The Effect of Objects: The Return of a North Vanuatu Textile from the Australian Museum to the Vanuatu Cultural Centre

Lissant Bolton

Department of Ethnography, British Museum, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG, United Kingdom
lbolton@british-museum.ac.uk

ABSTRACT. In 1995 a plaited pandanus textile was repatriated from the Australian Museum to the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. During the process questions about the textile’s specific place of manufacture arose. The Australian Museum records indicated that it was a girl’s dress collected from the northern part of Pentecost Island. However, through discussions with women fieldworkers from the Vanuatu Cultural Centre about variations in methods of manufacture and designs in different parts of Vanuatu it became clear it was a special type of textile called baru from Maewo which was no longer made. The return of the baru stimulated redefinition of what was known about such objects. For the Cultural Centre fieldworkers it drew attention to items in danger of being no longer made, of loss of skills and knowledge. Accounts of transactions such as this demonstrate both the complexity and the importance of the relationships that can flow through and around museums.