



Object type: Staff-god
Indigenous name: n/a
Culture/location: Rarotonga, Cook Islands
Date: late 18th century/early 19th century
Materials: wood, mulberry bark, feather
Dimensions: H. 155 x W. 23 x D. 23 in.
Institution and accession number: The British Museum, Oc1978,Q.845



Object type: Female Figure
Indigenous name: A'a
Culture/location: Rurutu, Austral Islands
Date: early 19th century
Materials: Sandalwood
Dimensions: H. 45 x W. 12 in.
Institution and accession number: The British Museum, Oc,LMS.19

I have chosen to compare and contrast two wooden figures that reveal the importance of ancestry and genealogy as themes in Polynesian art. Sculptures like these represent this theme by the exaggeration and stylization of certain features of the human form (Kaepler 2008, 11). One of these two objects is the "Figure of A'a", a 4-foot tall sculpture made of sandalwood from the early 19th century in Rurutu, Austral Islands. This figure is a depiction of the creator God "A'a", and is a powerful demonstration of the importance of family and reverence for ancestors. It also shows that the artist was skilled at representing this theme. The Figure of A'a could be considered one of the most famous sculptures in all of Oceania. This could be because of the collection of 30 small figures carved across its surface. These figurines are a reference to ancestry; they acknowledge the ancestors and descendants in a lineage. The 30 smaller figures are strategically positioned all over the outside of A'a's body, and are even used to form its facial features. In addition being externally ornamented with small ancestral figurines, the inside

of the Figure of A'a is hollow. Inside this cavity were 24 more small figures, accessed through a detachable panel in the back.

Another form of wooden sculpture that refers to the theme of ancestry in Polynesian art are Staff Gods from Rarotonga, Cook Islands. Staff Gods, in addition to being carved genealogical staffs, are thought to be material emblems in which spirits took temporary residence during religious ceremonies (Duff in Webb, 2011). One staff god among the sixteen complete staff gods in existence, exemplifies the tiki figure style of the Cook Islands and their focus on genealogy. This object is composed of a central wood shaft wrapped in an enormous roll of decorated barkcloth, measuring nearly 13 feet tall. The shaft is in the form of an elongated body, with a head on the top and small figures making up its torso. This particular staff god is considered a complete figure, containing three different sections done in the traditional Rarotongan style. The face is carved with concentric almond shaped eyes, echoed by the mouth and lips, which are positioned just above the jaw and sharp chin. The first of the three carved figures along the torso is probably a female, because of the bent arms and legs as well as the triangular notched arm, signifying elements of the female figure. The second figure appears to be a male, facing away from the female. The combination of the male and female qualities on this object suggests an association with Tangaroa, the creator god (Hooper 2006, 225). This imagery seems to convey genealogical themes, conveying the male figure as the primary power in procreation, and the alternating female figures are acknowledged as contributors to procreation and descent, but only as a vessel for passing on the male line (Kaepler 1997, 66).

The "Figure of A'a" and the sennit-wrapped "Staff God" are both extraordinary interpretations of the human figure in relation to the theme of genealogy and lineage. This theme is clearly referenced on the objects' carved features, indicating the importance of descent in the Cook and Austral Islands.

Bibliography

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Staff-god. Photograph. From The British Museum

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