

Reflexive Histories and Futures: The Case of Shark-Toothed Weapons, Climate Change, and Futures Past

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This *te unun* (shark-toothed weapon) from the Gilbert Islands of Kiribati represents a living object, a witness to the ceremonies and conflict on a Pacific island, the commercial exploitation of marine spaces by the nascent globalization of a young United States, and a world that no longer exists. The static nature of this item belies its use as a touchstone for people entering an uncertain future. To learn about it requires an exchange, a relationship between you and the object, where together you become something more than you were before you shared this moment.

The fact that this item is located in the American Museum of Natural History, New York City, and not among the descendants of its original creators, reflects the history of US colonial interests and an imbalance of power between nations. The popularity of similar objects in other museums documents a Western fascination with the “exotic” and “dangerous” world of the Pacific. This fascination with a “radical otherness” has been argued as a method by which Victorian ideals of (white) superiority (and associated ideas of American Manifest Destiny) find their definition—through an opposition to the “exoticism” of the Pacific.¹ These narratives were so important to colonialist societies that even people who could not participate directly in colonization hungered for physical and literary manifestations of the “exoticism” of places like the Pacific. Western ethnography and travel literature in the late nineteenth century viewed expressions of Indigenous culture through this lens so that even commonplace items became associated with the taboos of cannibalism and nudity.² This particular item came to New York from the Central Pacific via the voyages and depredations of Mr. Appleton Sturgis, Esq., who sold his Pacific Island Life collection of 2,200 items to the museum for the sum of \$2,255.31 in 1891.³ It has since been in the holdings of the ethnography department (now the division of anthropology), where access has been limited to accredited researchers and, more recently, those who have cultural ties to the object.

On one level, this is a shark-toothed weapon from the Gilbert Islands of Kiribati, many examples of which were collected by American whalers during the middle of the 1800s, now residing in that citadel of knowledge known as the American Museum of Natural History. It is composed of palm wood, thread woven from human hair, and coconut husks, and is embedded with the teeth of *Carcharhinus obscurus* (the Dusky shark). This item is also a lesson about ardor, community, and the challenges required to live on a small island surrounded by a very, very large sea. In this way, the object recounts the trials and skill necessary to obtain the teeth. This often required sailing offshore to capture a live shark in an outrigger canoe, dispatching the unfortunate chondrichthyan onshore, and distributing the meat freely among the community. These practices strengthened the social bonds that were built upon reciprocity and relationships.⁴ Lastly, and perhaps inadvertently, this item allows us to glimpse a world that no

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longer exists because of changes in climate, labor, and the legacy of extractive colonialism. These sharks were once frequently found in the waters around Kiribati. However, using similar objects, we have been able to show that this species, and one other, were extirpated—driven to local extinction—from the waters around the Gilbert Islands, before Western scientists were able to survey those reefs.⁵

So what do the identities of this object have in common? What can we learn from them and how can the relationships among these identities reinforce and challenge each other? And how can the conservation of this object open new spaces for identity in a rapidly changing world?

As colonization continues into the twenty-first century and the rising ocean—warmed by industrialized nations—threatens to subsume the very shores where this object was once used, historical objects provide a physical link to past relationships between local peoples and the natural world. The ceremonies and practices that built this object and strengthened relationships in the past will be further altered and changed by climate-induced emigration and additional biodiversity loss.

With an average height of just 5 feet, 11 inches (1.8 meters) above sea level, Kiribati is one of the countries most threatened by climate change. The I-Kiribati are already facing numerous climate-related challenges as well as a recapitulation of colonialist, extractive policies draped in a new cloth of climate adaptation.⁶ These threats are making a climate-mediate diaspora a very real possibility.⁷ As we envision a world where the I-Kiribati are displaced from their traditional lands and seas, remembering the relationships among the people and their environment becomes paramount. In short, the oceans in general, and sharks specifically, have been part of what it has meant to be an I-Kiribati for millennia, and having well-preserved anchors to the past may provide solace through an uncertain future's storms. The conservation of this object, and those similar to it, may provide a spark for long overdue conversations between its current stewards and the elders, artisans, and traditional knowledge holders for whom this object still holds cultural saliency.⁸

We, the authors of this essay, should also confront how we came to study this shark-toothed weapon. We are white Western scientists, studying historical ecology and conservation in the Pacific, while living on the lands of the Haudenosaunee people. We are privileged to use museum collections to support theories of lost biodiversity and develop support for conservation programs on islands where we do not live. Museum collections have been historically linked to the natural sciences—and the colonial practices that were intertwined with those collections—since the turn of the eighteenth century. Natural history museums are filled with collections of plants and animals that helped develop the theory of evolution by natural selection, the spread of diseases, and the role of dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT) in silencing the spring, providing testimony to the ravages of climate change today. At the same time, those same collections were used to lend scientific “authority” to white supremacist and racist practices, the repercussions of which still perpetuate active violence against Joshua A. Drew and Katherine N. Lawson, “Reflexive Histories and Futures: The Case of Shark-Toothed Weapons, Climate Change, and Futures Past,” *Conserving Active Matter* (2022), Bard Graduate Center, <https://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/cam/>. © Bard Graduate Center and the authors.

Indigenous communities.⁹ Although our research and this museum collection may help inform and support future decisions, those choices are not ours to make.

The current and future people of Kiribati are faced with a difficult challenge—how to maintain, grow, and evolve their identities and relationships with the land, the sea, and wildlife if a rising ocean forces relocation. How can we support I-Kiribati people that continue to use their local expertise to persevere at the forefront of climate adaptation and management? Can the conservation of this object as a physical entity support the preservation of these cultural ties? These questions can only be answered through deep and meaningful conversations about the role of colonialism in building collections and the role of institutions to protect and preserve them into the future. These conversations need to include multiple perspectives, but they also need to center and be led by I-Kiribati people so that those who are most impacted by these changes may dictate the ways to celebrate their past and move toward a hopeful future.

¹ See Martine Hennard Dutheil, “The Representation of the Cannibal in Ballantyne’s ‘The Coral Island’: Colonial Anxieties in Victorian Popular Fiction,” *College Literature* 28, no. 1 (2001): 105–22; and George K. Behlmer, *Risky Shores: Savagery and Colonialism in the Western Pacific* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

² Patrick Brantlinger, *Taming Cannibals* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

³ *The American Museum of Natural History, Central Park, New York City: Annual Report of the President, Act of Incorporation, Constitution, By-Laws and List of Members for the Year of 1891* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1892),

<https://digilibRARY.amnh.org/bitstream/handle/2246/6206/R1891.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

⁴ For more information about this shark, see the Chondrichthyan Tree of Life, <https://sharksrays.org/>.

⁵ Joshua A. Drew, Christopher Philipp, Mark W. Westneat, “Shark Tooth Weapons from the 19th Century Reflect Shifting Baselines in Central Pacific Predator Assemblies,” *PLOS ONE* (April 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0059855>.

⁶ Marc-Andréj Felix Mallin, “From Sea-Level Rise to Seabed Grabbing: The Political Economy of Climate Change in Kiribati,” *Marine Policy* 97 (2018): 244–52.

⁷ Richard Curtain and Matthew Dornan, “A Pressure Release Valve? Migration and Climate Change in Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu,” Development Policy Centre–Australia National University (February 2019): 1–3.

⁸ Alison Clark et al., “Many Hands, Many Voices: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Exhibiting Kiribati Coconut Fibre Armour,” *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 42, no. 1 (2019): 34–51.

⁹ See Subhadra Das and Miranda Lowe, “Nature Read in Black and White: Decolonial Approaches to Interpreting Natural History Collections,” *Journal of Natural Science Collections* 6 (2018): 4–14; and Sinclair Devereux Marber, “Bloody Foundation? Ethical and Legal Implications of (Not) Removing the Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt at the American Museum of Natural History,” *Colum. JL & Arts* 43 (2019): 85.

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