

**Body Ornaments of Malaita, Solomon Islands. Ben Burt with David Akin and Michael Kwa'ioloa. London: British Museum Press, 2009. 168 pp.\***

**Reviewed by Fanny Wonu Veys**

For the book entitled *Body Ornaments of Malaita, Solomon Islands*, the author Ben Burt joined forces with David Akin, his research colleague and Michael Kwa'ioloa, his Kwara'ae brother. This collaboration has resulted in an extremely well illustrated book on body ornaments in the Solomon Islands. The focus is on the Kwara'ae peoples of Malaita Island, who have largely abandoned the wearing of white shell, pearl and turtle shell ornaments or strings, money beads, combs, and patterned bands. However, other neighbouring Malaita peoples such as the Kwaio peoples who still make and use similar body ornaments are taken into account. Retained knowledge from Kwara'ae elders, oral history, objects, and historic images are brought together. The book is aimed at those whose ancestors once owned the ornaments and also at the museum-going public and researchers.

The publication is divided into four chapters, which guide readers through the most important themes pertaining to body ornamentation in the Solomon Islands. The first introductory chapter poses some theoretical questions regarding whether or not Pacific objects are to be considered art and whether this makes sense in the Kwara'ae framework. Ben Burt then zooms in specifically on his research methods as applied to the study of Malaita body ornaments. He first gives a definition of what ornaments involve and then touches upon the role that Christianity played in the abandonment of the wearing of body ornaments among the Kwara'ae. The relationship between Malaita ornaments and foreign museums is explored. In the past Solomon Islanders were attributed a kind of timeless traditional culture. Therefore, a detailed history of artefacts was of less interest. The author hopes that the publication will contribute to assisting people to maintain some self-determination in a world ever more subject to the cultural hegemony of the West.

In chapter two, entitled “Wearing and Discarding Ornaments” the disappearance of ornaments from Kwara'ae as part of the history of relationships between Malaitans and Westerners is looked at. In the past Malaitans only dressed up for special occasions, social events and to display their wealth. Some ornaments were closely associated with men, while others concerned women. This all started to change with the experience of foreign clothes when labourers came back from work in Fiji and Australia. Subsequent Christian missionary influence involved, for many converts, a clean break with the past and thus also with the wearing of body ornaments. Today, most Malaitans wear the smartest Western clothes to Sunday church services. World War II also brought unprecedented amounts of Western clothing to the community. It is thus clear that economic, religious, and political impacts began long before Malaita became part of the British Solomon Island Protectorate in 1893.

Chapter three, “Making, Selling and Documenting Ornaments” considers materials used, technologies of making and dying the ornaments, how those were obtained and how they have

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been documented and preserved. Materials are derived from both the sea and the land and include shells, cockles, mussels, dolphin teeth, plant seeds, and vines. The acquisition of those materials initiated and maintained relationships between communities in Malaita. Networks established for the exchanging of local shell bead “money” and dolphin teeth existed and Westerners moreover contributed significantly to these. They traded foreign goods in exchange for labour and the ornaments, which eventually became museum collections. Over time the curios trade played an important role in depleting the area of its body ornaments, which explains why most of them are now to be found in museum collections. The chapter concludes by examining local and regional ornament styles.

The final chapter “A Catalogue of Malaita Ornaments” gives a detailed overview of the types of ornaments, illustrating their appearance and also describing how they were worn. The ornaments are illustrated with fine drawings made by the author himself, which allows readers to compare Kwara’ae traditions with those of other parts of Malaita and Solomon Islands. The ornaments are organized under the categories of: money, head ornaments, ear and nose ornaments, neck pendants, arm, waist and leg ornaments and bags. The chapter concludes with an account of what needs to be done to the body to prepare it for the wearing of particular ornaments. The discussion includes painting, piercing, barbering and the blackening of teeth. Within each category, the ornaments under discussion are each given their vernacular Kwara’ae names.

This book is an excellent reference work thanks to its well-researched text, its organised structure and its pictorial material, including historic and fieldwork photography and minute drawings. It really provides a wealth of information, which is invaluable for documenting museum collections all over the world. The publication in which the vanishing tradition of body ornaments is recorded will benefit descendants of those who once wore them and the interested public, researcher, and museum professionals alike.

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