

Barbara B. Wavell, unpublished paper. 11 pp.

FROM SACRED TO SOUVENIR

THE SQUATTING FIGURE AS A MOTIF IN MICRONESIAN ART

The Micronesian squatting figure is a true tribal arts mystery. For the last 100 years this interesting sculpture has been a popular genre figure in the Western Caroline Islands. But does it represent the last vestiges of a disappearing religious tradition or is it simply a tourist motif, perhaps introduced from another cultural area by a capricious colonial power?

This intriguing example of Micronesian figural sculpture presents a significant research challenge since the first explicit references to the squatting figure and its cultural origins are found in Japanese sources dating from the Japanese occupation of Micronesia (1914-1945). Earlier references to figural sculpture from the area including Spanish, German and American sources describe standing, not squatting figures. They vaguely mention "idols" or crude figures without providing a detailed description.

Art associated with the religion or magic of indigenous inhabitants is often the first to disappear after culture contact. Missionary influence can motivate native peoples to conceal the original significance of an object. As outside influences erode ancient belief systems, objects are destroyed, abandoned or sold to Europeans devoid of their original cultural context, often causing their meaning to be lost before it can be recorded. Traditional arts, which were once part of a unique material culture, can go through many changes in style and function in response to outside influences. While certain art styles and cultural motifs continue to act as a focus for cultural identity, they often become stylistically modified when they are used as an economic resource.

In the case of the squatting figure, a period of popularity and high production beginning during the Japanese period (1914-1945) ultimately resulted in a proliferation of styles associated with specific carvers. The Japanese liked these squatting figures and trained Palauan carvers to make them in the same classes in which they taught them to carve storyboards. Although Micronesian sculpture continued to be produced during the American period, the original cultural significance of these figures and even their original appearance remains obscure. Very few early examples of squatting figures appear to exist, even in German collections. Most squatting figures in United States Museums such as the Bishop, the Peabody and the Smithsonian, were collected after WWII. Japanese researchers tell us that squatting figures once functioned as ancestor and guardian figures. Other evidence suggests that they may have been used in traditional canoe magic. Certain types of squatting figures such as Ngulu "frogmen" may have functioned as fertility objects. Numerous modern references briefly describe "monkeyman" figures along with other Micronesian crafts. For example, Trust Territory anthropologist Robert E. McKnight describes squatting figures as being guardians of the dead used in canoe burials. He states that the figures attracted the attention of German traders perhaps as early as the 1860s. The article provides no bibliography and strangely, all the early German references and most early figures collected appear to have been standing and not squatting. Certainly, the stylistic proliferation associated with the popularity of the squatting figure

has confused the situation, making it difficult to identify its original cultural origins. Although several islands in the Western Carolines appear to have produced their own style of squatting figures, the most well known incarnation of the genre is the Tobi “doll” or “monkeyman” thought to have originated on Tobi. Tobi is a small, raised coral island between Palau and New Guinea which has now been renamed Hatohobei, but for consistency, the earlier name of Tobi will be used here.

Two thousand islands in a vast expanse of ocean make up the area of the South Pacific which we call Micronesia. Guam is the largest of these islands at 225 square miles with a grand total of 1000 square miles for the entire region which includes the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Belau, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, the Republic of the Marshalls, the Republic of Nauru, and the Republic of Kiribati. These are modern political designations, but the Caroline Islands is an earlier term which encompasses the islands of Palau, Yap, Truk and numerous small islands in between. While some islands are atolls, others are high islands. Some islands are of coral limestone, while others are more recently volcanic in origin. Situated with Melanesia to the south west, the Philippines and Southeast Asia to the west, and Polynesia to the east, Micronesia is a melting pot of cultural influences. Based on linguistic studies, Micronesia is thought to have been originally populated from Island South East Asia or perhaps the Philippines. Some of the people of the Carolines appear more Polynesian with straight hair and golden skin, while others show the influence of Melanesian migrations in their darker skin and curly hair.

Different styles of squatting figures have been collected on many of the islands of the Caroline group. Most of the squatting figures which are currently seen range from over two feet to less than two inches in height and have inlaid eyes of mother of pearl. Eye shape varies according to the island of origin. In general, round, rounded square, tear drop and “eye” shaped eyes come from Tobi, Palau and Sonsorol (which sometimes also uses catseyes), and Satawan in the Mortlocks, while triangular eyes are associated with Yap, Ulithi, Woleai, Ngulu and possibly Eauripik. The Ulithi style squatting figure has a distinctive blocky body (also seen on Lamotrek, Ngulu and Satawal) and is often carved in soft woods such as breadfruit, while Palauan/Tobi/Satawan sculptures generally have smooth, curved surfaces and are often carved from highly polished hardwoods. The Ngulu style “frogman” has a similar head shape to the Ulithi style, but protruding stomach and breasts in keeping with its role as a fertility symbol.

During the first years of the American period, after WWII, Micronesia was generally a restricted military area, and there was very little tourism. Although the government bought a certain number of crafts to encourage island economies, they advised carvers to spend more time on the carvings they had already started since they could only purchase a limited quantity. This may have had the effect of improving the quality of the carvings, but the number of squatting figures produced declined significantly. Nowadays, a few such figures are carved in styles distinctive to the artist. For example, one group of squatting figures apparently carved by Patricio Tahimaremamo during the 60s have distinctive batman shaped ears.

Micronesian art has been largely neglected by specialists, both because of the scarcity of early examples and also because Micronesia tends to lack large dramatic figural sculptures. However, as Douglas Fraser states in his book Primitive Art "Once thought almost non-existent in Micronesia, figures actually occur in every Micronesian group with the possible exception of the Marshalls." Other island groups had ancestor figures, both squatting and standing which often came in male/female pairs. According to Mason, the squatting figure of Ngulu, another small island in the Western Carolines, became popularly known as "frogmen" and are considered extremely ancient in origin. Mog Mog dolls are identified as such in Hijikata's exhibition catalog, and are similar to those collected by Hera Ware Owen in Truk. The Japanese author Someki, and a 1997 Japanese exhibition catalog Micronesia - Navigators and Their Culture both identify these figures as products of the Mortlock Islands, (near Truk) although since Mog Mog is actually the name of one of the small islets of Ulithi, there seems to be an implied geographical origin in the Japanese name. In any case, these figures were often produced in male/female pairs, sometimes in standing or sitting positions. They have painted eyebrows with the T shaped configuration of nose and brows also seen on the well known Mortlocks Islands "tapuanu" (sacred spirit) masks. Interestingly, the Smithsonian has an example of a squatting figure which is illustrated in Kaeppler's book Oceanic Art and is attributed to Satawan in the Mortlock Islands. It closely resembles the classic polished lines of the souvenir monkeymen figures produced in Palau, although the Satawan figure has a few stylistic distinctions such as the clearly delineated Mortlock style eyebrows. Yap also produced pairs of male and female figures in traditional costume, although any ancestor figure function these sculptures may have served has long since been abandoned. Verna Curtis, who helped start and operate craft coops in Yap and Truk from 1951 through 1985 advises that certain styles of sculpture could only be carved by certain individuals from specific family groups or of specific social status. As in other Pacific cultures, certain types or designs of carving were owned and thus constituted intellectual property. Figural sculptures from all of the above islands including Sonsorol, Palau, Ulithi and Ngulu were probably a product of traditional belief systems. These belief systems began to confront Christian influences during the Spanish occupation of Guam in the 1500s. At first these contacts were very sporadic but increased during the 1800s as Caroline Islanders began to make regular trading visits to Guam.

Experts on Oceanic art have frequently discounted Micronesian figural sculpture as no more than airport art. As Kaeppler has asserted: "Micronesia must lead the world in the lack of outside attention given to its traditional and contemporary arts." Perhaps this is partly because Micronesia has been colonized longer than any other area of the South Pacific and its art and culture are therefore considered "contaminated" by Western contact. After Balboa discovered the Pacific Ocean in 1513, Magellan quickly followed rounding the tip of South America in 1520, and discovering Guam in Micronesia in 1521. Polynesia, in contrast, didn't really begin to be discovered until the 1700s by Cook and others. The Polynesian artifacts that explorers collected during this early period have become some of the most fabled and coveted objects of Oceanic art and are depicted again and again in books on the subject. However, although Micronesia was discovered early

on, its numerous isolated islands had scanty resources, and a reputation for thievery and aggression. Consequently they attracted infrequent visits from European traders, until the Japanese period(1917-1945) when many Japanese immigrated to Micronesia.

Spanish documents make brief reference to the existence of crudely carved figural sculptures in the Western Carolines, however the descriptions lack detail and no examples of squatting figures are known to have been collected during this period. Horace Holden, an American who was shipwrecked on Tobi in 1835 appears to be the earliest well substantiated Western contact. He makes no reference to squatting figures, and although he did witness canoe burials, his descriptions are sketchy. He does state that: "Rudely carved figures are placed in different parts of the building and are supposed to personate their deity."

Eilers, who documented the 1908 German expedition to Tobi also makes no reference to squatting figures. However, she does describe a sacred canoe house with a cult boat hung with votive offerings. Standing figures were arranged at intervals in the canoe house. Apparently, throughout the Caroline Islands miniature canoes were hung in canoe houses as a means of conveying the spirits of the gods. For example, in Palau a special boat was carved to bring a god or "galid" to protect the community from disease. The Tobi cult boat, described by Eilers, was used to bring the deity into the canoe house to converse with the priest. Spirit canoes were also prominent in the Yap district and Truk, both areas where small squatting and standing figures were being produced. However, the figures which the Germans saw being produced for trade on Tobi were standing and not squatting figures. Herr Fritz, the magistrate of Saipan visited Tobi on the vessel Seestern December 17, 1906 and provided the following description of the carvings which the Tobi were offering for trade: "They also brought remarkable pieces of carving streaked with white paint for exchange. These carvings consisted of men with hats and pipes, a complete steamship with compass, rudder, signal pipes and other details...unfinished work...however based on good observation." This description suggests that the Tobians were more comfortable selling objects which depicted foreigners and foreign objects. Interestingly, Eilers describes the Tobians as: "Extremely conservative with regard to their traditional customs and implements and, on religious grounds, they disapprove of all innovation. Everything that comes from abroad bears in their opinion, the seeds of misfortune, and this conviction makes them suspicious, anxious and reticent. Significant is their fear of anthropological, photographic and phonographic recordings." This attitude which may derive from the association between the visits of foreigners and the outbreak of disease; or the attitudes of missionaries, would certainly motivate the Tobians to conceal items associated with their most sacred beliefs. Certainly they would be reluctant to sell such items. However, eager to obtain trade goods, they worked hard to create objects which they thought would interest European visitors. It may be that only later, during the Japanese administration, squatting figures were identified and popularized. During the German, Japanese and American administrations more and more Tobians were transferred to other islands following storms and storm related famines. A population of Tobians who grew up in Palau exposed to urbanization and Christianity may have become increasingly willing to purvey images once sacred to their traditional culture.

A Japanese artist and self appointed ethnologist who visited Micronesia in 1931 was Atsushi Someki. He described the Tobi “dolls” as ancestor figures which the Tobians kept in special places in their homes. Mr. Someki felt that the artistic merit of the Tobi figures were limited, and preferred MogMog “dolls”, as well as figures carved on Woleiai . Mr. Someki found only one carver on Tobi in 1934 called Oakama who could carve fine examples of the traditional Tobi “doll”. The Tobian chief Mokonukuro could also carve them, but not as skillfully. Tobi figures carved in Palau could still be obtained, but they were expensive, and Someki felt that even those carved by Tobians who had moved to Palau could not be considered authentic.

Kenji Kiyono (1855-1955) was a Japanese ethnologist who visited Palau in 1941. He sought to understand the cultural origins of the Japanese people by studying Micronesian culture. Although he discovered that the squatting figures said to have originated on Tobi could be readily purchased in Palau, he considered these Tobi dolls to be only copies. According to him only one traditional carver was left. However, Tobian informants related that once long ago, Tobi islanders had big and small statues. Near the big statues they placed smaller figures which they prayed to and treated like gods. The Spanish missionaries succeeded in suppressing the production of the large figures, but the small figures continued to be produced. According to the Tobians, the original figures were carved in soft wood, while later copies began to be produced in hard woods. This may have simply been a function of the availability of better tools for wood working following European contact. In any event, the original figures were found in pairs, identified as male and female by their different parts. Genuine “Tobi dolls” were also identified by their eyes which pointed upwards on the tops of sloping foreheads. Tobians were said to use their canoes for coffins, cutting them and sealing them up, after first placing a pair of Tobi figures in the coffin (presumably one male and one female) to function as guardians to accompany the dead. However, Kiyono admits that the details of these practices have been obscured due to the influence of the Spanish missionaries. Apparently in early times bodies were sent out to sea in canoes, and it was not until later, during the Japanese or German period that sea burials were outlawed possibly for health reasons and modified coffins began to be used were for land burials.

Interestingly, Kiyono adds that the Palauans traditionally had a similar figure, which could be differentiated from the Tobian by the fact that it had tattoo marks. One Palauan squatting figure, in the Linden Museum, Stuttgart has inlaid eyes and very detailed sculptural features, as well as a huge penis, but no visible tattoos. It apparently represented the local god Ngaraus and was originally kept in a special shrine. Another squatting figure carved from stone is depicted in Meyer’s book on Oceanic Art. This Palauan squatting figure also from the Linden museum is said to represent Temdoki, a guardian of the god’s dwelling place, who warns of approaching visitors by whistling. Both these figures tend to support the theory of a sculptural tradition of squatting figures in Palau ,both in stone and wood.

Female mons on Palauan “dolls” were represented by a triangle pointing downwards, similar to those seen on the Dilukai figure which was traditionally attached to the front of the Palauan bai. Tobi figures, however, have the triangle pointing upwards. The mons is represented by a sort of “w” shape whereby the clitoris is outlined in the center by an upwards point. This description and a print by Jacoulet from the 1930s which depicts a Tobi figure being carved, seems to indicate that the early style of Tobian squatting figure were crudely made, and more similar to the Ulithi squatting figures, than the smooth finely polished figures seen today.

A personal informant, a Palauan woman whose father had a great deal of association with Tobians, was told by her father that squatting figures were used in canoe magic. Certainly, in the Caroline islands miniature canoes were used as vehicles for spirits and souls. Priests used canoes hung in the sacred canoe house to attract healing or protective spirits. Canoes were the way to get about, logically they would also be the means of transport for gods and spirits.

Although the above descriptions of canoe magic cannot confirm the presence of a symbolic figure in the canoe, there are numerous accounts of the use of such figures, both in ancestor worship and burial practices; documented in Micronesia, the Solomon Islands and Indonesia. James Frazer in his book The Belief in Immortality and the Worship of the Dead, makes an interesting reference to a related practice in the Mortlock Islands of Micronesia quoting the German source Girschner. Apparently, images of deceased chiefs or noblemen who had especially distinguished themselves were carved from breadfruit and seated in canoes in the canoe house. The image’s legs were outstretched and it was adorned with a necklace and girdle. It was kept in a large canoe. Permission was sought from the image in order to use the canoe, and in times of warfare the image was renewed. Interestingly, squatting figures have been collected from Satawan in the Mortlocks, such as the one illustrated in Kaepplers Oceanic Art from the Smithsonian collection. Furthermore, Kramer (Truk, 1932) illustrates an altar set up under a breadfruit tree on Etten Atoll, Truk. Although extremely unclear, this photos shows a figure tied with pandanus leaves and surrounded with breadfruit which does seem to have some stylistic similarities to the Ulithi style squatting figure in several areas including the sharp lines on the shoulders and arms, the mouth and shape of the bust. Although the figure is extremely elongated its possible that it may be in a distorted squatting posture. A side view is not available.

Interestingly, an article in the 1971 National Geographic book Isles of the South Pacific depicts a carved figure, seated in an inlaid model canoe apparently from Foueda Island in the Solomons. Like the Mortlock Islands figure described in Frazer, the image’s legs appear outstretched. The cryptic caption states: “Shell inlaid model of a ceremonial canoe holds a black figure whose name remains a secret kept by chiefs and priests.” An inquiry directed to the National Geographic society failed to elicit further details. However, in Codrington’s The Melanesians the discussion of burial practices in the Solomons describes how the remains of bodies are enclosed in the wooden model of a fish or canoe, and hung in the rafters of the canoe house, usually only when a great man dies. The Batak of

Indonesia similarly enclosed the bones of their ancestors in a model boat complete with a guardian figure sitting in the back. Other Indonesian cultures have squatting guardian figures, such as the Dayak's Hampatong (which is sometimes standing), or the Korwar of Irian Jaya which is carved shortly after death for the ancestor's spirit to inhabit. The Leta, and neighboring Moluccas use squatting figures on their altars, and in the Phillipines they carve spoons with squatting figures called "binulla" signifying "guardian images". These are very similar to ladles with squatting and standing figures which were traditionally carved in Palau.

The similarities between squatting figures on different islands in Micronesia is so clear that it is almost impossible to dispute the relationship. However, stylistic comparisons can also be made between the head shape of the more polished style of Micronesian figures, and the heads of some Polynesian figures such as Tongan whale ivory figures and suspension hooks, Fijian suspension hooks, ancestor figures and even the heads of Fijian dishmen. These similarities are especially evident in the flattened top of the head, the general head shape, and the formation of the ears, nose and chin. Keith St. Cartmail's recent book entitled The Art of Tonga provides some fascinating support to the idea that these stylistic similarities are more than just coincidence. The similarities between Tongan and Tobi burial customs are suggestive. Canoes, or the wreckage of canoes were incorporated into the burial mounds of Tongan chiefs, a site where spirit houses were subsequently built, and pairs of male and female wooden guardian figures were also included, apparently as "monuments to the dead". The same types of figures were also included in spirit houses. These figures were observed during the late 1700s and early 1800s, when conversion to Christianity caused many of them to be destroyed. Interestingly, one Micronesian squatting figure collected by Yoshio Kondo "Palao, Tokobe in 1936, and now at the Bishop Museum has a catalog note "said to be buried with chiefs in lieu of humans." This figure is has polished sculptural lines but is of a fairly unusual style with its legs splayed to the side. However, unlike the Tongan which Cartmail describes, variations of the Micronesian squatting figure have continued to be made, and not just as museum copies, but as a vital art form. Interesting examples can be found from the 1950s and earlier, many of which were collected by servicemen stationed in Micronesia, during and shortly after WWII. Strangely, the curious figure which the servicemen brought back with them has been largely disregarded by tribal art collectors, museum curators and art historians alike.

Some tentative conclusions can be drawn for the information obtained thus far. Certainly the squatting figure motif cannot be said to have originated solely on Tobi, but can be identified in figures ranging as far afield as Indonesia, New Guinea and the Solomons. All these islands have similarities in art and material culture which are probably the result of early contact and exchange prior to Western discovery. Of course, the squatting figure motif is a world-wide phenomena too extensive to adequately address here. The Micronesian squatting figure, and an associated religious tradition involving ancestor worship, may well have originated with those Asian cultures thought to have peopled the Western Pacific, from there spreading in altered form, perhaps as far as Fiji and Tonga.

The Micronesian squatting figure is often found in association with the use of spirit canoes and the practice of ancestor worship. The inhabitants of Pur, Tobi and Sonsoral believed that the realm of the dead was a great canoe, to which their souls transferred. In Tobian canoe burials, the addition of a pair of squatting figures to the coffin was meant to ensure successful passage to this afterworld. Apparently, Tobi squatting figures were also placed on household or canoe house altars. Small figures placed around a larger figure as Kiyono described, may have represented deceased relatives who could intervene on one's behalf with a more powerful ancestor figure or spirit. Certainly Micronesian burials often involved forming the corpse into a squatting position prior to internment. The blocky Ngulu style figures with their large stomachs and swollen breasts may represent a fertility symbol related not just to human fecundity but the success of the breadfruit crop. This may constitute a separate but related tradition.

During the German period, the Tobi were known for their clever carvings, but there is certainly some evidence to suggest that the squatting figure motif did not become a popular tourist item until the Japanese period.

Robert McKnight and derivative references such as Angus McBean were the only ones who asserted that the squatting figure caught the interest of German traders possibly as early as the 1860s. This contention was not supported by Eilers, however. She attempts to document all the known contacts between visiting ships and the Tobi through the early 1900s. These contacts only describe standing figures, often made to look like Europeans. Mc Knight may have found a reference to Tobians trading in carvings and generalized, but since he does not provide his sources it is difficult to speculate. Certainly Eiler's description of the reticent Tobi nature supports the idea that squatting figures could have remained secret until the Tobian culture was sufficiently dispersed and undermined to transform sacred to souvenir. Further, the Japanese people were non-Christian and different in appearance. They may have taken a different approach which elicited more information.

Finally, confronted with the tremendous stylistic variation of squatting figures associated with Tobi and Palau, what constitutes authentic form? How can a genuine or original style Tobi doll be differentiated from one that is derivative? First the distinctive styles of different island groups must be distinguished, as well as the styles of individual carvers. A coral sandstone carving in the blocky outline of a squatting figure who appears to be grasping a broken penis with both hands was obtained on Tobi by Dr. Peter Black in 1968. Along with several Tobi people he was excavating a fireplace at the edge of a small hill while others collected stones to line it. This stone was discovered by one of the searchers. Some elders at Eang, the Tobi settlement in Palau told him that this was once part of a set of stones which bordered the house of the "mother of the island". This same house was where young children, too small for a canoe burial, were interred in the ground. This carving, along with Jacoulet's print from the 1930s, and Someki's descriptions, seems to suggest that the Tobi figure's original form was cruder and rather blocky, somewhat similar to the Ulithi style figures produced today, but perhaps with pouting mouths, eyes near the top of a sloping forehead and upwards pointing mons and detailed

penises. Certainly, Tobi and Ulithi linguistics traditions are more closely related to each other than that of Palau. More streamlined figures could have derived from Palauan or Mortlock Islands style figures. The Japanese preference for the more polished style of figure may have popularized this form, while the original style of figure virtually died out in some areas. Certainly, Someki felt that the Tobi style dolls were crude and preferred the MogMog dolls and carvings from Woleiai.

As Western influences have become stronger, the true form and ritual functions of the Micronesian squatting figure have become increasingly obscure. While there is still more description and documentation to be uncovered, this once sacred souvenir continues to intrigue us with echoes from an earlier time.

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