

A Fiji-Iroquois War Club

An Unusual Case of Diffusion



By LEE A. PARSONS

Assistant Curator of Anthropology
Milwaukee Public Museum

The museum anthropologist occasionally has the unique opportunity of making inferences in regard to cultural process from the study of material culture alone. One such opportunity was afforded the author recently when dismantling a twenty-five year old exhibit of historic Iroquois materials at the Milwaukee Public Museum. Included in this assemblage of lacrosse sticks, baskets, wooden bowls, rattles, and weapons, was an unusual short-handled wooden war club which looked strangely out of place in spite of the attached eagle feather. Closer examination of the carved shaft, with its tightly geometric design, the natural root convolutions constituting the business end, and the color and weight of the wood, brought to mind the characteristic root-stock throwing clubs of Fiji. The

eagle feather and a length of black friction tape applied to the shaft plus the general concept of a ball-headed club gave the piece a superficial feeling of appropriateness to the New World association in this exhibit. A check on provenience data in the museum accession book showed that this specimen had indeed been collected from an Iroquois group! The club was included in a large collection gathered on a field trip to western New York state in 1918 by this museum's distinguished early director, Dr. Samuel A. Barrett. There can be no doubt that it formed part of our Iroquois family's household inventory. At the same time, the wooden club, minus feather and tape, would be hopelessly lost if mixed with a group of Fijian clubs of this type.

All this leads to a very obvious series of deductions, which nevertheless provides a rather interesting comment on the sometimes fortuitous and unpredictable nature of diffusion. Three cultures, widely divergent in space and historic connections, all contributed to the history and appearance of the artifact: Fijian (wooden club), Iroquois (eagle feather), and American (friction tape). We may safely infer that the club itself had been picked up in Fiji, perhaps in the first half of the last century by a New England whaling captain or a church missionary. It was then brought back to the East Coast along with other "curios" from the South Seas. We might imagine that descendants of this original collector brought the family heirlooms and souvenirs with them when migrating westward. This particular piece

may have been traded to an Iroquois Indian along the way. The Indian would have been attracted to the object because of its resemblance to the traditional and familiar Woodland ball-headed war club. He enhanced the flavor of the object to suit his taste by adding the eagle feather. Then sometime prior to the appearance of Dr. Barrett on the scene in 1918, the shaft of the club had been repaired with American black friction tape by an already somewhat acculturated Indian.

Therefore, this club, in the course of three or four generations, passed through Melanesian, American, Woodland Indian, and back to American hands. The weapon had full meaning and functional use only to the two neolithic-level cultures. The American intermediary provided an unintentional means of conveyance of the object from one pre-literate culture to another.

In spite of the special nature of this example of diffusion, and the unusual distance involved, this situation undoubtedly has parallels in prehistory where the diffusion of certain objects cannot conveniently be explained by direct contact between the donating and receiving groups. The fortuitous intervention of a third, possibly disinterested, party may account for such trade items. This reaffirms the often repeated caution that it is not always necessary to marshal migration theories, or specialized merchant organizations, or even thoughts of independent invention, to account for the appearance of identical articles in widely separated areas.

POSTSCRIPT BY THE EDITOR

Mr. Parsons has just advised us that Dr. Barrett who had obtained the club for the Milwaukee Public Museum has given him some further information about its history. Our first thought was to ask Mr. Parsons to rewrite the article in the light of this information, but we have decided that our readers may find it interesting to compare his deductions from circumstantial evidence with the actual facts.

Dr. Barrett remembers the club because he had realized its unusual nature and had made a special effort to follow it up. The Iroquois Indian in whose possession the club was in 1918 told Dr. Barrett that he had acquired it during his former association with a circus. He did not know exactly where it came from, but he did think it was from a South Sea island. He had had it for a number of years and prized it highly because it was similar to a club used by the Iroquois in ancient times.

It may be of interest also to note that Irving Wallace in his book *The Fabulous Showman: The Life and Times of P. T. Barnum*, states that in the great circus railroad show, *Barnum, Coup and Costello*, organized by Barnum in 1872, there were included in a sideshow, "four wild Fiji cannibals rescued from an enemy's pot." It is entirely possible that these were the very individuals who brought this club to the United States, and it may have been this circus for which our Indian worked.

Therefore, the actual story of the specimen proves to be more direct and simple than the reconstructed history. Thanks to the circus, there may well have been a first-hand transaction between Fiji Islander and Iroquois Indian, without the American intermediary! In a way, however, the actual process of diffusion was even more specialized and fortuitous than the author had imagined.