

Barava: land title deeds in fossil shell from the western Solomon Islands

Rhys Richards¹ and Kenneth Roga²

(1) 73 Seaview Road, Paremata, Wellington (mrhys@paradise.net.nz)

(2) Cultural Affairs Officer, PO Box 178, Gizo, Western Province, Solomon Islands

ABSTRACT: Following fieldwork in the Solomon Islands and the tracing of residual traditional knowledge in Ranongga Island, a large fretworked *Tridacna* shell plaque, known as a 'barava', held in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa collection, can now be reinterpreted as originally a land title deed. This review proposes a revision of the generic term 'barava' to cover a wide range of *Tridacna* shell plaques, and seeks to restore something of its original social context to the Te Papa plaque.

KEYWORDS: Melanesian art forms, Solomon Islands, artefacts of *Tridacna* shell, barava.



Fig. 1 'Barava' (or 'venu') *Tridacna* shell plaque. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa collection number 1539. Acquired in 1919, and listed as from Vella Lavella. Dimensions: 390 x 335 mm (photo: Te Papa, negative B.9722).

Introduction

Among Te Papa's artefacts from the Solomon Islands is a magnificent fretwork plaque sculptured from a single large slab of white, semi-fossilised *Tridacna* shell (see Fig. 1). Evidently, it originally had three rows of human figures with bent knees, linked hands, and over-large ears, a single row of a capital V- or W-like motif, and, at its base, two large rings cut out from the surrounding rough shell. It is large, measuring 390 x 335 mm, and is heavy. This striking plaque was donated to the then Dominion Museum (now the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa) on 15 June 1919 by 'Captain Tacon'. On the reverse is written 'W.H. Bennett, Solomon Islands'. At this time, G.L. Tacon and W.H. Bennett leased neighbouring plantations in eastern New Georgia, with Tacon in Marovo and Kolo lagoons and Bennett at Grassi in Ramada lagoon (Golden 1933: 224, 239, 250). A photo of William Bennett and his wife at their home at Grassi in 1909 is included as Fig. 8.

In addition to the usual museum accession records, there is also a short, handwritten note by Elsdon Best: 'Item 1539. Carved piece of giant clam shell from Solomon Islands. Presented to the museum by Captain Tacon July 15 1919. These reticulate carvings are kept by the natives in the tambu house, where human heads etc. are also kept. This is an old specimen. The process of manufacture is interesting. A small hole was drilled first, through which was passed some cocoa fibre [*sic* – a tough vine], and this was pulled to and fro, sand and water being used in the process, and so by a very slow process, the figures were formed' (Best diaries, MU000084, box 3, item 1, note 2, page 165). It is not clear when the accession records also noted this as from 'Vella Lavella', and this may be a later attribution.

Today, barava – openwork plaques made from fossilised *Tridacna* clam shell – are a national icon in the Solomon Islands. One form is a national symbol for 'kastom money', or wealth, and is used, for example, on the two-dollar note and as the logo of publications of the Central Bank. 'They are elaborate, both technically and visually, ... A flat piece of clam shell [transformed] into an intricate openwork combination of geometric motifs, anthropomorphic figures, birds and an occasional canoe ... Written accounts indicate that they have been found in burial caves, mortuary huts, and private houses. [Yet] despite numerous references [in the historical records],



Fig. 2 'Porobatuna' confiscated from Chief Ingava of Kolokongo village, Roviana, 1891. Davis collection, British Museum. Dimensions: 270 x 227 mm (photo: British Museum. Published by Edge-Partington & Joyce 1904: Plate J, Fig. 5).

little is actually said about them [or about their function in their original context].' (Waite 1983: 55.)

In her comprehensive review of 42 *Tridacna* shell barava in museum collections, Waite (1983) identified three stylistic groups and reviewed the scattered references 'to reconstruct something of their traditional and cultural context and significance'. Our two short field reports supplement her pioneer museum review, and describe the original function of barava in Ranongga, as it is still known amongst the oldest generation there today. The case is made that while Waite's type 1b, which is the national icon, may have been kastom money traded widely from its home in Choiseul, the other two forms were never traded as they were not money but rather local land title deeds set in fossil shell.

Barava types are illustrated in Figs 1–6. Waite's type 1a and her type 2 are represented by Figs 2 and 4. Several styles among those proposed for attribution to a new, broader, third category are shown in Fig. 5. Several fragments of barava from Ranongga (see Fig. 6) have anthropomorphic motifs and patterns like types 1 and 2 in Waite's classification, though more prominence is given to

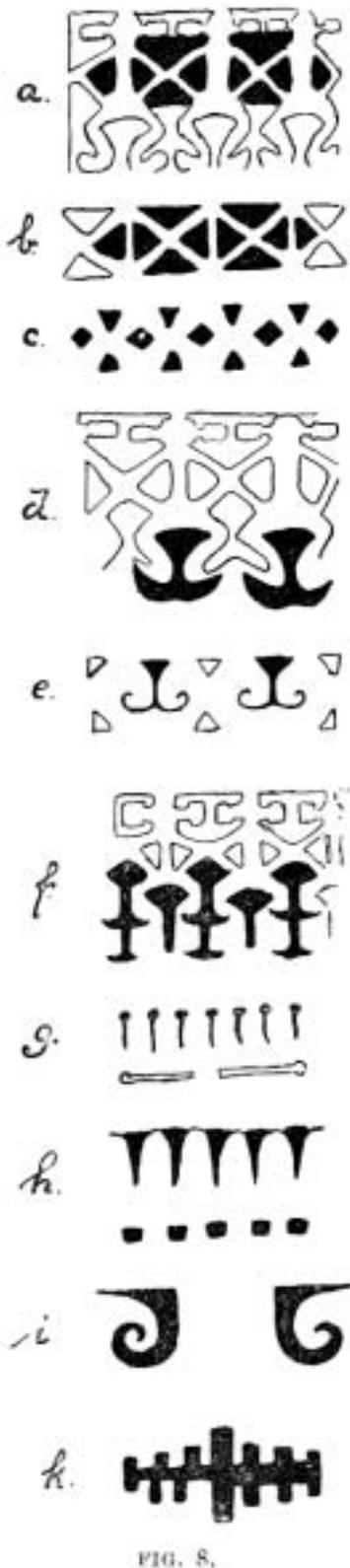


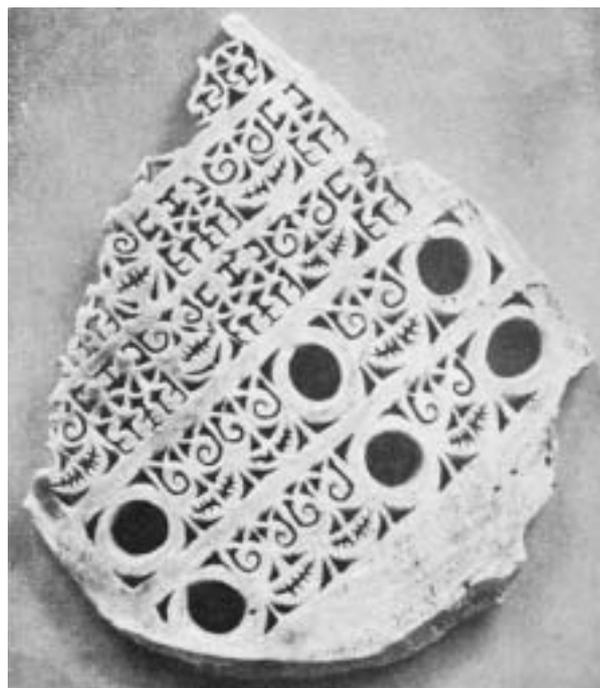
FIG. 8.

**Evolution of barava designs and motifs.
Notes and figures by Edge-Partington & Joyce (1904)**

Edge-Partington & Joyce (1904: 130) posed a valid question about barava fretwork motifs, asking whether what matters is the remaining shell, or the spaces where the shell has been removed, or both. They analysed the motifs on the barava taken from Chief Ingava at Kolongo village in Roviana in 1891, shown here as Fig. 3. Fig. 8 referred to in quotes from Edge-Partington & Joyce (1904) correspond to Fig. 3 this paper.

They noted that '... in the centre of the upper row of figures we find the symmetry of the pattern interrupted by the development of unmeaning curls and flourishes. ... paying attention solely to the vacant spaces in the pattern, the design on the extreme top edge of the large slab (Fig. 8b) would seem to be derived naturally from the bent arms of the little figures (Fig. 8a). ... two bands of this same pattern, a trifle more conventionalised by the disappearance of their bodies (Fig. 8c). ... and considering the spaces between the legs of the two figures on the extreme right of the second row, we find an anchor-like pattern (Fig. 8d) ... Again, the "nail"-like pattern displayed ... (Fig. 8g) may reasonably be conceived as evolved from the spaces between the legs of the dancers (Fig. 8f), though in this case the design is more conventionalised and has been turned on its side.'

Edge-Partington & Joyce (1904: 130) also noted that other component designs have been '... further conventionalised; Fig. 8e passing to 8i, and the symmetrical "nail" pattern, of which Fig. 8g represents half, to Fig. 8k.'



Above left: Fig. 3. Analysis of motifs on 'porobatuna' shown in Fig. 2 (from Edge-Partington & Joyce 1904: 130).

Above right: Fig. 4 'Porobatuna' from Vella Lavella. Australian Museum collection number A 8517. Dimensions: 270 x 250 mm (photo: Australian Museum. Published by Woodford 1905: 38, Fig. 1).



5 (a)



5 (b)



5 (c)



5 (d)



Fig. 6 Barava fragments from Ranongga. Private collection, Wellington, New Zealand. Dimension of largest fragment: 140 x 115 mm (photo: Te Papa, registration number I 7010).

Opposite page

Fig. 5 Four examples of former 'Barava type 1b' (now renamed type 3):

(a) 'Zaru' from Choiseul, with two stylised human figures squatting back to back. Private collection, Wellington, New Zealand. Dimensions: 350 x 140 mm (photo: Te Papa, registration number I 7006).

(b) Double bird figure from Choiseul. Private collection, Wellington, New Zealand. Dimensions: 155 x 105 mm (photo: Te Papa, registration number I 7007).

(c) Combination of two 'zaru' figures, a hornbill, and a squatting woman; from Choiseul. Private collection, Wellington, New Zealand. Dimensions: 215 x 205 mm (photo: Te Papa, registration number I 7008).

(d) Combination figure with three humans and other designs; from Kolombangara. Private collection, Wellington, New Zealand. Dimensions: 295 x 180 mm (photo: Te Papa, registration number I 7009).

a curl motif comparable to a question mark with no full stop, which can also appear reversed, or in pairs to form a double curl within an open oval. A single curl like this, but rendered on bark cloth, was formerly called 'torlow' in Kumbukota language in Ranongga. A pioneer analysis by J. Edge-Partington and T.A. Joyce (1904) describing how several of these motifs are interrelated, and how they may have evolved, is included with Fig. 3. Our main informants, at home in Ranongga, are shown in Fig. 7.

Fieldwork I

In October 2002, both authors travelled extensively around Ranongga, including to the village of Ombombulu on the east coast, which is the home of the Nulu people, the oldest clan in the Kumbukota land district. Kenneth Roga is a neighbour and wantok of the Nulu clan. Interviews conducted with scrupulous care for local *kastom*, and in the local dialect, revealed that not all local knowledge of barava had been lost.

Chief Leziri Betekera of Ombombulu said that the main quarry for semi-fossilised *Tridacna* shell was nearby, high on Mt Kela, and that formerly the exact location was known only to a *kastom* priesthood called 'matajonga' (literally, 'keen eyes'). Even today, its location is known only to very few (including Roga). Old fossilised *Tridacna* from this site often has an internal yellow-brown tint extending widely through the rock. Artefacts of the highest quality, where the tint extended through the whole item, are still known as 'kela' (this term has nothing to do with the pidgin word for colour). Material quarried by the matajonga was taken to the artisans who worked it, probably with the most tedious manual labour carried out by slaves. The artisans were called 'aza-poata', or moneymakers, as that was their main function. Thus, barava could be made in several districts – in Lungga, Ghanongga, and Kumbakota – but the best *Tridacna* was always from Mt Kela.

Chief Leziri Betakera said that the last barava was made before his grandfather was born. Long ago, he said, every tribe and clan had a barava. It remained with them if they shifted to a new home. Even now, his own clan's barava is safely stored somewhere on their land. As barava were never traded voluntarily, he said that museum pieces must have been seized after whole clans were exterminated in head-hunting raids, or the barava were stolen by thieves.

Chief Betakera scoffed at suggestions that barava were a form of money, funeral items, or grave markers. He

insisted that the function of a barava was to establish and demonstrate tribal identity and, more particularly, tribal ownership of land. After much discussion, all in the local language, it transpired that the concept he was trying to convey was, in fact, strikingly similar to a land title deed, but made of 'stone'. He stressed that a barava was made to demonstrate the clan's title to the land. A barava could be stolen, or taken away by a conqueror, but actual ownership of the land did not change hands until the conquerors or new owners lived and used the land. Chief Betekera said that in olden days, barava – if they could be found – would be taken away as trophies of war, but were only title deeds and were not negotiable or saleable for land. On rare occasions, a barava might be given away to formalise a land deal or treaty, or as a peace settlement, but they were never sold.

Further enquiries were made among the old people, men and women, at Kears and Lale on the west and south coasts in the Lungga land district. There, Chief Peter Minazuma, a former teacher, said that Ranongga was once a centre for making shell money, with the last bakiha (thick *Tridacna* clam-shell rings worn as chest ornaments) made by his grandfather in the 1920s and 1930s. The circular rings known as bakiha and poata could be traded like money. Chief Minazuma added, however, that there were three further forms of fossil clam-shell valuables that were not money and were never traded as they signified tribal land ownership. The first was 'titi', a larger, thicker form of the poata and bakiha rings, but too large for wearing. The second type was 'bareke', large semi-circular slabs of fossil clam shell, retaining some of the outer clam shell, but also with one or two more oval holes, making them look rather like large, flat knuckledusters.

The third and most important items, which Chief Minazuma said demonstrated tribal or clan ownership, were barava, made from fossilised *Tridacna* quarried on the east side of Mt Kela and created almost entirely by the Nulu clan. He thought the last barava was made in about 1900 or earlier. They were very slow and tedious to make, and hard to copy even with foreign tools. He, too, was scornful of hesitant questions, drawn from the early literature, that barava were grave markers or part of funereal structures. He said emphatically that barava were only kept on or near graves and shrines because those were the safest, most tambu, places to store them. Chief Minazuma said that barava represented the wealth of the tribe in owning the land. The history and status of the tribe was

represented by the design. They were, in effect, land title deeds. They could be stolen or broken by raiders, but could never be traded unless handed on along with a gift of the land as well. When moving to a new location, a tribe might carry its barava as a sign of wealth in land, or a successful conqueror might exhibit or even trade to a foreigner a barava seized from a defeated tribe, but this was selling only the symbol of the land, not selling the land itself or the former occupiers' rights to it.

A third old informant, John Angalo at Lale, confirmed separately the techniques used for making shell valuables (see Piko 1976), but said that no more were made after the missions were established in the 1920s. He said the name of the vine used to cut the shell was 'mungu'. He had been told in his youth that barava were very tedious to make, requiring 'as much time as it takes a coconut to grow from a pod to a fruit-bearing tree' (in good plantations, using current coconut strains, this now takes from five to six years). John Angalo and other old men said that barava could not be made with foreign tools, but there are several historical accounts of thin metal wire being used instead of vegetable fibre and sand to expedite the still tedious manufacture of shell monies (e.g. Woodford 1905: 39, Hocart unpublished manuscript: item 22, p. 1).

Fieldwork II

In July 2003, three more old men were interviewed in Ranongga about barava, their use, and their motifs. Isaac Lepiti of Kara village, who was born in about 1913, had seen bakiha and bokolo shell money being made with hand drills, and with a strong bush vine strung on a bow acting as a cutter with coarse sand and water. However, he was sure he had never seen barava being made as they were 'much more ancient'. He was certain that barava were a symbol of tribal unity, wealth, and well-being, and that the designs referred to tribal origins, land ownership, and the overall wealth of the tribe ('butubutu'). He said a barava is a symbol to be passed on in old age by the chief tribal leader to his designated successor in recognition of the tribe and their land (land rights descend matrilineally but, like land use, barava were passed on only between men). He used the term 'titi', meaning an anchor that binds men to the land (see 'titi' above). Barava were of no value to other tribes and enemies, he said, because those people were not anchored to that land. He was certain that barava

were never exchanged or used as money. Unlike bakiha, which were also stored in shrines, barava were tambu but were not associated with death. He could not account for the fact that so many barava are broken, except to cite natural disasters destroying old and exposed shrines, and recent carelessness. Nor could he comment upon our suggestion that perhaps many are broken now because they were originally hung (titi) for display in tambu houses, as it is known in one case in Choiseul, but when neglected, they fell and shattered (Metcalf 1927: 13, 2001: 106; Milne 1936: 41).

Kaea Pio of Pienuna, who is also 90 years old and was brought up when pagan and early Christian religions operated in parallel, confirmed these points independently. He, too, had seen bakiha and poata shell rings being made as money using 'pisu mongu' hand drills, and with vines and coarse sand and water as cutters. However, he too had never seen barava being made. He was adamant that barava were never sold and were in effect land title deeds, made to represent a tribe's intangible relationships with their land.

Isaac Tetembule of Ombombulu, aged about 75, showed us a large, weathered block of semi-fossilised *Tridacna* shell that he had brought down from the quarry. He said barava were sacred, but each was sacred to one tribe only, and they were non-transferrable. If a chiefly holder died without having designated his successor, a group of elders would meet to discuss and decide who should assume the tribal leadership and take care of the tribe's barava, land, and people. Consequently, barava were never traded, not in Ranongga, or in Roviana, or as far as he and Chief Betakera knew, on Choiseul either. Upon being shown several photographs of museum barava, Isaac Tetembule alone said that he knew a little about the designs and motifs. He was sure that some of the human figures represented living men and others represented ancestors ranked in lines. He referred to the large ears, noting that in his youth both his parents and all adults had distended ear lobes with large ear plugs. He volunteered that the wavy W-shaped lines are only decorative, and that the lower broad circles were not intended for money but rather as symbols to represent the general wealth inherent in the tribe. This, he said, was information he knew from his youth, not conjecture. Chief Betakera, who was also present at this interview, concurred, adding that these motifs were not just decorative, but had symbolic significance too.

Discussion

This new, surprisingly explicit, information from six old men seems likely to be true, since all are well known to Kenneth Roga, their wantok, as informed, reliable, and truthful. These six old men also confirm that the traditional name for *Tridacna* fretwork plaques in Ranongga was 'barava'. Interestingly, Hocart, who undertook intensive fieldwork on Simbo in 1908 and who visited Ranongga often, published only one passing reference to the plaques when he mentioned an 'ornament like a mbarava' (Hocart 1922: 280, Russell 1972). Perhaps parts of his original notes are lost, but at least this snippet confirms that the name 'barava' was also the original name on Simbo.

Elsewhere, the record is less clear. Today, the name 'barava' is used throughout the Solomon Islands and beyond as a generic name to cover a wide range of *Tridacna* shell fretwork carvings. The historical records indicate, however, that formerly different names were used in different localities. In particular, C.M. Woodford, the naturalist and collector who became the first Resident Commissioner of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate from 1896 to 1915, used the name 'porobatuna' for a plaque obtained from Chief Ingava of Roviana in 1891 (see Fig. 3, Edge-Partington & Joyce 1904). Another old informant told Woodford that on Vella Lavella such plaques were called 'venu' (Woodford 1905: 38). Similarly, Piko from Choiseul, who had watched his clan making shell money around 1926 and described its manufacture in some detail, used both 'barava' and 'sarambangara', indicating the latter was an older local name of the carvings and of the former people who first made them (Piko 1976: 105).

Unfortunately, the geographic names used by the early writers and collectors often cover several different linguistic, religious, and cultural groups indiscriminately. For example, the name 'New Georgia' has been used, and often still is, for the large, multilingual and bicultural island of New Georgia, but also for a varied group of very different islands and peoples stretching from northern Vella Lavella through to Simbo in the southwest, and to Marovo Lagoon in the southeast. Therefore, precision in provenancing museum artefacts is often impossible now, but it seems that the three barava types described by Waite (1983), although made of the same material and often carrying the same circular ring motif, may not have had the same function in each of the linguistic groups, from Isabel to New Georgia, Kolombangara, Vella Lavella, Ranongga, and Simbo.



7 (a)



8



7 (b)

Above left

Fig. 7 Some of the main informants at home in Ranongga:

(a) left to right, Susie Muleduri (aged about 75), Leziri Betakera (aged nearly 80), Isaac Tetembule (aged about 75) (photo: Rhys Richards);
(b) left to right, Kenneth Roga (second author), Obed Keri Jr (aged 8), Reuben Kaea Pio (aged 90), John Wesley Paleo (aged over 80) (photo: Rhys Richards).

Above right

Fig. 8 William Bennett (donor of the Te Papa barava) and his wife, at home in Grassi, 1909 (photo: published by Burnett 1911: facing p. 125).



Fig. 9 Map of the Solomon Islands, showing locality names mentioned in the text.

However, there is perhaps room for a compromise that denies neither the traditional folklore in Choiseul that their shell plaques were ‘money’, nor the declarations noted above, that, in Ranongga, barava were valuables and definitely not money.

It is suggested now that Waite’s (1983) types 1a and 2, which are associated with Vella Lavella, Ranongga, Simbo, and Roviana, were not traded, but were land title deeds of fossil stone. On the other hand, her type 1b, which clearly is associated primarily with Choiseul, was passed from group to group, from Choiseul to New Georgia and beyond, so that its description now as ‘kastom money’ need not be challenged. This division of the present generic name ‘barava’ into two groups with different functions despite physical similarities may never be proven, but it

would allow Waite’s types 1a and 2 to be correctly identified as valuables but not money, while her third type – which she called type 1b, now broadened to become a residual generic term ‘Type 3’ – could still be called ‘kastom money’. This distinction would be a practical compromise that would avoid any need to advocate the abandonment of a national icon, and would also avoid requiring revisions of the design of the two-dollar notes and the logo of the Central Bank.

The revised, or new, third category would include, for example, various large examples of barava that have single or double rings below, and large tapering uppers showing a pair of human figures squatting back to back. These are known on Choiseul as ‘zaru’ (see Fig. 5a). Other heavy plaques have a ring below with a bird or birds above,

especially hornbills (*see* Fig. 5b). These are often also attributed to Choiseul, but they have been found in various forms throughout the Western Province. Some have been called 'bokolo', although elsewhere this name is used to refer to a plain *Tridacna* ring (Clark & Kelesi 1982: 28). Some are well-carved sculptures in three dimensions; others are, in fact, decorated only in two dimensions. There are also, as Hocart (unpublished manuscript) noted on Simbo in 1908, heavy old rings, often rough and only partially finished, called 'mbariki'. Some of these rings have no specific value for trade, but are treasured as family heirlooms called 'meru-meru'. One from Simbo, with a big ring below, but shaped on top rather like a zaru with two rounded ancestral figures back to back, is called 'Kukuporo'. Its kustom stori, concerning the origin of the first family, has been published by Macfarlane & Macfarlane (1977).

Conclusions

Waite's (1983) three categories of barava can now be revised as: (i) barava proper; (ii) porobatuna; and (iii) the other types of *Tridacna* shell plaques. This third group would replace Waite's type 1b as something of a residual category to cover a wide range of designs and motifs. All these three categories can still be called 'barava', but that name can now be seen as a generic term encompassing a wide range of big *Tridacna* shell plaques of various styles.

This review is also a basis for a reassessment of the social history of the Te Papa barava shown in Fig. 1. This artefact can now be identified not as a mortuary memorial or a decoration, but as an original deed of title to tribal land. When it was made, as a barava, it reflected a tribe's pride in their land, and in their group's capacity to spare the labours of one or more artisans for one or more years, to create a tangible symbol of their tribal wealth, identity, and pride. However, by 1918 this barava had probably become a war trophy taken from a defeated tribe that had lost in the head-hunting raids that proliferated following the introduction of foreign weapons, boats, and guns. Its theft was probably intended by the victors as a further humiliation of the losers. As 'Vella Lavella' was written later on its accession list, this 'trophy' may have been brought to New Georgia after a head-hunting raid further north, or from Vella Lavella itself. With the passage of time, and out of its original social context among the victors, this 'object' became available for trade with the foreign planters

Bennett and Tacon. They were probably unaware of its history and its significance, and gave it to the Dominion Museum in 1919 as a 'native curiosity'. Fortunately, we are now able to restore to this fine barava something of its former context and original glory.

References

- Burnett, F. (1911). *Through Polynesia and Papua. Wanderings with a camera in southern seas*. London: G. Bell & Sons, Ltd. 197 pp.
- Clark, M.L. and Kelesi, M. (1982). *Solomon Islands Art and Artifacts*. Honiara: Solomon Islands National Museum. 32 pp.
- Edge-Partington, J. and Joyce, T.A. (1904). Notes on funerary ornaments from Rubiana and a coffin from Santa Anna, Solomon Islands. *Man* 4 (86): 129–31, plates I–J.
- Golden, G.A. (1993). *The Early European Settlers of the Solomon Islands*. Melbourne: privately published. 466 pp.
- Hocart, A.M. (1922). The cult of the dead in Eddystone of the Solomon Islands. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 52: 71–112, 259–305.
- Hocart, A.M. (unpublished manuscript). Notebooks etc. Manuscript 60, item 22, in Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.
- Macfarlane, R. and Macfarlane, T. (1977). The story of Kukuporo. *Journal of the Cultural Association of the Solomon Islands* 5: 55–8.
- Metcalfe, J.R. (1927). The guardian of the Kulumbangara River valley. *Open Door* 26 (1): 13–14.
- Metcalfe, J.R. (2001). *My Father's Journey*. Alstonville, New South Wales: E.L. Corben (ed.). 270 pp.
- Milne, B.W. (1936). Ancient idol in the Solomons. *Pacific Island Monthly* 6 (12): 41.
- Piko, G. (1976). Choiseul currency. *Journal of the Cultural Association of the Solomon Islands* 4: 96–110.
- Russell, T. (1972). A note on clamshell money of Simbo and Roviana. From an unpublished manuscript by Professor A.M. Hocart. *Journal of the Cultural Association of the Solomon Islands* 1: 21–9.
- Waite, D. (1983). Form and function of tridacna shell plaques from the Western Solomon Islands. *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 1: 55–74.
- Woodford, C.M. (1905). Further notes on funerary ornaments from the Solomon Islands. *Man* 5 (20): 38–9.