are considered to be chief societies, with a distinction between nobility and commoners, whereas the Yami of Ponso no Tao and the Atayal (including the present-day Sediq and Truku) are egalitarian big-man societies (Huang 1986: 4). Japanese anthropologist Kojima Yoshimichi once characterized the Atayal as such: 'Atayal society is certainly egalitarian, autonomous and republican. If one could say that the Atayal constitute a political body, one would say that they are a democratic system without equals' (Kojima 1996 [1915]: 235, translated by the author).

In the collection, I found three bamboo traps for catching birds and two arrows for shooting birds. Photo 3 below shows item H0023700, a 74 cm bamboo trap collected from Hualien. Minpaku archives record that it was collected in the Amis village of Pokupoku. It is a long slender piece of bamboo with a notch at the end to which a thread would have been attached. In fact, the two other bamboo traps (H0023701, origin uncertain, and K0003869, collected by Ino Kanori in the Tsou community of Washa in Nantou) included the thread, which looks to be of the same kind of ramie fibre used to weave cloth. As I looked at each trap, I could imagine the man who fashioned it from

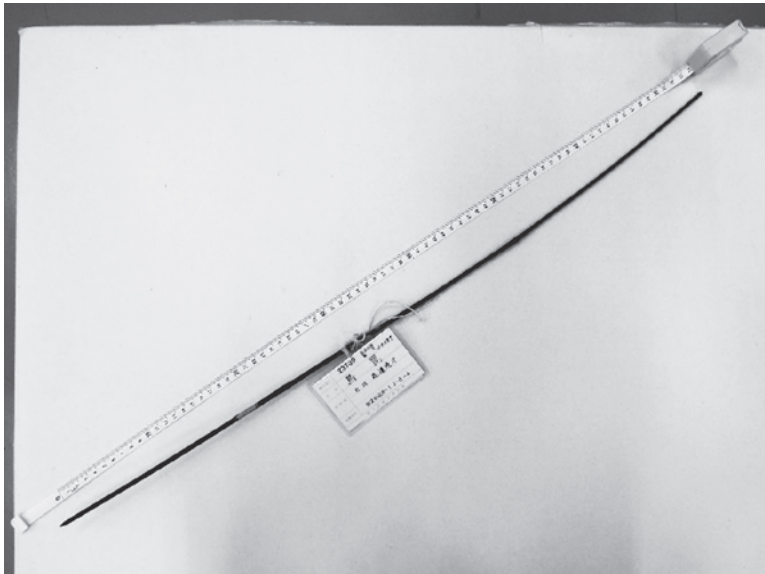


Photo 3 Bird trap. Item H0023700 at Minpaku (June 2018, Simon)

bamboo, got the thread from his wife, and caught the bird, probably for immediate consumption. It may very well have been used to trap a shrike, as I saw in a Truku community in Hualien. I was not surprised to see that the Truku trap is so similar, since the Truku bird trappers I met in Hualien all told me that they learned their techniques from Amis friends.

The following two photos are from my research in Taiwan, where I found that a handful of elderly men still have knowledge of how to catch the brown shrike (*Lanius cristatus*) they call *psima*. They claim that it is a traditional way of catching birds and that before the practice was made illegal, they used to catch them and sell them to tourists to eat on the road leading to the Taroko National Park. By 2012, I had to make great efforts to track down one man who still traps shrikes. He showed me how he cut a small slender stick from bamboo, to which he fixes an even smaller piece as a perch and attached to a piece of thread, which serves as a noose. He fixes this to a larger piece of bamboo, and places it in a clear area away from tall trees. The shrike, which hunts small animals, will land on the perch to get a view of the surrounding terrain. When it lands, the perch will give way, and its foot will be caught in the noose. In Photo 4, he shows me how to set the trap and, in Photo 5, we can see the shrike he caught.

This trap itself is a multi-species assemblage as it includes materials from two kinds of plants, the co-existence of man and wife, as well as the bird that will land on it thinking it is a convenient place to perch. The hunters must have empirical knowledge of the birds. In this case, they say that they only hunt shrike in the fall as the birds are migrating from Japan to the Philippines, and are blown inland to Taiwan by typhoons. This practice is probably very ancient and, except for a very brief period in the post-war decades, was probably undertaken more for self-consumption rather than for trade.



Photo 4 (top) a shrike trap (September 2012, Simon)

Photo 5 (bottom) a trapped shrike (September 2012, Simon)

Nonetheless, hunting pressure in both Taiwan and the Philippines led ornithologists to fear for the survival of this migratory avian population (McClure 1974: 268). Most Truku, however, tend to distance themselves from such commercial activities, even saying that hunting birds is not real hunting.

This simplicity bears testimony to a situation very far removed from the more complex division of labour and trading relations that led to the emergence of feather money in the Solomon Islands. But that is precisely the beauty of what Kojima exalted as egalitarian, autonomous and republican societies. The Sediq/Truku themselves recall the halcyon days of pre-colonial times when all adult men in their small communities (*alang*) were equal and no-one had the authority to give orders to anyone else. This is the kind of society that French anthropologist Pierre Clastres (1974) so famously called ‘Society Against the State’, but I will return to this in the conclusion.

One bird in particular is of special importance to the Sediq and Truku: the tiny grey-checked fulvetta (*Alcippe morrisonia*) they call the *sisil*. This bird was important in

ornithomancy (Simon 2015; Takoshima 2015; Yamada 2014) and has even become the political symbol of both indigenous nations (Simon 2018). Yet, despite years of living in Truku and Tkedaya villages and in two decades of looking at Formosan indigenous items in museums in Taiwan and elsewhere, I never encountered a physical representation of the bird until I saw it in Wei Te-sheng's 2011 film *Warriors of the Rainbow*, where computer animated sisil were used to as a symbol of Sediq resistance against Japanese colonialism. In spite of the existence of divination using birds, there is no social group of diviners or shamans who cultivate a special relationship with the sisil for this purpose (unlike most forms of divination in the world). The Sediq/Truku people say that everyone can have equal access to this bird, who communicates messages from ancestors to all people. Their relationship is with the living bird in the forest, unmediated by human professionals. This bird helps everyone hunt, but its body parts are not harvested, and use of the bird or its representation do not convey any messages of social distinction. It is only in the age of state-led multi-culturalism that it became a symbol of tribal belonging, which is itself a bit misplaced, because other groups also make the same use of the same bird.

In the basement in Minpaku, I returned the bird traps to the shelf and carefully picked up a small clay figure of a bird made by a Yami person on Ponso no Tao (Photo 6). It is from the collection of Kokichi Segawa. Having held a shrike in my hand, but even more recently in Japan, having held birds in my hands that were trapped for banding and research, this piece spoke to me more than any other I observed in the collection. As I cradled it in my hands, I could hold it exactly as one would hold a live bird, with the wings tucked in to prevent it from struggling and injuring itself, or from flying away. Somebody had taken care to carve lines into the clay suggesting the presence of wing and tail feathers. There was even a small feathered crest on the head. The eyes are closed as if the bird is at rest, and the beak appears like a tiny mouth. The



Photo 6 A clay bird, item H0176509 at Minpaku (June 2018, Simon)

feet are webbed, although one is damaged. I could see that the piece was made with care, as if the artist loved birds and wanted to recreate the feeling of holding one. It seemed to me that the figure was made to be held, turned, and caressed in the hands of the person who made it.

In Taiwan alone, these simple objects made by the Atayalic and Yami people are already very different from the things manufactured by the chiefly Paiwan and Rukai people, such as the snake-decorated pot at Donghua University that started me thinking about material culture. In all the museum exhibits I have seen on the topic of indigenous Taiwan, whether in Taiwan, Japan, and elsewhere, there are stark contrasts between the various indigenous peoples. The richest material cultures seem to come from the Paiwan and related Rukai, where there are stone slab houses, elaborate wood carvings, and three handicrafts of bronze knives, clay pots, and glazed beads viewed as symbols of the superior status of the nobles. The Yami are notable for their sea-going canoes and metal hats made from coins, which they reputedly thought were of no value. The Atayalic groups produced beautiful cloth weavings, particularly after the Japanese introduced modern looms, and created intricate designs on the handles of their knives, but compared to the Paiwan they left very little in terms of material culture that could be easily preserved. They lived in the mountains of northern Taiwan in bamboo homes that leave fewer traces than stone slab homes. As nomads, they had little use for decorative pots and large wooden carvings that could not be easily transported.

Finally, we return to the Regional Exhibitions. Due to their rich material culture, the Paiwan are most prominent in the exhibit on indigenous Taiwan. There are Paiwan carved knives displayed on the floor but towering over them are three mannequins dressed in full ethnic attire. Photo 7 below shows Atayal on the right, dressed in modern style weavings that were introduced during the Japanese period—these now flourish due to the state support of weaving workshops. To the left are Paiwan clothes, colourfully adorned with embroidery, beads, shells, a boar's tusk for the man and, most importantly



Photo 7 Paiwan and Atayal regalia at Minpaku (May 2018, Simon)

for those interested in birds, feathers.

The feathers bring us back to the *venaleiage lageinawang* snake pottery, and in fact the two are intimately related. In Paiwan cosmology, the hundred-pace snake transforms itself into a Hodgson's hawk eagle (*Nisaetus nipalensis*), which has the same design on its wing feathers. The four feathers with the clearest designs are traditionally used only as head ornaments of the chief, reflecting their sacred origin and the ritual/political authority of the chief. These artefacts are said to have life (*nasi*) and power (*ruqem*) if taken care of properly (Hu 2005: 163). In the past, there were many taboos and rituals about gathering these feathers and only the nobility could wear them. The different feathers had meanings that conveyed the respective rankings of the chiefs who wore them. In contemporary Taiwan, however, even Paiwan commoners hope to wear them for weddings and other public ceremonies and now have the means to purchase them.

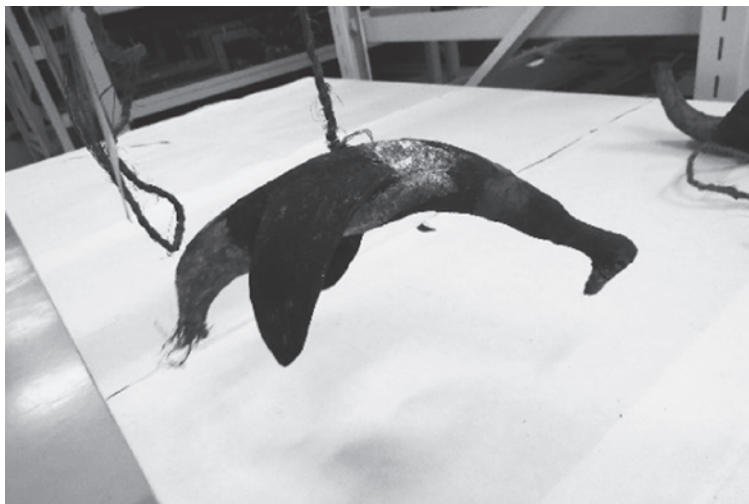
What is important here is the observation that feathers are harnessed to represent social distinctions between humans. They are collected and worn by political leaders in all five of the groups characterised by Huang as chiefly societies (Paiwan, Rukai, Tsou, Amis and Puyuma). In Taiwan alone we can observe that chiefly societies leave behind more items of material culture for museums than relatively egalitarian societies. Chiefly societies have a more complex division of labour, as well as elites who need the power of things to manifest their social positions. One could hypothesise that this complexity would increase across Oceania, at least if one followed the ideas of Marshall Sahlins who traced political evolution from Melanesian 'underdevelopment' in the West to great Polynesian chiefdoms in the East (Sahlins 1963: 286). Although I disagree with his ideas of 'political evolution', I do see the value of better understanding indigenous Formosa by contrasting those societies with those elsewhere in Oceania. I thus turn to Vanuatu.

2. Bird Sculptures in Vanuatu and the Santa Cruz Islands

Vanuatu, formerly known as the New Hebrides, is located in the western Pacific, just north of New Caledonia and south of the Santa Cruz Islands of the Solomon Islands, where the feather money described above was collected. Vanuatu and the Santa Cruz Islands form part of the same rainforest ecosystem, probably share many of the same bird populations, and have a long history of contact between peoples. There were two kinds of bird artworks from this region in the Minpaku collection. Item H0137918 (not depicted here) is a wooden sculpture of a bird 30 centimetres long, and 15 centimetres high. It is painted with black lines on wood to suggest wings and feathers and is adorned with chains of beads and shells. The feet are made from a separate piece of wood, which can be detached from the bird's body.

More intriguing yet is a box of small bird figurines from Mele Island of Vanuatu, some 776 kilometres to the south of the Santa Cruz Island. As I picked up each delicate sculpture, I was amazed to find that they were incredibly light. Each one was about six centimetres in height, and ranged from 20 to 28 centimetres in length. The wingspan of the birds was usually around 20 to 22 centimetres, with the exception of one figurine (item H0125002, Photo 9), that had folded wings measuring 12 centimetres. They were painted in rufous, white, and black colours. Only one (H0125001, top, middle, in Photo 8) had

feet. Both the feet and head were painted red. The eyes and beaks were carefully carved on all of them and each one had a piece of string on the back, which suggests that they were made to be hung, perhaps from ceilings or rafters. Although clay covered the surface, the light weight suggests that they are also made from other items. Indeed, some seemed to have fibres, and item H0125002 had a prominent fibrous tail. They are probably similar to other artworks from Vanuatu in their construction from a melange of vegetable fibre, clay, volcanic pumice, and even spider webs, then painted with ochre (Said 2013). The vegetable fibre may be the same mangrove root used in other masks (Deacon 1970: 427). They are at any rate as much of a multi-species assemblage as any other thing that I examined so far. The tags affixed to the items indicated that they were



Photos 8 and 9 Vanuatu Bird Sculptures, items H124999 to H125003, from Minpaku (June 2018, Simon)

used as decoration during rituals.

A search of the ethnological literature shows that such bird decorations, although less important than masks, could have been used in rituals related to social grading. Birds, especially those with outstretched wings, are an important element of art in the ceremonial houses of north-central Vanuatu, as well as further north (Kaufmann 1996: 32–33). This makes sense in a part of the world where people are proud of their *kastom* (custom), keeping customary law alive despite the challenges of colonialism and post-colonial globalisation. In Malekula, every clan is ritually associated with some kind of plant or animal, including several species of birds (Deacon 1970: 588–589). Moreover, throughout the islands of north-central Vanuatu there is a long history of ethnological inquiry into the ritual and ceremonial systems of ‘graded societies.’ These rituals happen within a hierarchical complex in which men (and occasionally women) seek status and the acquisition of ranked names through ceremonial exchange in emblems, figures, songs, dances, yams, pigs, and other tangible and intangible items. Haidy Geismar looks at affinities between these traditional reckonings of entitlement and new concepts of copyright that can also be used to strengthen indigenous intellectual property rights (Geismar 2005). These small bird statues may have been minor commodities used in ceremonial exchange, and also sold as tourist crafts. I hesitate to make assertions without doing field research in the region, so it suffices to note that these multi-species assemblages, bird sculptures as well as feather money, came together in contexts where people needed birds and other symbols to mark social rankings or grades between humans. Like the Paiwan *venaleiage lageinawang* and hawk-eagle feathers, they are ambassadors of the people who made, used, and traded in them. There are similar items in Japan. I thus turn my attention to one of Japan’s most beloved bird icons, the giant three-legged crow known as *Yatagarasu*.

V. Japan: Crows as Animals, Deities, and National Symbols

Japan is home to a number of crows (*garasu*), the carrion crow (*hashibosogarasu*, *Corvus corone*) and the large-billed, or jungle crow (*hashibutogarasu*, *Corvus macrorhynchos*) being the most prominent. The relationship between humans and crows is close and visible enough that director Wei Te-sheng made the crow into a symbol of Japan in his film *Warriors of the Rainbow*. In the film, as the Seediq begin their battle against the Japanese colonialists, the protagonist Mona Rudao says, ‘the *sisil* birds in the forest will drive away the scavenging crows’. Thus the *sisil* symbolises the Seediq just as the crows indicate the Japanese.

Japan’s most special crow is the Yatagarasu, a giant crow with three legs who appeared to Japan’s first emperor, Emperor Jimmu, in the forests of Kumano and led him to the successful military expedition that founded Japan. This popular story from the *Nihonki* (*Chronicles of Japan*) is depicted in numerous manga and works of art. Since 1931 the Yatagarasu has been the playful symbol of the Japan Football Association.

Most importantly, the Yatagarasu remains an important Shinto deity. In the Kansai area alone, there are Yatagarasu shrines in Osaka, Kyoto, Nara, and Kobe. In Osaka, the

tiny Yatagarasu shrine known as Karasunomiya was founded in 1215, but was given the name Karasunomiya by Daimyo Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1592 when three crows appeared after he gave prayers of thanks for a safe return by sea. This history is presented in an informational plaque at the entrance to the shrine. The altar at this shrine is crafted in the shape of a ship's bow because the Yatagarasu at this shrine located near the Osaka port was traditionally a protector of sailors.

The centre of Yatagarasu worship, however, is at Kumano Sanzan, the three grand shrines located in the southeastern part of the Kii Mountain Range where Emperor Jimmu began his expedition that led to the foundation of Japan. These shrines are the Hongu Taisha, the Hayatama Taisha, and the Nachi Taisha. Since Kumano is accessible from Osaka in four hours by train, I visited the shrines four times, participating in three festivals and one event organised by Yamabushi Priest Hoshino Fumihiro.

On January 7, 2018, I attended the annual Yatagarasu Shinji Ceremony at the Kumano Hongu Taisha. The Yatagarasu Shrine is not in the main shrine compound, but is a separate building in front of the main shrine office. The Yatagarasu Postbox is a popular place for tourists to snap photos and send souvenir cards. In front of the shrine are also carved stones and statues of the crow deity. On this day, chairs were set up in front of the shrine for the crowd that began to gather by mid-afternoon. At 4:30 pm, we were allowed to enter the shrine and kneel on the carpeted floor. The ceremony began at 5:00 pm.

The ceremony itself was a multi-species assemblage. Throughout the ritual, the Shinto priests waved the branches of the shrine's sacred *nagi*, or Asian bayberry tree (*Nageia nagi*). Outside of the shrine, a bonfire was made to purify the freshly made seal carved from a pine branch. As the sky darkened, the lights at the shrine were extinguished so that participants would be illuminated only by the bonfire. Local notables, such as the head of the Kumano Tourist Association, were invited to step up to the altar, kneel, and receive blessings and *nagi* branches. After the prayers were finished, the priests distributed a piece of paper to each participant. The participants crushed forward to kneel in front of the priest, balancing the sheet of paper in the palm of one hand as the priest stamped it with the chop. It was the design of the three-legged footprint of the Yatagarasu. As the people left the shrine in procession, each person was given a few grains of rice, a sip of sake, a tangerine and a *nagi* leaf. This ceremony already offers a glimpse into the ways in which Japan's indigenous spiritual traditions offer a different relationship with nature. It is salient that the most revered ritual items are still locally made.

The Yatagarasu shrines are rich in material culture. There are the imposing wooden buildings, carved stones, woven and embroidered ritual vestments and drapes, and at the Hongu Taisha, a *shimenawa* (enclosure rope) crafted from rice straw into the form of the Yatagarasu. The shrines sell a wide range of talismans, amulets, and good luck charms. Each of the three shrines has its *Go'o ho-in*, a talismanic block-print, with its own distinctive stamps symbolising the Yatagarasu. Souvenir shops in the area sell a wide variety of crow statues, t-shirts, coffee mugs, sweets, and even Kumano Yatagarasu beer. If we think of the complexity of material culture along a spectrum, industrialised Japan is



Photo 10 Shimenawa at Kumano Hongu Taisha. The three sheaths below the rope body represent the three feet of Yatagarasu (January 2018, Simon)

at the far end of a spectrum which begins with the Truku who encounter the sisil in the forest and catch birds with simple bamboo traps. It is not surprising that of all of the societies discussed here, Japan has for centuries had the most complex social structure, with political hierarchies up to the position of emperor and the widest division of labour which, in the manufacture of tourist souvenirs, even reaches out to factories in China. Japanese people seem to live comfortably with the ambiguity of such things as shrines which includes both worship of nature and crass consumerism.

The material cultures of all these societies are simultaneously multi-species assemblages, ambassadors of other lives, and signs of the relative place of each society within the western Pacific. Reflection on this flight around the Pacific, especially considered in relationship to birds in the meshwork of life, reveals much about what it means to be human.

VI. Conclusion

Thinking about birds and humans as part of the same evolutionary process may seem ridiculous, especially as in molecular terms the earliest ancestors of birds (diapsids) and mammals (synapsids) diverged in the Carboniferous period about 310 million years ago (Kumar and Hedges 1998). Yet, this is exactly what an anthropology of life calls upon us to do. Increasingly, ethologists are learning that non-human animals, including some birds, are capable of social organisation, use of symbols, and communication. Anthropologist and ethologist Dominique Lestel even argues that birds have cultures (Lestel 2001: 129). Indeed bird song is among the clearest indicator that birds have regional variations akin to culture and dialect (Parker 2011). A visit to the Izumi Crane Observation Centre in Izumi City, Kagoshima, Japan, in January 2018 drove that lesson home to me. At night, as I slept in the inn right next to the centre, I was kept awake

until past 11 pm by the raucous sound of cranes in the fields outside my window. It was clear to me that the birds were communicating with one another. The following day, as I spent the day observing them feeding, it appeared to me that their arrival at the spot with a group of fellow cranes, interactions with one another, and departures all followed patterns. In fact, professional ethologists working with cranes have been able to understand their social organisation (Tacha 1988), family-based territoriality and winter flocking (Alonso, Bautista, and Alonso 2004). Yet, even if bird movement involves coordination, communication, and perhaps even conscious planning, it still pales in comparison to the organisation of human movement such as the Austronesian colonisation of the Pacific, not to mention international aviation. Perhaps what distinguishes non-human and human mobility most of all is the degree to which human movement and sociality are based on harnessing materiality and materiality gained from other species in ways unknown beyond the human. Because this is subject to local variability, we have become accustomed to calling these local variations of learned behaviour and social coordination *culture*.

As they crossed the Pacific, Austronesian peoples wove together cultures from bricolages of items and animals they brought with them and items they found in new places. Humans crossing the Pacific in canoes were able to construct their vessels with objects attained from non-human lives. And, unlike any birds, they were able to decide which other species to take with them. Because my work is grounded in Taiwan, I use the verb 'to weave' in order to recognise the contribution of women in this process. Atayalic women, including the Tkedaya and Truku women with whom I do research, are very proud of their weaving cultures. Traditionally they used local ramie to make the fibres for their weaving. They tell me that in very ancient times their ancestors had cultivated a ramie with stronger fibres than that found growing wild in their surrounding forests, they had 'domesticated' plants. In the Japanese era, they quickly adopted modern looms, purchased fibre and colourful dyes. After looking at the bird traps in the Minpaku collection, I think that men may also have used the fibres developed by women to hunt. For centuries, the Atayalic peoples in the mountains lived in an egalitarian society following the rhythm of a cultural world of weaving, trapping, hunting, conducting rituals, and observing signs in the behaviour of birds. Compared to other Formosan groups, they left behind little material culture because they needed little. They lived in bamboo forests, and lived from bamboo and millet, so they left what we call today a very small 'ecological footprint'. As we move to the coast, we find ranked societies, and the Paiwan and Rukai people who used feathers and pots to show their rank in society, however these locally sourced materials also came at a low ecological cost.

The ancestors of the Atayalic and Paiwanic peoples were probably those who stayed behind as their relatives planned new journeys eastward by boat about 3,500 years ago. From an avian perspective this was already a disaster as hungry people along with the dogs and rats they brought arrived on islands populated by large-bodied flightless birds with little fear of predators. Recent analysis of the avian fossil record shows that after human arrival close to 1,000 species of nonpasserine landbirds went extinct, in addition to nonpasserine seabirds and passerine birds (songbirds). This was the largest extinction

event of the Holocene (Duncan, Boyer, and Blackburn 2013). As the Austronesians moved eastward, they developed increasingly complex political chiefdoms. They had new forms of sociality through which some people could command others and direct the flow of materials through society. Already in the Santa Cruz Islands humans could use feathers as money to convince other humans to construct boats for them, or to send them a wife from a nearby island. The migrations themselves likely contributed to new political innovation. After all, it would have taken effective leadership to plan and implement such difficult journeys. Individuals who refused to take orders would likely be among those who stayed behind in Taiwan. Japan, of course is on the other extreme of political organisation because it is one of the world's oldest state-based civilisations in the world.

The last century has seen rapid change throughout the western Pacific. In terms of material culture, the money-makers and craftsmen of Santa Cruz, Vanuatu, the Kulu ring, and even the grand chiefdoms of Hawai'i and Tonga built up complex societies and political organisations by mobilising the things they found in their immediate surroundings and trading with peoples from other islands. They left behind rich material cultures that remain in museums like Minpaku as ambassadors from those times and places. Those days are gone forever. One of the biggest changes is that the relative proportion of material culture made from organic materials has decreased rapidly, replaced with inorganic materials of metal and petrochemicals. Oceanic trade now means that one can walk into the 7–11 store on Truku territory to purchase water bottled in Fiji. Everyone uses plastic every day of their lives. Even seemingly distant Vanuatu is fully incorporated into international tourist circuits.

Henri Bergson was so fascinated by both the similarities and differences between humans and other lives that he developed a theory of evolution as a creative process, even coining the term '*élan vital*' (vital impetus) to think through the morphogenesis of life in an increasingly complex manner. For him, humans made an important step beyond the capacities of other lives with the development of language, as words, concepts and symbols made it possible to communicate beyond the immediate objects that are physically at hand (Bergson 2014: 160–161). This is what makes it possible for the Paiwan to use hawk feathers and the people of Mele to use bird sculptures to indicate the relative position of humans within their local social structures. These different positions make it possible for them to channel the movement of things through society, as when Paiwan hunters provided meat to local nobility. These human capacities are fully employed in societies like Japan where the symbol of a crow can be used to mobilise supporters and worshippers at a Shinto shrine, or to inspire fans and players in a football game. It is not difficult to follow Bergson to his conclusion that evolution inevitably led to human industry (Bergson 2014: 165). Disagreeing with Darwin by saying that the differences are of nature rather than of degree, he argued that language and social organisation made humans stand apart from other animals (Bergson 2014: 264–265). But perhaps he was too celebratory of human ingenuity when he concluded that:

The animal takes its stand on the plant, man bestrides animality, and the whole of humanity, in space and in time, is one immense army galloping beside and before and

behind each of us in an overwhelming charge able to beat down every resistance and clear the most formidable obstacles, perhaps even death. (Bergson 1922: 285–286)

Bergson's thought is very teleological, suggesting that industrialisation is an 'overwhelming charge' stemming from the very impulse of life. If this is true, there is little that can be done to stop powerful human groups from expanding their territories, destroying the earth through mining and oil extraction, and driving other kinds of lives to extinction. All of this has happened through the complexification of political socialities in which people compete for prestige, power, and the accumulation of wealth by extracting things from other lives. For birds more than for humans, those human-bird entanglements are likely to be fatal, whether they are trapped to make feather currency on Santa Cruz or getting tangled in plastic bags off the coast of Japan. Anthropologists have shown us, however, that human societies have also made other choices.

In *Society Against the State*, Pierre Clastres showed us that some indigenous societies in the Amazon chose not to develop political forms in which individuals could accumulate political power or economic wealth for themselves (Clastres 1974). In his preface for the French translation of Marshall Sahlins' *Stone Age Economics* (which demonstrated that 'primitive' economies already provided well for their people), Clastres wrote, 'if the primitive man is not an entrepreneur, it is because profit does not interest him; if he does not make his activity "profitable", as say the pedants, it is not because he doesn't know how to do so. It is because he does not want to!' (Clastres 1976: 15). This ethic resonates strongly with the customary law of *Gaya* still remembered by many Sediq and Truku people, whose ancestors for centuries chose not to develop ranked societies like those of the Paiwan or Rukai. The fact that such societies still exist leads Tim Ingold to suggest that we learn from indigenous peoples who are good at 'being with', rather than disengaging from other lives (Ingold 2000: 76). I am also optimistic when I see people look to Japanese spiritualities for a better relationship with nature. There may be hope yet, as long as we are willing to listen to the many ambassadors who speak to us from the meshwork of our interrelated lives.

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