



Object Type: Ancestor Figure
Indigenous Name: Moai Kavakava
Culture/Location: Easter Island (Rapa Nui)
Date: Possibly Modern Sculpture
Materials: wood, bird bone, obsidian, and traces of pigment
Dimensions: 17 3/4 x 3 1/2 x 4 in.
Institution and accession number: LAMCA, M.2008.66.6



Object Type: Temple Image Figure of Ku
Culture/Location: Hawaii
Date: 1790-1819
Materials: Breadfruit Tree Wood
Dimensions: 105in x 27in x 21in
Institution and accession number: The British Museum of Art, Oc1839,0426.8

Throughout Polynesia, figural sculptures have acted as a means to express spiritual forces, genealogy, prestige, and culture. Generally, Polynesian figure sculptures share a variety of formal properties, such as a full body carved from one piece of wood that faces forward, proportions split into thirds between the head, torso, and legs, and bent knees. For this summary, I will compare and contrast two Polynesian figures: the *Moai Kavakava* (Ancestor Figure) from Easter Island and the Temple Figure of Ku from Hawaii. I have selected these objects because they reflect continuity and variation in Polynesian art by virtue of their general visual structure, materiality, and the importance of their spiritual and mythological powers. I found it interesting that while these objects share basic qualities of Polynesian figure sculptures, they have aesthetic and practical nuances that shape two different cultural narratives. In this way, the figures address the notion that smaller group narratives can emerge within the framework of a regional artistic practice, challenging the assumption that the Polynesian identity is constructed from a monolithic culture.

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, King Kamehameha set out to conquer and unite the islands of Hawaii (Valeri 1982, 10). In Hawaiian warfare traditions, it was standard practice to perform rituals before battle. Rituals would take place in temples constructed for the king, and were closely linked to his political agenda to take over the land (Kolb 1994, 522). The Temple Image of Ku was a component of these ritual practices, working to aid the king in his conquest once placed in the temples. These objects were crucial to the ritual in part because of

mana, the spiritual power it holds. *Mana* was generated through prayers, the intricate carving on the head, and the image's close connection with the god Ku. As King Kamehameha traveled throughout Hawaii conquering islands, he and his people would have made use of these ritual practices (Kolb 1994, 529). These spiritually charged images of Ku were made and placed in the temples to legitimize the power of King Kamehameha: they would have emphasized that he had the support and power of Ku behind him (Valeri 1982, 10). The surface of the figure's body shows facet marks from when the body was carved from the piece of wood. These marks could indicate that the artists did not take the time to smooth out the surface, and that these figures were made quickly to be used in pre-war rituals in the temples so that King Kamehameha could efficiently conquer the islands (Valeri 1982, 15-16). These practices illustrate the importance of spirituality and rituals in Hawaiian warfare. This object worked in a proactive way with a forward reaching agenda that helps us better understand the historical and cultural narratives of the Hawaiian people.

The second figure I selected is the *Moai Kavakava* of Easter Island. These objects are seemingly as mysterious as the history of the island itself. However, my research has uncovered multiple stories about this object and the context in which it was created. The distinct features of the *Moai Kavakava*, such as the elongation of the body and facial features, the narrow torso, exposed rib cage, and defined checks, have been attributed to a variety of different explanations. Some argue the figure reflects the history of starvation on the island that occurred after of a cascade of unfortunate natural mishaps such as deforestation, Polynesian Rats and disease (Heyerdahl 1979, 10; Rainbird 2002, 437; Hunt 2006, 417). Others suggest that the starvation was caused by wars between groups on the island because war requires an increased use of resources to make weapons, tools, and food to sustain warriors (Croix and Dottori 2008, 27). However, some assert that the object holds more spiritual and genealogical significance. The figure could have been associated with the practices of commemoration of the *akuaku* spirits, the spirits of the deceased (Eggertsson 2011, 114). The hole on the back of the figure's neck indicates that it was mostly likely used to put sennit or some other fiber to suspend the object around a person's neck, revealing that the object could have had great significance to individuals and their identities. This shows the importance of ancestral spirits and how the people of Easter Island would have used figures for personal remembrance.

Though the *Moai Kavakava* and the Temple Figure of Ku share similar figure sculpture qualities, they vary in use and iconography. The Temple Figure of Ku exposes a cultural narrative centered on warfare rituals and how King Kamehameha conquered and unified the Hawaiian Islands. The *Moai Kavakava* sheds light on the mysteries of Easter Island, providing

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some more clarity on its past and the importance of ancestors. These objects show how smaller group identities emerge relative to specific islands within the larger group context of Polynesia, highlighting the idea that there is not a singular Polynesian cultural identity.

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