



## Priest's yaqona dish in duck form

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### **On display**

**Title/Description:** Priest's yaqona dish in duck form

**Object Type:** Dish

**Materials:** Shell, Wood

**Measurements:** h. 150 x w. 295 x l. 470 mm

**Accession Number:** 912

**Historic Period:** Early 19th century

**Production Place:** Fiji, Oceania, Pacific

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Fijian pedestal *yaqma* dishes in any form are rare, and this is one of only four examples known in the shape of a duck. The flat body and outstretched wings are carved as an elegant shallow dish, which is supported by two square-section legs on a circular base. The head is clearly that of a duck, with the upper bill slightly overlapping the lower, as can be seen in the detail. The inner surface of the dish and the head are beautifully smooth, whereas the underside and the base are unpolished, with adze marks still evident. The whole sculpture is carved from a single piece of *vesi* (*Intsia bijuga*), a Fijian hardwood which was favoured for items of ritual importance. The shell ring for the left eye is missing.

Special *yaqma* dishes (*ibubburau ni bete*), carved with elaborate stands, were an important part of a priest's ritual equipment in pre-Christian Fiji, notably on Viti Levu, where most examples have been found (see Roth and Hooper, 1989, for several collected in the 1870s by Baron von Hugel). The significance of the duck form of this dish is unclear. Although indigenous to Fiji, the duck does not appear to have been a creature of general ritual importance, though it may have had some specific totemic associations with particular groups.

*Yaqna*, more generally known by the Tongan name *kava*, was, and is, a drink of great ritual significance in Fiji. It is prepared from the roots of a species of pepper plant (*Piper methysticum*), mixed with water. Clunie (1986: 168-75) has discussed at length the two basic *yaqona* drinking methods employed in Fiji — the indigenous priestly *burau* rites, for which this dish was used, and the Tongan-influenced 'kava circle' ceremony, for which a plain circular bowl (*tanoa*) on four or more legs was used. The *burau* method, by which priests entered a trance state, virtually ceased with conversion to Christianity during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, whereas the *kava* circle method has developed to become one of the most important of Fijian state ceremonials.

The principal role of the pre-Christian priest was to act as a channel for communication with gods and spirits. After drinking an infusion of *yaqona* through a wood or straw tube, the priest entered a trance and became possessed by the god. The god would speak through him and could be addressed by supplicants for the purpose of asking favours, seeking medical cures or for discovering the origin of sorcery.

The precise history of this dish is not known, but examination of historical sources, and of the three other extant duck dishes, allows us to suggest that it may be the example given to John Erskine during his visit to Fiji in 1849, and also the one illustrated by Williams in his *Fiji and the Fijians* (1858: 77). Beasley noted this possibility in his short article on this dish (1922: 133), but took the matter no further.

In the earliest known published reference to this type of dish, John Erskine wrote that at Viwa on 15 August 1849 the missionary James Calvert gave him 'a rare specimen of a priest's sacred kava-bowl, carved in rude imitation of a duck, acquired from some recently Christianized community' (Erskine, 1853: 200). The Reverend Thomas Williams, who collaborated with Calvert on *Fiji and the Fijians*, also refers to such a dish. In a general summary he wrote, 'Fancy oil dishes and *yaqona* bowls, chiefly for the priests, are cut . . . out of very hard wood, and the former in a great variety of forms. I have seen one carved like a duck, another like a turtle' (Williams, 1858: 77).

Fortunately, Williams provided a drawing of a duck dish, which is very similar to the present example, despite some distortion in scale and perspective, particularly of the base. The dish in the drawing has a circular base, square-section legs, and — a feature which is clearly emphasised — the central part of the dish extends along the neck of the bird, beyond the wing tips.

Of the three other known duck dishes, none corresponds so closely to the Williams drawing as the present example. One in the Fiji Museum is known to have been collected by Williams, but it has cylindrical legs and the neck part barely extends beyond the wings. The other example in the Fiji Museum was collected in the late 1850s and has a conical stand (Clunie, 1986: 86). The fourth dish, in Tasmania, has no known history, and although similar in general form to this dish, its legs are cylindrical, while the central part of the dish does not extend beyond the wing tips (Ewins, 1982: 60). There is a further small bird dish in Auckland (Oldman, 1943: pl. 70), but it differs markedly from the duck dishes in the form of the wings and the angle of the head.

Until further evidence comes to light, this little ethnohistorical puzzle will remain unresolved, though it is safe to say that all such dishes date to the period before Christian conversion (1840s to 1870s) and the cessation of formal *burau* rites.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 32-35.

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