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Object type: Female figure
Indigenous name: Ngatu statue
Culture/Location: Tonga
Materials: Whale Ivory
Date: Early 19th century
Dimensions: H. 5 1/4 x W. 2 x D. 1 1/2 in.
Institution and Accession number: Metropolitan Museum 1979.206.1470

Object type: War club
Indigenous name: Uatogi
Culture/Location: Samoa
Materials: Hardwood
Date: 19th century
Dimensions: 37 13/16 x 4 15/16 in
Institution and Accession number: Brooklyn Museum 2015 35.2049

I chose to compare this ivory female figure from Tonga and a wooden war club from Samoa as representatives of femininity and masculinity within their respective cultures. Tongan and Samoan culture are closely intertwined, so much so that they mention each other in their respective ancient mythologies (Gunson 1990, 176). By examining femininity and masculinity in each society, we can create a composite perspective and provide insight into not just gender roles in Polynesia but how these roles shifted with Western missionary contact and influence.

This figure is one of many ivory female figures taken by missionaries. The numerous collected figures are considered to be female ancestors or goddesses. This figure is carved out of whale ivory, showing the close Tongan relationship with the sea. Whale ivory was frequently used in Polynesia, but the people never actively sought it out, waiting instead for dead whales to wash ashore. This figures' low relief features indicate that it was carved with traditional carving tools as opposed to Western metal tools. Her squatted stance with arms resting at her sides and a boxy build are a typical Polynesian tiki stance. The muscular body represents typical Polynesian female beauty standards, which were a stark opposite to Eurocentric beauty standards emphasizing slender bodies and smaller female figures that pervaded colonized societies. The highly regarded priests and priestesses of Hikule'o, the goddess represented, studied and promoted religious Tongan mythology within their society (Gunson 1993, 147).

Women in Tonga possessed a particular "pre-eminence" in their societies and religious ceremonies. Tongan society emphasized the relationship between brother and sister. For example, women held powerful positions in indigenous Tongan religion, but their brothers were

the ones that possessed political power (James 1983, 234). Male chiefs needed the approval of their sisters to make important decisions. The traditional explanation behind these gender roles is unclear. The information became unavailable when Western missionaries arrived in Tonga (James 1983, 234). Many scholars argue that female status deteriorated with Western contact and missionary influence because Western contact began pushing women into domestic roles, such as wives and mothers, and denigrated the importance of sibling relationships (James 1983, 234). Once entrenched in the domestic sphere, Tongan men assumed dominance over women. Although this is similar to pervasive ideas in Western culture, this was practiced prior to Western contact (James 1983, 238).

In Polynesia, war clubs were used by men and represented strength and masculinity. These clubs were often intricately carved out of wood and decorated at the top of the object, infusing the club with a strong dose of mana. The more detailed the carving, the more mana was infused in the club. By using wood as the main material, the artist was able to employ the natural resources around them, and did not need to trade with a foreign country for the material. The beautiful patina, the natural shine on the wood derived from natural oils from the hand of whoever was using it, shows this object was used frequently and was probably lovingly cared for. Because of the immediate link between these clubs and masculinity, men were so emotionally invested in these objects that they were often buried alongside them.

Western contact in Polynesia permanently shifted power dynamics between men and women. In Samoa, similar to Tonga, men controlled the majority of political life and women dominated the religious sphere. When male missionaries arrived in Samoa, they needed to establish relationships with the natives, leading them to connect with male leaders and chiefs (Ralston 1987,118). Missionaries implemented their preconceived views of gender roles onto Samoan peoples by ignoring the females in power, and placing that power with the male leaders. Masculinity automatically shifted into the Western ideals because missionaries forced males to assimilate to their idea of what men should be- dominating society while women take a back seat. Ralston argues “colonial regimes encouraged island men to assume greater powers for themselves vis-a-vis women, whose traditional influence and positions were undermined” (Ralston 1987, 120). This comparison illuminates many important themes, as I have outlined.

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