

## Book and Media Reviews

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woven images of atua (deities and gods), such as to‘o, arranged symmetrically in freestanding cases that created a passage down the center of the space into an open area—or marae atea. The design of the exhibition visually reinforced the strong crescent form and canopies indexed in the artworks on display, giving one the sense that an archway was rising up to stretch over and above you. At the entrance to the exhibition, visitors were greeted by an impressively carved figure of the Hawaiian god Lono, installed just above eye level, giving him a foreboding presence and inferring his ascendancy to the upper canopies of the heavens. In a final, self-contained section of the exhibition, two majestic ‘ahu ‘ula (feather capes) from Hawai‘i suggested that godly presence can take explicit form in the materiality of well-crafted things, capturing the essence of primordial power in the most beautifully executed objects. If Lono, who greeted us at the entry, was ascending to heaven, then his flight traced an arc above us in the atea, opening out into the primordial sky, and then drew a return arc that rested on the ‘ahu ‘ula on the far wall. In this way, atea—as vā, or space—is indelibly welded to tā, or time, because openings (atea) are continua, places momentarily formed when the past, present, and future coexist on a single plenum, just like Doctor Who’s TARDIS. What gives these configurations life are the rituals and ceremonies performed in and around them.

*Atea* the exhibition was redolent with ritual songs and dances, and I was fortunate to participate in the closing ceremony, which reminded

me so forcefully that Polynesians are ritual beings. Chants and songs are some of the most important ways we create a continuum, allowing us to bring our ancestors to life, to wake them up. It is also important we put them back to sleep; thus, our songs of farewell are lullabies that softly caress the dead, sending them back to the primordial night. I will never forget the final farewell performance by Jahra Wasasala. Her wailing was haunting and melancholy as it dawned on me that these ancestral beings would now be disbanded from this unique configuration, never to be brought together in the same way again. And then, of course, on exiting the Met, the spell breaks as you are once again confronted with a world no longer enchanted.

ALBERT REFITI

*Fasito‘outa/Vaovai, Sāmoa*

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This earth glows the color  
of my skin sunburnt  
natives didn’t fly  
from far away  
but sprouted whole through  
velvet *taro* in the sweet mud  
of this ‘āina [land]

—Haunani-Kay Trask,

“Ko‘olauloa”

(*Light in the Crevice*

*Never Seen* [1994], 80–81)

*Atea: Nature and Divinity in Polynesia* was a project that looked to foreground Indigenous perspectives by exploring the genealogical relationship between Polynesian chiefs and their gods. I called the exhibition

*Atea* to ground it firmly in Polynesian cosmology, and more precisely in that powerful moment when space and light (*atea*) flooded the dark ancestral night (*te pō*), initiating a dynamic new era in which strings of islands were vigorously birthed into being and the first generation of gods was born. The focus of the exhibition was to highlight the singular materiality of high-status ritual items created for the most powerful chiefs (*ariki/ali'i*), who descended from these gods (*atua*) and were imbued with their spiritual essence (*mana*). Prestigious items such as sumptuous feather cloaks, breast-plates and headdresses, whalebone and ivory gods—I hoped to delve deeply into the unique aesthetics of these rare Polynesian things and draw out the conceptual significance of the valuable materials incorporated into them. Natural fibers, iridescent pearl shell, glossy black feathers, and the red-tipped tail feathers of the tropic bird (*tavake*)—each material has its own set of associations and stories to tell. It was these vital resources, marshaled from the natural world, that enhanced the personal and spiritual efficacy of chiefs precisely because each asserted a close genealogical connection with one's divine forebears. The relationship with divinity was never an abstract notion for Islanders; rather, it found its roots in the bones, feathers, and plant fibers of the islands and ocean from which the gods once sprang.

The exhibition featured some thirty works, dating from the late eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, which were grouped in three major clusters: (a) Fiji, Tonga, and Niue in the west; (b) Tahiti, Mangareva, and

the Austral and Cook Islands to their east; and (c) the Hawaiian Islands in the north. Focusing on these three distinct archipelagoes as anchor points for the entire region, the exhibition's design reinforced a west to east to north trajectory as a way to explore how Polynesians distilled the coordinates of their unique conceptual landscape over the course of two thousand years. Indeed, the installation was designed to underscore the serial evolution of ideas and philosophies across space and time. The prevalence of the crescent shape, the interaction of vertical and horizontal indices, and a directional relationship with space (*vā*) with time (*tā*)—all of these find their full expression in the ritual regalia worn and wielded by Polynesian chiefs. I wanted to underscore the material expression of these ideas in different parts of Polynesia by establishing a strong visual dynamic in the exhibition—one that created sight lines and established links and affinities between carefully juxtaposed groupings of distinct yet interrelated artworks from right across the region. I worked closely with Met exhibition designer Fabiana Weinberg and graphics designer Alexandre Viault on concept and schematic designs for the exhibition, and they helped me to realize a visual execution of these ideas.

A first section, "Ancestral Homelands," examined the potency of sacred sites, including Pulumotu, a realm associated with darkness and the night, with things invisible and unknown; the section explored Pulumotu's significance as a point of origin as well as return. A second section, "Propping Up the Gods," explored the conceptual underpin-

nings of Taputapuātea (meaning vast and sacred light), the most extensive ritual precinct in central Polynesia. Located on the island of Raʻiatea and said to be the birthplace of the gods, it features monumental stone temples—described literally as the “jawbones” of the gods—that were once the focus of ritual encounter. Crescent-shaped ceremonial headdresses were designed to formally evoke the vaulted dome of the sky, its unfolding layers receding into nested spheres (figure 5). By contrast, upright wooden staff gods called toʻo (meaning a baton or post) represented the vertical plane connecting land and sky. Animated in ritual practice, these ceremonial staffs functioned as live channels linking the human and ancestral realms.

A third section, “Divine Chiefs,” focused on the significant role of Polynesian chiefs in becoming a living



FIGURE 5 Headdress, Austral Islands (probably Raʻivavae), eighteenth century. Cane, fiber, feathers (various), shell, bark cloth, and human hair, 110 cm. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge (99-12-70/53617). Reproduced with permission.

embodiment of the divine, a vessel that could express the vitality, well-being, and ongoing prosperity of the community. A link was established in this final section with the seasonal rites associated with the cyclical rise and fall of the Pleiades and the appearance every November of the seven stars (Makaliʻi, literally “eyes of the gods”) on the horizon, which signals the beginning of Makahiki (Matariki/Mataliki). This narrative of cyclical time was woven in distinct ways throughout the entire exhibition and was established most pertinently in the striking figure of Lonokaʻeho, who presided over the entrance to the exhibition. Standing sentinel, his impressive verticality is reinforced by the distinctive series of crests that sprout plant-like in a series of projections rising up from his backbone and forehead to form a dramatic arch above his head. These cresting peaks echoed the dynamic flourishing of the universe, uniting the space between the earthly domain of humans and the arched dome of the sky, where gods reside. We were able to literally activate the exhibition space by connecting Lonokaʻeho with the voices of contemporary Hawaiians. I invited my friend and colleague Marques Marzan to respond to the exhibition, and he was joined by Samuel M ʻOhukaniʻōhiʻa Gon, III, Anne Lokomaikaʻi Lipscomb, and Marie Keʻalohilani Wong during a visit to New York several months prior to the exhibition opening. They chose to record a series of mele whose steady rhythms invoked two pairs of gods: Ku and Lono and Kane and Kanaloa—all deities who were represented and instantiated by specific

artworks in the exhibition. The mele honored their presence in the exhibition and were played in the gallery every day throughout its run, animating the space and binding the extremities of the exhibition space together with sound.

My ambition with *Atea* was to inspire on a conceptual as well as a visual level and highlight above all else the active and dynamic aspect of each artwork in the show. I was interested to see how far we could push the exhibition space to tap into the efficacy and agency of these majestic works to create new avenues for understand-



FIGURE 6 Jahra Wasasala performing *God-House (bure kalou)* in the Oceania galleries as part of the programming for the final weekend of the *Atea* exhibition, 26–27 October 2019. Photo by Dan Taulapapa McMullin.

ing. Much of the curatorial work I do is grounded in this approach to distill and elevate core ideas pertinent to the Pacific and present things as far as possible from the inside out. One of the outcomes is the creation of a space that allows for Indigenous narratives and distinctly Pacific ways of being to flow out and guide all the activity and protocol that takes place in the galleries.

We commissioned the fiercely talented dancer and choreographer Jahra Wasasala (Fiji/New Zealand) to create a piece in response to the exhibition. Using her own body as a point of connection and expression, Jahra produced an active and deeply moving critical dialogue with the works in the exhibition (figure 6). In a powerfully uplifting work that was both melancholic and shattering, Jahra used the opportunity to open up a dynamic space for her own voice where she could respond, in a visceral and profound way, to what she described as the “extraordinary ancestors” on display in the galleries. Entitled *God-House (bure kalou)*, the twenty-minute work confronted the power dynamics of the institution exploring indigeneity and its interface with the museum.

Exposure to this kind of distinctive practice is precisely the kind of extension of boundaries that I am dedicated to promoting at the Met. All of the mighty works in *Atea* encapsulate such vastness and remind us always of the larger work at hand in articulating a sense of this within the museum space: how might we show the Pacific at its most expansive, imaginative, and unrestricted; the Pacific as it inheres in people and places—and

time; the Pacific of song and story, as it is spoken and danced; the Pacific in art that keeps moving, shifting in and out of different realms, as it was designed to do; the Pacific as it inheres in the ongoing work of relationships—between people, art, and museums—dynamic and evolving, just like the ocean within us.

MAIA NUKU

*The Metropolitan Museum  
of Art*

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*Framing the Islands: Power and Diplomatic Agency in Pacific Regionalism*, by Greg Fry. Canberra: ANU Press, 2019. ISBN print: 9781760463144; ISBN e-book: 9781760463151, xvii + 399 pages, maps, notes, bibliography, index. Hardback, US\$55.00; e-book, free.

In 2019, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Secretariat reported “that current and emerging geopolitical and climate change risk-related circumstances and dynamics call for a fundamental re-thinking of the way in which we work together, as Forum Members and partners, while also as stewards of an increasingly environmentally threatened and geopolitically contested Pacific ocean” (*State of Pacific Regionalism Report* [2019, 6]). However, in more than seven decades of attempted regional cooperation in the Island Pacific, fundamental rethinking has rarely been absent from the journey. This is evident from Greg Fry’s thorough evaluation of the increasingly complex, at times tortuous processes in which the “framing” asserted

by contrasting, often contested agendas has remained persistently unsettled. Most recently, for example, the Forum experienced a serious fracture when, led by the Marshall Islands, five Micronesian States declared that they planned to leave the Pacific Islands Forum, cutting its membership by a third. This occurred following a marathon meeting in February 2021 during which the Forum narrowly decided to appoint a Cook Islander as secretary general, thus breaking a prior understanding that the post would go to a Micronesian representative.

The introduction and conclusion apart, this study’s twelve substantive chapters include five in which previously published material is acknowledged. They span the 1947 origins of the colonial-dominated South Pacific Commission; subsequent decolonization of regional governance; importantly, the 1971 inception of what is now the Pacific Islands Forum; exogenous impacts driven by Cold War and post-Cold War security imperatives; a period of neoliberal ascendancy; and, finally, a more recent phase of regional assertiveness driven by the exigencies of global climate change.

On reviewing what this study has faithfully recorded, some significant features emerge. The first is the dual struggle Pacific Island governments have faced in filling blank spaces left by incomplete processes of decolonization; this has been particularly acute for smaller territories. Although unmentioned in this study, the so-called MIRAB phenomenon—originally penned in 1985 by Aotearoa/New Zealand scholars I G Bertram and R F Watters and involving dependency on out-migration, inward remittances,