

# The Body Politic: The Role of Body Art and Anthropomorphic Depictions in Oceanic Societies

**Session Abstract:** Throughout the South Pacific, the human body as art subject or expressive medium has been used to convey political ideals and to structure society. Recently, work across a number of academic fields has focused on embodiment. Shilling has critiqued the most prominent perspectives: constructionism considers the body as a locus for society, phenomenology approaches it as the source of society, and structuration theories view the body as a link between the individual with society. (2003: 203 – 206) Each of these effectively leaves the material form “invisible” (2005: 6), ignoring “how the body is not only a location for social classification but is actually generative of social relations and human knowledge.” (2003: ix) Consequently, Shilling calls for a holistic approach that acknowledges the “body as material phenomenon which shaped, as well as being shaped by, its social environment” and is “Central to our ability... to exercise agency in the world.” (2003: ix) Sociological and philosophical studies have addressed the presentation of the body. However, considering embodiment from the viewpoint of aesthetics or art is less widespread and most research has focused on Western societies. Yet, Shilling’s ideas have applicability to Oceanic cultures and their artistic expression.

This panel will take as its starting point Shilling’s contention that the corporeal body is “a multidimensional medium for the constitution of society (a source of, a location for, and a means of positioning individuals within, society).” (2003: 208) As a source, bodies or their depictions transcend their physicality. As location, the limits of subsequent social actions in regards to the body are established. As a means of positioning, social reproduction and transformation are mediated through embodied forms, including art. (2003: 210) Papers address how the decorated body and anthropomorphic images shape, transcend, or are limited by the socio-political realm in Pacific cultures, now or historically.

Body Ornaments and Tattooing / Canoes, Shields, Images: Ornamental Equivalences and Translations as Social Markers in Western and Nggela Provinces, Solomon Islands  
Deborah Waite, University of Hawai'i

In Western Province, Solomon Islands during the mid-late nineteenth century, wooden carvings that constituted translations of personal ornaments (shell rings, pendants) empowered war canoes and war shields. Sometimes actual shell ornaments were placed in a canoe or were sewn to a shield for this purpose. Shell-inlaid designs on certain canoe prow carvings reiterated the face paint of warriors. Shell materials utilized for personal ornaments as well as for the inlaid ornamentation of canoes and canoe carvings contained their own specific agency. Carved and plaited designs on war shields translated body paint and ornaments. Resultant imagery signaled an immediate personal identification between canoe or shield and social leader and have been said to convey an "aesthetics of intimidation" (Thomas). On Nggela, personal tattooing inscribed on images and clubs transmitted the identity and agency of their owners. In every instance, these "agentic actions" (Shilling) transformed artifacts into multi-dimensional social bodies.

Tiki Kitsch, American Appropriation, and the Disappearance of the Pacific Islander Body  
Dan Taulapapa McMullin, Artist and Independent Scholar

The Pacific Islander body under American colonization is not the embodiment of an ideal but the capitalization of the Pacific Islands thru appropriation. The appropriation of Polynesian and Pacific Islander sacred images and our bodies in American Tiki Kitsch, beginning in Los Angeles in the 1940's, and coming out of Hollywood commodification of the colonized Pacific Islander body, is the continuation of Western gunboat politics and missionary erasure. For indigenous contemporary Pacific Islander artists, working in a variety of media and from many platforms, the project of the indigenous interrogates many assumptions in art criticism and curatorial practice. Rarely addressed from an indigenous positionality, the arguments of appropriation and intellectual property are complicated by Pacific Islander contemporary artists working today.

Moko as politics, Politics as Moko. Maori signatures, 1813-40  
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In Aotearoa New Zealand inscribing the body to show political and cultural alliances was brought from the Pacific on the skins of the first ancestors. The early *tatau* evolved into a distinct practice that was curvilinear and carved into the skin - *moko*. It related information about one's identity, both political and social, and was used to emphasize and reinforce hierarchies within groups by delineating lines of status and power. Such ideas were put under pressure with the arrivals of new peoples. This paper explores how Maori used their *moko* as a political gesture. The focus will be on two documents on which chiefs used their *moko* as signature: a letter to King William IV in 1813 and the Treaty of Waitangi 1840. This letter and the Treaty are today considered by Maori as critical documents in relation to cultural alienation and the redress of land.

Hawaiian Bodyscape: Hair Rituals Circa 1800  
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The body mediates all action and is the primary instrument through which we interact with our physical and social worlds. In addition, the body is the locus for cosmological experience. This paper will explore these concepts as they relate to the bodyscape of the Hawaiian chiefly class (*ali'i*) in the era before Christianity (pre-1820), with a special emphasis on human hair in social practice. Since the head was considered the most sacred part of the body, hair was valued for containing a unique generative potency (*mana*). Highly visible and easily modified, hair could be artistically manipulated on the body or severed for incorporation into ritual objects (such as wigs, body ornaments and figurative sculptures) and to foster dynamic social relationships between human and spiritual entities.

## Bodily Transformations: The Sociopolitics and Symbolic Inversions of Men as Pigs and Pigs as Men in a Pacific Island Chieftainship

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This paper augments Shilling's theories of the body through the analysis of an anthropomorphic equivalent in the culture of Manam Island, Sepik River, Papua New Guinea— in this case, the decorated body of a pig. Here the adorned pig functions as a symbolic transformation of a specific individual, as well as the society itself, the body politic. In Manam the male body is decorated for exchange events, called *buleka*. Adornment and dance embody sociopolitical differentiation between men of chiefly status and commoners, in particular the spatial choreography that symbolizes the chief as “the meat” (the pig) surrounded by the commoner men (“the fence” around the pig.) With the death of a man of chiefly status, aspects of Manam sociopolitical structure are reversed as on this occasion a huge pig is adorned with the regalia of a chief, transforming the animal into the anthropomorphic equivalent of the deceased leader.