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Ku and the battlefield of authenticity

A Hawaiian feather image between empathic and objectified authenticity

INTRODUCTION

For more than 220 years, the issue of "authenticity" of the ethnographic collection from the James Cook Voyages (1968-1780/1) housed at Göttingen University had never surfaced.[1] This, however, changed when a delegation of representatives of a Hawaiian community and an exhibition consultant visited the Ethnographic Museum in 2006 in order to meet, for the first time, one of the most famous feather images of the Hawaiian god Ku (Kuka'ilimoku'), acquired during the Third Voyage of James Cook in 1779. The delegation also came to Göttingen in order to escort Ku back to Hawai'i, where the feather image, along with more than 300 other artefacts from the Cook Voyages, was to be displayed in an exhibition organised by the Honolulu Academy of Arts (2006).[2] The collection was destined to travel to Canberra, Australia, later (2006). Some of the most singular artefacts then went on to the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris (2006/07), to the modern art museum Fondation Beyeler in Switzerland (2009) and finally, to a large exhibition hall (Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle) in Bonn (2009/2010). During the collection's tour from one exhibition site to the next, Ku became attributed with a variety of meanings whose basis was constituted by the assumption of the authenticity of the artefact (Hauser-Schäublin 2011). Towards the end of the tour, the materiality of the feather image became contested – and with it, its authenticity.

With our decision to lend the feather image of Ku for exhibitions in different parts of the world, we entered the world of exchange and were plunged into a tournament of values (Appadurai 1986:21), interests and goals.[3] We became stakeholders in the game of the art market, and the cultural value of the artefact which had dominated our discourses before became permeated by its value as a commodity (Geismar 2008). We realised that this tournament of values was about a whole range of meanings and values whereby the commodity value (exhibition or display value in Benjamin's terminology [1936] 2008) formed one end of an axis of values and meanings with which the feather image was associated; the

[1] The Göttingen collection comprises a quarter of all the ethnographic items acquired on Cook's Voyages that are presently in museum collections around the world (for the history of the collection, see Hauser-Schäublin and Krüger 1998; Kaeppler 1998a).

[2] Two other important exhibitions on Pacific art took place in Europe in the same year: the "Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia, 1760-1860" in the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich, and the "Pasifika Styles" exhibition in the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and in the Musée du Quai Branly. Both exhibitions embarked – at least for Europe – on new ways to integrate or combine past and present Pacific cultures (see Jacobs 2009).

[3] Gundolf Krüger, the curator of the ethnographic collection of the Institute for Cultural and Social Anthropology, and myself. I was then chair at the institute and responsible for the collection.

ritual or cultic value (Benjamin [1936] 2008) constituted the opposite end. These meanings encompassed Ku's commodity value, especially for transport and insurance companies; the cultic or ritual value Ku had as an intimate and ancestral part of pre-colonial Hawaiian culture for today's Hawaiians (and probably also for other South Pacific islanders); the exhibition value Ku had as a singular historical and artistic object for the exhibition halls, museums and visitors, since it had never been shown abroad; and finally, Ku and its value as an artefact crafted in a particular Hawaiian way and "unspoiled" by European (or "western") material and crafting. These values constantly interacted with each other according to the most initiative actors in each configuration and sometimes the values fused.

For museum curators, even if they are sensitive to the contingency of the concept of "authenticity",[4] the authenticity of the artefacts for which they are responsible is of particular importance (see, for example, van der Grijp 2009; Jones 2010). It is the objectivist or materialist perspective that dominates their daily care for the material preservation or even the physical survival of the artefacts. We had also been looking at the feather image (as well as the other artefacts from the Cook Voyages) as researchers and curators in a similar way. We were anxious to preserve Ku in the condition in which it was: The bright feathers that looked brand new, and the flawless way in which they were attached to the wickerwork underlay with no bald spots. We were concerned about the insecticides which were to be used in order to prevent any damage from beetles and moths, and we were worried about the dangers of fading if the feathers were exposed to intense light. It was a sobriety that dominated our everyday perspective on Ku and our perception of its authenticity.

However, there is another aspect of authenticity linked to artefacts, namely the contextual side or the historical and cultural setting in which the artefact had been produced and used, and the immaterial, even sacred or spiritual value it also embodies for today's source community. This is a different form of authenticity but is linked to the material expression, the object, and forms one of the ethical motives for curatorial care.[5]

Ku, the feather image of the Hawaiian war god Kuka'ilimoku,[6] had been situated in Göttingen for more than two centuries and allowed to move around only within a confined area

[4] See, for example, Bendix 1997. With regard to the anthropology of Oceania, the authenticity discussion started with authentic "traditions"; for an overview, see Hanlon and White 2000; Jolly 2000; Keesing [1989] 2000; Keesing and Tonkinson 1982; Linnekin 1991, 1992; Trask [1991] 2000.

[5] Van der Grijp identifies this concept of authenticity as a kind of "spirit of the object" in which the people anthropologists study "may well believe […] but most anthropologists do not believe in spirits themselves" (2009:315).

[6] Today, Hawai'ians point to the vast variety of meanings Ku represents for them. The interpretation of a "war god" seems to be too narrow. In 2010, the Bishop Museum brought together the carved images of Ku still extant. They were also displayed in a temporary exhibition. The project manager, Noelle Kahanu, gave another description of the god Ku: "I think that the reputation that precedes Ku today is that he is the god of war, that he was associated with human sacrifice. […]. The negative aspects of

restricted to the city of Göttingen since the first artefacts from the Cook Voyages had reached the University in 1782.[7] Ku had been forced to leave its seclusion only once during the Second World War when it was (as part of the ethnographic collection) tucked away in a shutdown tunnel near Reinhausen in the Bremke valley, not far from Göttingen. In contrast to other Hawaiian feathered artworks from the Cook Voyages, Ku did not get directly involved in the turmoil of a break-in and the Second World War, and survived unharmed.[8]

For us – as for the generations of anthropologists in charge of the Göttingen collection before us – Ku represents not only the most spectacular and valuable artefact, but also the carefully preserved material link to the time when the curiosities kept in the University's Academic Museum gradually turned into objects of scientific investigation.[9] At the same time, Ku also embodies the link to the era of Cook's Voyages, especially the Second Voyage in which the German scholars Johann Reinhold and Georg Forster participated, and the way in which such artefacts were collected (Heintze 2009; Thomas and Berghof 2000).

In this paper, I am going to describe to describe two contrasting exhibition settings, one in Honolulu and the other in a privately owned modern art museum in Europe, in which Ku was displayed. In each of the exhibitions, Ku's originality was experienced in a completely different way by the audience: In Honolulu, Ku became a sacred representation and offerings were laid in front of the feather image; thus, Ku was attributed with a cultic or ritual value and the visitors developed an empathic relationship with it. In the second case, Ku was displayed as a highly artistic and expressive artefact and was in dialogue with examples of modern Western art. Thus, the visitors looked at the feather image in the same analytical-appreciating way as they did other outstanding works of art. It was evidently the aspect of the image's display or exhibition value which determined the relationship between the audience and Ku. Obviously, two different ways of perceiving the feather image existed and, correspondingly, two different ways of assessing the originality or authenticity of the artefact. I will take

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warfare, aggression, all of these things, are why everybody says, 'Ku God of War.' The reality is that while we may now know the names of some 20 different forms of Ku, there may have been over 200. In other words, Ku represented male endeavors: fishing, farming, gathering, canoe carving, medicine, healing. These were not negative, they were positive or benign" (Grace 2010).

[7] Adrienne Kaeppler curated the famous exhibition "Artificial curiosities" at the Bishop Museum in 1978 (see Kaeppler 1978). She had requested a number of artefacts from the Göttingen Cook/Forster collections, including Ku, on loan. A number of artefacts were shipped to Honolulu but, at that time, Ku was considered too fragile.

[8] In 1932, there was a break-in at the Ethnographic Collection and the Hawaiian feather helmet and feather cloak were stolen. The director of the art history museum in Berlin castle discovered in 1945 how Russian soldiers made "mischief" with two ethnographic artefacts (in fact, they were targeting small mud balls at the helmet). The German collector Arthur Speyer identified it as the helmet from the Göttingen collection; the artefact had remained unharmed and was returned to Göttingen. The feather cape has never surfaced and the break-in was never solved (Krüger 2006:47-48; Schindlbeck 2012:143-146).

[9] For the detailed history of how the collection was assembled in London and sent to Göttingen, see Urban 1998.

Benjamin's distinction between ritual or cultic value and display or exhibition value as a starting point.

EMOTIONAL RELATIONS WITH KU AND THE ANCESTORS

We were sceptical when we heard that representatives of a Hawaiian community and also an exhibition consultant intended to meet Ku in Göttingen and then escort the feather image back to Hawai'i. In fact, we anticipated that this was only a kind of promotion tour of the exhibition hall.

The delegation consisted of four Hawaiians, three men and a woman; they arrived in Göttingen on 23 January, 2006. The members of the delegation were La'akea Suganuma as the representative of the Royal Academy of Traditional Arts (he also teaches *lua*, or "bone-breaking", a form of Hawaiian martial art), Jerry Walker (also from the Royal Academy of Traditional Arts), Jackie Kaho'okele Burke (a film-maker), and Leonard Kelemoana Barrow (an expert on Pacific cultures and consultant of the exhibition at the Honolulu Academy of Arts).

When the delegation entered our institute, they went straight to the showroom where Ku was set up on a table in front of the showcase. Everything had already been prepared for the special packing this delicate feather work needed in order to be transported to Hawai'i. The Hawaiians immediately started to prepare themselves for their first encounter with Ku. They each wrapped a shoulder cloth around their formally dressed bodies and lined up in a row with bowed heads in front of the showcase. They remained silent for a moment and all conversations between the few journalists present and members of the institute suddenly stopped. The silence was unusual and was the prelude to an unexpected ritual in our museum. La'akea Suganuma started to speak a few words in Hawaiian and English about the extraordinary encounter they had come a long way to experience. He then started to invoke the ancestors and the Hawaiian gods. The chant in a vibrating voice changed everybody's look and one could even see how all the beholders felt their blood run cold. He then took a coconut shell of water and asked me to accompany him when he approached the feather image. He began to murmur some invocations and then sprinkled some drops of water on the table where Ku stood (see photograph in Little 2011:VIII). He then informed the (small) audience that the Hawaiian ancestors had acknowledged Ku's presence in Göttingen and that they were present.

We were, in fact, unaware of what Ku and warriorship symbolized for many Hawaiian men today, namely the remaking or rather the (re)formation of gendered or rather masculine and indigenous subjectivities, that is, male Hawaiian identities (Tengan 2008). The encounter

with Hawaiian artefacts representing Ku in different forms and the paying of homage to them in museums belonged to Hawaiian men's endeavours to revitalize their relations with Ku in his many manifestations. However, the revitalization and establishment of relationship through ancient artefacts goes even further, as the case of their visit to the Te Papa Museum in Wellington showed, since they also wanted "to sanctify [their] relationship with the museum" (Tengan 2008:209; 203-210). Ku was, as Hawaiian representatives said, "not just the god of war but also as a pan-Hawaiian icon of what it is to stand and be upright (*ku*), to continue, to procreate, and to prosper after the overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom in 1893"; they even denoted the museums in which Ku images are kept as Ku's "present 'temples'" (Jolly 2011:125). Only in retrospect were we able to understand what the delegation (albeit including a woman) was performing in our sober storerooms. Ku was definitely not simply an "object", but a "subject".

Ku was then put back into the showcase. Sometime later, the feather image was packed up and finally transported, as part of the whole collection, to Hawai'i. The delegation from Hawai'i did indeed escort the transport from the beginning of the trip to its destination. Upon arrival (as we were told later), a welcome ceremony was held for Ku. And the same – a welfare ceremony – was held when the feather image of Ku left.

During the conversations with the Hawaiian representatives in Göttingen and Honolulu, we learned that the feather image was perceived as a sacred work of art that still bore the fingerprints of the ancestors who had crafted it. The many generations in between – the time gap – seemed to be compressed in this brand-new looking feather image, so that one could, so to speak, shake hands with the forefathers from the 18th century. Furthermore, this feather image also had a divine aura. It was clear that the god Kuka'ilimoku was (re-)presented by this feather image and that the ritual leaders had achieved communication and even a communion with him. The tears shed by members of the delegation during the communication ritual in Göttingen, and the moved faces of many Pacific islanders we saw when they encountered Ku in Honolulu showed that deep feelings were involved and an emotional bond between them and the feather image/the god Ku had been established.[10]

We realized that "our" feather image contained an originality and a power for present-day Hawaiians we had not expected due to the time gap of more than 200 years and the

[10] Keawe Kaholokula, one of the Native Hawaiian leaders chosen to bring the wooden sculpture representation of Ku "home" (the temporary exhibition of the Bishop Museum in 2010), said: "His homecoming has caused great emotions". And the project manager for the Bishop Museum, Noelle Kahanu commented: "I've been here for 12 years […] and I've never seen an exhibit with this kind of impact. People are moved to tears, and that's as good as it gets. Through objects, people are transformed, or at least reach an understanding not only about culture but about themselves" (Grace 2012).

geographic distance that lies between its origin and the place where it had been housed for centuries. Through the form and the material – especially the bright red feathers – and based on its documented origin in the mid-18th century, the feather image became an actor which "indexed" something particular to the Hawaiians, from which we were excluded (Gell 1998): It was a ritual value that the feather image embodied for the members of the delegation; they possessed the corresponding knowledge and were exhibiting an empathy we were lacking due to our different cultural background.

RITUAL AND EXCHANGE VALUE – AND OSCILLATIONS BETWEEN BOTH

Benjamin, in his essay on a (historical-materialist) theory of art ([1936] 2008), differentiated between two polar aspects in the perception of art: The "cultic value" – I will henceforth use the more common contemporary term "ritual value" – and the "display value" or exhibition value of a work of art.[11] The former constitutes the "genuineness" of the artefact, the latter its "authenticity". The ritual value is interwoven with the context in which this work of art is used: the ritual. The ritual value of the image embedded in rituals, Benjamin continues, is its original and first utility value. Benjamin contrasts this utility value with the display value, which is, in fact, a form of exchange value, the same object may have when it is detached from its original function and enters into a relationship with things of the same kind, that is, for example, an ethnographic collection: Authenticity needs to be assessed by the means proposed by the art market and requires objective methods of verifiability, since it "is seen as an objective and measurable attribute inherent in the material fabric, form and function of artefacts and monuments" (Jones 2010:182).

Ku's display, or rather exchange value, definitely began when the feather image was offered for sale in London and King George III of England (who was a descendent of the German noble house of Hannover) commissioned the art dealer, George Humphrey, to assemble a collection of artefacts from Cook's Voyages for Göttingen University. The feather image was bought for 50 *Reichsthaler*, which was more or less equivalent to the annual income of a university professor in 1782 (Urban 1998:65-66).

In contrast, ritual value, and therefore the artefact's genuineness, can be attested only in a culture-specific context by members of a ritual/religious community.[12] An artefact does

[11]Of course Ku was, as any ritual artefact, also displayed in specific ritual contexts of the Hawaiians in the 18th century (see Valeri 1985). However, such displays were not open to an unrestricted public. The play between concealing and revealing is an important part of many rituals (Hauser-Schäublin 1992). For Benjamin's understanding of display value, see below.

[12] Benjamin, however, adds that "the concept of genuineness never ceases to reach beyond that of authentic attribution: This comes out with especial clarity in the person of the collector, who always has something of the slave to fetishism about him and through possessing the work of art partakes of its cultic power" (2008:40, ftn. 6).

not need be “very old”, “manufactured before European influence”, “original”, “unchanged”, or “rare” (attributes highly valued on the art market). Instead, the ritual value of an image is experienced through its ritual effectiveness. The image possesses its ritual value only as long as the community experiences its power through communication with the image or the beings thereby represented. If a ritual image loses its power, it will be destroyed, simply disregarded, thrown away, and possibly replaced by a new image. Alternatively, as the many ethnographic collections show, such images have survived local iconoclasts, been placed in museums and are ready to be awakened to ritual value again. Ku is an example of this. Thus, there is no unilinear development from ritual to display value, as Benjamin had anticipated. The transformation from ritual to exchange value can apparently be reversed at any time, depending on the actors, and by reactivating the artefact’s ritual value (see also Clifford 1988:226). Instead of fixed chronological sequences, both may even co-exist at the same time.

The exhibition in Honolulu showed to what extent Ku was not just an “exhibit” but rather a sacred artefact. The opening, which was attended by many dignitaries from Pacific societies, took place in a markedly religious-ritualistic atmosphere and also began with an invocation of the ancestors. Following the advice of Hawaiians, Ku was exhibited on a platform above the heads of the visitors, sheltered by a glass showcase. When we entered the exhibition hall immediately before the opening, we became aware that ceremonies had apparently been taking place there as well. There were offerings (flowers) and other ritual gifts deposited at the base of the platform (see the photograph in Menter 2009:117). During the exhibition it became apparent that the delegation which had been sent to Göttingen did not represent a homogeneous or unified Hawaiian community. Differences exist among the Hawaiians, especially over the ownership and destiny of Hawaiian cultural documents located in museums and the appropriate way in which to deal with them, as the Kawaihae dispute or the Forbes Cave Controversy has shown (Johnson 2007).

Ivy Hali’imaile Andrade from the Centre for Hawaiian Studies of the University of Hawai’i, Mānoa, wrote in a review of the exhibition: “I found the altar-like setting perplexing and there was no explanation for it. It seemed overly dramatic, and I feel it encouraged people to leave *ho’okupu* (offerings), not understanding how this particular Kū (ancestral deity associated with politics or war) may have functioned as a private god for designated followers rather than a public god for all to worship” (Andrade 2007:342).

Thus, Andrade was pointing out that Ku was not destined to be exhibited to an unrestricted public. Her critique focuses on the blending of ritual and display value: The pedestal seemed to – apparently wrongly – suggest a site of worship for all those who felt emotionally attached to the testimonies of ancient Hawai’i or the South Pacific in general. Nevertheless, Andrade explained her personal attachment to the artefacts as follows: “As a

Hawaiian, I am linked genealogically to the pieces from Hawai'i lying behind the glass cases; they are my ancestors" (2007:342).

Later, when the exhibition was already in progress, Ton Otto told me how he saw a group of South Pacific islanders outside the Honolulu Academy of Arts. They stopped before entering the exhibition, concentrated for a moment, held each other by the hand and then intoned a song. It was, they explained, a ritual preparation before appearing in sight of "their ancestors" (pers. communication). Thus, the ritual value of Ku dominated the perspective of many Pacific Islanders. Accordingly, Ku represented genuineness and radiated a kind of numinous or magical quality (Jones 2010:208). In other words, Ku "brought home" created contexts of new revaluation, of rediscovery and re-experience of what had not been accessible to the Hawaiians before (see Little and Ruthenberg 2006).

Thus, a double process took place involving two parties of actors and their mutual interaction: the Hawaiians and Ku. Following Gell (1998), we could say that the feather image of which the Hawaiians knew its history of origin "indexed" something special to them.[13] This "indexing" evoked a specific perception (and interpretation) with the expression of emotions we had witnessed and of which Noelle Kahanu had been speaking (ftn. 11) on the occasion of the exhibition E Ku Ana Ku Paia in the Bishop Museum in 2010 (Ka'Elele 2010). Conversely, the expectations and experiences of the Hawaiians caused the emergence of Ku as a numinous being with its specific ritual value. Therefore, as Kahanu had said, the "object" had also transformed and reactivated people (Grace 2010; Tengan 2008).

THE FEATHER IMAGE AS AN EXHIBIT AND ITS CHALLENGED AUTHENTICITY

In the modern art museum Fondation Beyeler in Riehen (Switzerland), Ku became integrated into an exhibition called "*Visual Encounters: Africa, Oceania, and Modern Art*" in 2009. The historicity of the feather image, the conditions under which it was collected or the functions it had in the past and has in the present were not in the foreground, but were taken as an inherent part of its authenticity. The feather image was selected because of its artistic composition with its blazing red feathers, the bright yellow crest and its strong facial expression; it represented an authentic work of "non-Western" art. The immediacy or agency of the direct visual power formed a binding link in the open juxtapositions with western art. This exhibition has to be seen in the context of the tradition that started with the "primitivism"

[13] The encounters the Hawaiians had with Captain Cook were eclipsed from this re-experiencing of history. The emphasis lay almost exclusively on the Hawaiian forefathers and their life world (for a Hawaiian perspective on Cook, see Jensen and Tarallo Jensen 2009).

exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984 (Clifford 1988; Errington 1998; Rubin 1984). It consisted of the comparison of works from Africa, Oceania and the Americas with Western art. Thus, the basic idea consisted of encounters and dialogues between Western art and non-Western "art". The unmediated encounter between works of art – such as a painting of sea roses by Monet with sculptured (sacred/secret) crocodiles from the Korewori (Papua New Guinea) – should create an aesthetic tension and a progression in contrast that increase the visitor's perception (Wick 2009:21). The feather image was displayed in an exhibition hall together with a colourful and monumental painting, mostly in red, by Mark Rothko. There, too, aesthetics or aesthetic tension between non-Western and Western art were in the foreground. As the curator said, the choice of the individual works of art and their juxtaposition was based rather on intuition and aesthetic feeling than pure rationale.

In such exhibitions, the public looks at the artefacts – the feather image in our case – as an outstanding work of art and perhaps also as a spectacular and exotic object. This gaze of admiration also includes assessment and inspection – visualism – which implied an objectification of the feather image (Edwards et al. 2006). In fact, as a consequence of this gaze of assessment and inspection, authenticity became a disputed issue. During the official opening with distinguished guests, three scholars of Oceanic art had a close look at the feather image and they began questioning the authenticity of Ku with regard to the feathers and also in the way the knotting of the underlay was made. However, this talk among experts was expanded to a wider audience and words like "chicken feathers" started to be rumoured. This new "knowledge" about authenticity challenged the knowledge that we had taken for granted before, namely that the feather image had remained in its original condition since the moment it had reached Göttingen in 1782.

Sometime later, in February 2009, the curator of the University's Ethnographic Collection received a query from one of the critical experts. He reported that a student from Hawaii, who was working on his/her MA dissertation on Hawaiian feather-work, was in contact with him. The student had suggested that most, if not all, of the feathers on the Göttingen Hawaiian head had been replaced at some time in the 20th century during restoration of the head. The expert added that he had always thought that the feather image looked a little strange and "fluffy", and different technically from the heads he had studied. He pointed out that the head in Honolulu was mounted very high near the ceiling, so it was not possible to study it carefully. By contrast, he was able to have a close look at it at the Fondation Beyeler exhibition. He came to the conclusion that the red feathers on the neck looked as though they could be feathers from the *i'wi* bird, but the yellow feathers on the crest and around the base did not look right; normally, he continued, the base feathers would be attached to a circular

flap around the base. Not only the feathers but also some of the teeth, he suggested, looked as though they had been replaced, or rearranged, with three internal sticks supporting the structure, which may have been collapsing in on itself in the past.

His detailed inspection resulted in the following questions: Is there any documentation about this apparent restoration? Was it perhaps in the 1930s or 1950s? The expert added that he had been discussing these issues with another anthropologist and expert on Oceanic art who told him that they had heard about the restoration several years ago, but they could not remember who had told them. However another expert (on the Cook collections) told him that they had not heard about it.

The writer's doubts concerned almost all aspects of Ku's materiality: The feathers ("most if not all", "the yellow feathers on the crest and around the base do not look right"), his look ("a little strange and 'fluffy'"), the teeth ("some of the teeth look as though they have been replaced, or rearranged"), and the technique with which it was manufactured ("different technically", "normally the base feathers would be attached to a circular flap around the base"). What remained of the feather image if all these assumptions suggesting not only minor restoration, but heavy replacements were true? Could its materiality still be called authentic "Hawaiian" (see also Jones 2010:184)?

All of a sudden, the feather image "indexed" something completely different: No longer an unchanged Hawaiian artefact but rather non-professional European restoration work. Moreover, it also implicitly raised the questions of our integrity: Had we concealed information we should have released to the lenders and the public?

The question of authenticity, however, had struck us earlier in the guise of insurance value. When the prospective borrowers wanted to arrange a contract, they also needed to know what value the feather image had in terms of money (exchange value). Moreover, we had decided to ask for substantial fees for lending all the objects, since the Göttingen collection, as part of a teaching institution – the University – had no budget at all nor staff for conservation work or any other tasks required for administrating and keeping such collections. We consulted auction catalogues and contacted colleagues before we determined the monetary value of the artefacts (see also Geismar 2001). We were performing a kind of imaginary auction with all the implications this had for the "thing" and people related to it (Geismar 2008). The ministry and the University President relied on our expertise; if anything happened to one of the federal state of Lower Saxony's most valuable collections, it was sure that we were the first to take the responsibility. The insurance value of Ku, the flagship of the ethnographic collection, finally reached several million Euros. The insurance fees for both the

transport and the exhibition were incredibly high. The institutions which had been successful in raising enough funding to exhibit such a costly collection naturally made promotion campaigns on a large scale. The media reception was very positive everywhere and most of the visitors were delighted.

The innocent query stirred up a nightmare. Moreover, the letter reached us shortly after the opening of the exhibition at Fondation Beyeler, and there, I had insisted on a respectable fee for lending Ku, which was generously offered to the Beyeler Museum by the L + Th. La Roche Stiftung, since the museum itself does not ask for or pay any such fees. Therefore, I was even more appalled. I wrote an e-mail to the curator asking him about the rumour. In the meantime, another colleague let us know that some of these rumour-mongers had alluded that the yellow feathers were dyed chicken feathers.

The curator wrote back:

> Never mind. If so many people of the "ethno scene" meet all in one bunch, gossiping seems to be inevitable. I did not notice anything then because I was too busy with other lenders. I had heard something about chicken feathers recently. But I didn't pay much attention to it.[14]

We felt relieved for the moment since we apparently did not face accusations of "selling" the artefact at a display value it did not indeed hold. However, as reactions from colleagues in different countries showed, the gossip had spread rapidly and would certainly reach the earlier exhibition sites soon. Furthermore, the last huge exhibition in Bonn was already in preparation, and we felt obliged to inform its director about the renowned colleagues' doubts about "our" feather image.

METHODS OF ASSESSING KU'S AUTHENTICITY

We were overtaken by the exhibition value of Ku and the way we had gambled with it. Although we had the opportunity to rely on an almost unbroken line of handing down Ku, and records of its condition reports since the 1930s [our predecessors were still active], this "proof" did not seem to be sufficient. We had to systematically reassess Ku's material authenticity. We decided to follow van der Grijp's suggestions: He identified – among others (see Jones 2010:184) – the following criteria for assessing the authenticity of an artefact: 1) That the object was actually made by the people to whom it is attributed; 2) that it was made in the time

[14] The quotations of this and the following e-mail correspondence have been authorised by the writers.

period concerned; 3) that the material from which it is supposed to be made is indeed that material; and, last but not least, 4) that the object is of artistic quality (van der Grijp 2009:315). The inquiry of our concerned colleague touched the first three criteria: 1) Was Ku, in its current shape, actually made by the people to whom it is attributed – or perhaps by gifted artists in Europe in the second half of the 18th century? 2) Could we really say that the feather image was made in the time period concerned (before 1780)? And 3), was the material from which it was supposed to be made indeed that material?

We decided to take van der Grijp's criteria as a guideline for assessing Ku's authenticity.[15] Three tracks of investigation following the international standards (as spelled out, among others, by van der Grijp) included: 1) the reconstruction of the artefact's biography, 2) the analysis of the wickerwork and the application of the feathers to it, and 3) the analysis of the birds' feathers. On the following pages, the assessment of the feather image will be described in some detail.

The collection history of the feather head was explored by Gundolf Krüger, the curator of the collection. His report goes as follows.

Humphrey, who was commissioned to assemble a collection in 1781, wrote a detailed catalogue of the objects and sent the collection and the catalogue to Göttingen in 1782. He wrote about the feather image of Kuka'ilimoku: "The whole image is singularly curious from the Sandwich isles" [Hawai'i].[16] Eight feather images which originated from the Cook Voyages exist; there are five others which were collected later. The Göttingen specimen was probably among the four feather images that were brought to Cook and his companions by boat in Kaawloa Bay on 26 January, 1779. The feather images seem to have looked similar: "[…] the mouths of all are strongly distorted" (Beaglehole 1967:512).

There is only one among the feather images still existing which displays a couple of similar features to the Göttingen specimen: The pronounced teeth and the open mouth, the profile, and also the fluffy look and the fragile construction and support with sticks mentioned in the colleague's letter. This feather image is, however, much smaller and the teeth were not dog but shark teeth. This feather image was part of the private collection of an Englishman, A.W.F. Fuller. He donated it to the Field Museum in Chicago where it has remained since 1958.

[15] We presented the findings (on 28 July, 2009) to the interested public in Göttingen before the collection went to the last exhibition in Bonn. The results were also communicated to the colleague who had sent us the query.

[16] For a full version of Humphrey's catalogue text, see catalogue number 274 (in Hauser-Schäublin and Krüger 1998:326). The original number in Humphrey's catalogue is no. 199.

The earliest photographic documentation (on a glass plate) of the Göttingen specimen dates back to 1927; it was published by Hans Plischke, the first Curator and Professor of Völkerkunde (anthropology) at Göttingen University and its (then) newly founded Institut für Völkerkunde, in 1929. One of the photographs shows Kuka'ilimoku in profile, so that the mother-of-pearl disc (eye) and its fissure is visible on the right side of the face. It is this fissure that was "repaired" (glued) in 1965 (as documented by a photograph of the same year). Otherwise, this photograph proves that the shape and the "fluffiness" of the feather image was the same then as it is today. A second photograph in Plischke's publication shows the inner side of the head and its wickerwork construction from below. A comparison with a recent photograph illustrates that this part, as well as the mouth with the teeth, also still look the same.[17]

In sum: The tracking of the artefact's history based on written and visual archival records over the past 80 years provides evidence that the feather image has remained unchanged.

Adrienne Kaeppler published further information only a year later, in 2010: The feather image had probably been traded by David Samwell, surgeon's mate on Cook's Third Voyage; he sold his collection by auction shortly after he had returned from the voyage.[18] Thus, as this information showed, the biography of this artefact is also not static but changing, depending on subsequent research and also the perspective applied. Nevertheless, Krüger's report based on oral (information from our predecessors), visual and written documents disproved the hearsay of restoration work, except for the glued fissure of the eye about which he had already known.

However, the feather image's materiality was not yet determined. Therefore, we had to move to the second step of verification/falsification. Fibres (wickerwork) and feathers were the major materials used. The Hawaiian technique of how the feathers were applied to the wickerwork seems to have followed a characteristic pattern, as the critic had noted. The Göttingen exemplar apparently did not display these features. The investigation into the

[17] Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840), Professor of Medicine and Natural History at Göttingen University, was the first curator of the Academic Museum. He had exact drawings made of a large number of artefacts (some he had drawn himself). We can assume that he also made one of Ku; unfortunately, this drawing (which would have shown Ku's condition around 1800) is missing.

[18] Adrienne Kaeppler gave the following description of the collection history of the feather image: "Two smaller and still pristine god figures also have definite associations with Cook's voyages. One figure is now in the Field Museum, Chicago (G5; 272591), and was also in the Leverian Museum. The other small, pristine figure is in the University of Göttingen's Ethnological collection (G6; OZ 254). These two figures were probably recently made for the next battles in which they would be carried: the Chicago figure was probably acquired by Cook on a separate occasion; and the Göttingen figure was probably traded to David Samwell, surgeon's mate on Cook's third voyage, who sold his collection by auction shortly after he returned from the voyage" (Kaeppler 2010:18).

materials and the techniques applied required further expertise. We decided to ask experienced conservators specialized in Oceanic art, Gerry Barton and Sabine Weik, from New Zealand, to take on this task.[19]

The cordage, of particular importance here in assessing Ku's origins, is as finely and flawlessly made as any seen on 18th century Polynesian objects.
This latest inspection brought home to us just how elegantly Ku is constructed. The image is so perfectly made and so well-preserved that we could not confidently ascertain how the dense feather covering is attached to the cane-like foundation. The feathers seamlessly cover the form and the most that can be said at this point is that they are not tied to a fine net which, in turn, is stretched over the wickerwork, the method used on some of the other Ku images. This question of fastening would need further research.

As their brief report shows, the experts' analysis was primarily based on their experiences with other Polynesian and especially Hawaiian artefacts, and by comparing the feather image with them. They were thereby able to exclude a special technique used in other Ku images – the fixing of the feathers on a fine net – but they were not able to identify the exact technique used in this case. It would have been necessary to dismantle some part of the image to examine the way in which the fastening was made. Other experts – botanists – and their laboratories would have been necessary to classify the species of the fibres used (but see Kaeppler 1998b:239-240 for general information on the wickerwork underlay).

We finally moved to the third step in the assessment process, for which we had to rely on the knowledge and expertise of a further specialist, an ornithologist, and the technical facilities to analyse the structure and the colour of the feathers. This analysis was carried out by Dr. Frank D. Steinheimer, head of the natural history collection of the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg and an expert on the ornithology of Cook's voyages.[20] His investigations started with what we thought would result in a scandal: We had first sent him a tiny red feather that had fallen off an artefact in the closet where Ku was kept and we assumed that it had originated from the feather image.

A couple of days later Dr. Steinheimer wrote me an email:

[19] Barton had been working on the Göttingen collection for a number of years, and has a close familiarity with not only the feather image, but also with 18th and 19th century Polynesian material culture.

[20] Schulze-Hagen et al. 2003; Steinheimer 2006a, 2006b; see also Halloran and Halloran 1968.

> I have just returned from the Berlin Museum [Natural History] and would have preferred to tell you the news by phone but I couldn't reach you. The feather you sent me does not originate from Hawai'i. The red feather is UNAMBIGUOUSLY a feather from the belly plumage of the Arakanga, the red-yellow-blue-green macaw (parrot from Central America and northern South America). This bird had been known in Europe since the Renaissance. The very size of the feather (body feather) exceeds the size of any feather of Hawaiian birds by far. The feather is not dyed; the red colour is original. It fits perfectly the red of the Hawaiian *i'iwi*. The bird could not have been brought to Hawai'i prior to Cooks visit.
> (20 July 2009)

This report caused excitement and stimulated our fantasy: Was Ku a fake, made in London around 1780 when clever art dealers and craftsmen might have looked for means to multiply the collection of curiosities brought back from the Cook Voyages for their own benefit? Instead of the red plumage of a Hawaiian bird, had they used feathers from a bird of different origin already well-known in Europe at that time?

However, we could not be sure that the sample we had sent for analysis really was a feather from Ku. Fortunately, after we had decided to take a sample directly from the feather image the analysis of this feather confirmed its origin from an *i'iwi* bird (see below).

Dr. Steinheimer wrote a detailed report[21] which sheds new light on the feather image's materiality. At the same time, this report illustrates the procedures of scientific analysis so aptly described by Latour (1999). We therefore quote from the report extensively:

> If we have a close look at the red feathers of half a centimetre long, one realizes that towards the base of each feather the red colour becomes first orange, then whitish and changes finally into dark grey for the proximal half of the shaft. The shaft itself remains light brown or horn-coloured. We have to acknowledge therefore two issues: Firstly, there is hardly any colour available for colouring feathers substantially well which lasts also under exposure to UV light. Secondly, it is even more difficult to dye a feather of this size in different shades of red gradually changing via orange and white to grey. In short: these feathers cannot be faked.

[21] "Kuka'ilimoku. Evidence of historic origin: the feather evidence", unpublished report by Dr. F. Steinheimer.

Six native species of birds occur(ed) with a red coloured plumage in Hawai'i: *i'iwi* (scientific name *Vestiaria coccinea*), ula-ai-hawane (*Ciridops anna*), Kona Grosbeak (*Chloridops kona*), *apapane* (*Himatione sanguinea*), *kakawahie* (*Paroreomyza flammea*), and *akepa* (*Loxops coccineus*).[22] *I'iwi*, *apapane* and *akepa* still exist. *Kakawahie* was documented on Molokai Island for the last time in 1963 before it became extinct; the Kona Grosbeak was last recorded on Hawaii about 1894; and the *ula-ai-hawane* was recorded also on mainland Hawaii about the same time. If we compare these birds regarding the quality of the red of their feathers, only *i'iwi* and *kakwahie* are possible candidates for the origin of the feathers of Ku. Thus, the colour as a sole criterion would allow no definitive identification of the feathers used. Therefore, one needs to turn to the microstructure of the feather sample. The contour feathers of each species have a typical microstructure of their barbs (*Ramus*), barbules (*Radus*) and barbicels (*Radiolus*); down feathers have rather fewer barbicels but similar microstructure. The barbs and barbules consist of long, thin shafts interrupted by thicker nodules. The distances between and the thickness of the nodules are specific. Compared with the feathers from an identified specimen from the Berlin Museum of Natural History, the structure of the Göttingen Ku feathers display the same characteristics. The feathers of reference from Berlin are from an *i'iwi* bird. Thus, the microstructure proves that the feathers of the Göttingen Ku specimen originate from the *i'iwi* bird.

The yellow feathers are of a different structure and size, nearly 10 cm long; they are fluffy and look very unusual. They display two colour shades, a brighter and a darker yellow. There were originally only two species of native birds in Hawai'i with yellow plumes of this size. Both species are nowadays extinct. The feathers are very special fluffy plumes situated under the wing on the flanks of the birds. They were probably used during courtship displays and puffed out to form a conspicuous tuft on each side. The birds carrying these feathers belonged to the genus *Moho* in which originally four species were described. One became extinct before the beginning of the 20th century (last seen in 1837), two in the 20th century and one species, Bishop's Oo (*Moho bishopi*), was believed extinct after 1904, but was rediscovered in a small population on Maui Island in 1981. Only two species, *Moho nobilis* and *Moho apicalis*, possessed yellow flank feathers of that size and must be considered as the origin of Ku's yellow feathers. It is obvious that no such feather would have been available for producing an imitation or fake after the turn

[22] The Hawaiians had an excellent knowledge of the birds. The bird names established in ornithology are all indigenous names.

of the 20th century. An exemplar of *Moho nobillis* was collected by Cook and was part of the Göttingen collection but had to be given to the State Museum in Hannover in the 19th century. This specimen is very important in ornithology since the type, *Moho nobillis (Hawaii o'o)*, was described based on the study of this exemplar.[23] The microstructure of the feather confirms that the yellow feathers come from the latter extinct species of the family of honeyeaters (*Meliphagidae*). The yellow feathers used on the artefacts show that they are neatly cut. The Hawaiians, who had no metal prior to European contact, must have had instruments that allowed them to cut the feathers in this precise way (even to cut a feather with modern scissors is quite difficult).

The black feathers used for Ku's eyebrows could originate from the same bird, but as there exist(ed) many species with black plumage in Hawai'i, a definite conclusion was not made. Here, it would be necessary to take DNA samples or to conduct an isotope analysis to determine their origin. A very long brown feather is found in Ku's crest. This feather is indeed a chicken feather – going along with the claim of others that the entire Ku is made out of chicken feathers. Chickens were brought to the region of Hawai'i by the Polynesian settlers several hundred years ago, originating from the jungles of the Malay Archipelago. Thus, they had their own chickens before the arrival of Europeans.[24]

Dr. Steinheimer's report showed that a couple of techniques had been applied in combination with each other to assess the feathers: Detailed description of the characteristics, UV analysis and the examination of the microstructure of the feathers. Further methods could have been applied, such as DNA and isotope analysis, however, such measures would have gone too far (and would have been possibly too expensive) in our case. The analysis also raised an interesting question from the perspective of the feather image's technology: The

[23] For the reproduction of a watercolour picture of this bird painted by William Ellis, the second medical doctor on the Third Voyage, in 1779, see James Cook and the exploration of the Pacific, Bonn 2009: plate 497.

[24] His report continues: "A further result of the investigation into Hawaiian birds and feathers brought back from the Cook Voyages also needs to be mentioned: The Göttingen collection houses a dried skin or rather a mummy of an *i'iwi* bird, complete with plumage. The usual conservation technique in the 18th century consisted of drying the complete bird (with all its bones) in an oven rather than to only mount the skin. The disadvantage of this technique: Insects are very much attracted by such a mummy. Therefore, this technique was used only until 1800. Later, only proper skins were prepared where the body and the brain of the birds were removed while the skin and feathers, the skull and the long bones of wing and leg remained in the skin. Arsenic soap, later also arsenic dust, was applied in Europe from 1803 onwards which immediately killed the insects when they had eaten even a small quantity of the feathers. However, a few people had knowledge of the arsenic soap and its insecticide effects also in the 17th and 18th centuries: German noblemen around Freiherr von Hohberg (1612-1688), the French pharmacist Jean-Baptiste Bécoeur (1718-1777) and his pupils, and Johann Reinhold Forster (1729-1798), who accompanied Cook on his Second Voyage (Forster 1771). Forster taught this method to the members of the Third Voyage."

"neatly cut" feathers and the question of what instrument the Hawaiians had used for this apparently quite tricky task. We could not find any description of how the Hawaiians did it.

The process of the assessment of Ku's authenticity moved from an overall consideration – the artefact's biography, its form and expression – to increasingly specific perspectives, details of indigenous technology (wickerwork and the feathers applied to it) and ended, finally, with microscopic examinations. The analysis of even more tiny particles – DNA and isotopes – could have been available. The assessment of the feather image's authenticity resulted in an objectification that appeared to be a far cry from the representation of a god whose power the Hawaiians had experienced. The analysis led step by step deeper into an apparently detached world of microstructures and colour scales, where the experts are looking for ultimate certainty to determine the true material. However, all this was carried out with the goal of verifying the object's authenticity in a similar way to that which Latour has called "circulating reference" in his account of collecting and analysing the sampling of soil in the Amazon forest (1999). The identification of these micro-elements was constitutive for the material, as was the material for the authenticity of the artefact. Nevertheless, we also realized that Ku's property was much more than the properties of the sum of materials used for the feather image.

AUTHENTICITIES RECONSIDERED

The story of Ku's exhibition tour and the "tournament of values" that took place around the feather image reveals, as Margaret Jolly has stated, "how divergent geopolitical situations create profound differences in the cultural politics around Oceanic collections" (2011:125). What accompanied these "divergent geopolitical situations" and the corresponding exhibitions were "shifting set[s] of people and things" (Gosden and Larson 2007). Ku was displayed and experienced as a sacred subject in Honolulu by Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders. The Hawaiians felt the presence of Ku by looking at the feather image made by their ancestors, and they were able to establish emotional ties to the god and its material expression. In short, Ku embodied, above all, a supreme ritual value.

The feather image became, the longer the distance from its place of origin, transformed by curators and the rather sober way in which it was displayed into a mere but highly prized object whose authenticity was finally questioned. The search for Ku's authenticity showed us quite plainly to what extent it was Ku's display value balanced in Euros and Dollars that created this struggle for authenticity. The display value was mirrored in the insurance certificate, the lending fees, the most prestigious exhibition halls, the lavish catalogues, the openings with distinguished guests, and the large numbers of visitors. We had implicitly granted Ku's authenticity by agreeing to all these contracts and had given, unintentionally,

promises. The constitution of Ku's display value, our competence as scholars and curators, our knowledge, but also our prestige (as well as that of the university and the federal state of Lower Saxony), our personal integrity and the way in which we had complied with the professional duty of care were deeply involved. Conversely, all these properties depended on this display value, or rather on the verification/falsification of Ku's materiality.

There seemed to be no way to argue with the Hawaiians' experience and expression of Ku's genuineness. It was obvious that these were two separate and even incommensurable categories. But were they really?

Of course the Hawaiians had relied on the truth of the historical origin, namely that the feather image was made in the era of pre-contact Hawai'i by Hawaiians when their culture had not yet been shaken by colonialism and Christianity. The feather image leaving the boundary of its culture of origin no longer kept a ritual value for the Hawaiians in the 18th century, since they did not know what had happened to all the goods they had given to Captain Cook and his companions. It passed out of the hands of those who would have warranted its genuineness. The biography of the feather image features more than 200 years' guardianship in European hands and gradually changed its values there too. The gift – if it ever was a gift – turned into something else in the end when the feather image arrived in London. It became like other artefacts: A rare "curiosity" to be sold in auctions. It gradually turned into an object of scientific inquiry in the Academic Museum when it was used for teaching and research purposes by scholars from many parts of Europe in the late-18th and early-19th centuries.

After having reached Göttingen in 1782, the current display value the feather image had acquired only began with the loan requests and the preparation of the exhibition tour of the Cook collection in 2004, as outlined above. Therefore, Ku's ritual value seemed to have been lost over two centuries. However, as the encounter of the Hawaiian delegation with Ku in Göttingen had shown, the ritual value had only been hidden and could be revitalized again. And even when the feather image was displayed in a showcase in a public exhibition in Honolulu, many visitors from Hawai'i and other parts of the Pacific experienced awe and respect in confrontation with the material representation of the god Ku. The feather image was for them a relic rather than a unique and, therefore, expensive "exhibit".

There was, in contrast to what Benjamin had anticipated, no unilineal historical development from the ritual value of an artefact to the display value and emptied from its former religious significance. Instead, both values co-existed and were even intertwined, as the story of the feather image's exhibition tour showed, according to the particular actors involved, including the art market, and the "geopolitical situations" (Geismar 2008:315; Jolly, 2011; Jones 2010:197-200).

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