

Caroline Islands, State of Pohnpei, Nukuoro Atoll

Wood (Artocarpus sp., breadfruit), h. 174 cm. (67.8"), w. 45 cm., d. 30 cm.

Nukuoro is an isolated atoll in the eastern part of the great group of islands and atolls in the western Pacific Ocean collectively known as the Caroline Islands. Its closest neighbor is Satawan, one of the Mortlock Islands group, which lies 110 miles to the south; the others are between 30 to 100 miles further still. Kapingamarangi is the next closest. It, and Nukuoro, are almost in the heart of the cultural area known as Micronesia, but with the islands of Luanguia, Takuu, Sikaiana, Rennell and Tikopia off the eastern coasts of the Solomon Islands, and still others further south, they are essentially Outliers (as they are called) of Polynesia in culture and languages.

The atoll consists of no less than 46 tiny reef islets set in three quarters of a circle around a lagoon about 5 miles across. The only one of any size is Nukuoro itself which, though narrow, is about a mile long. None stand more than a few feet above sea-level. The islands have the advantage of an equable climate, and a freedom from the hurricanes that so frequently devastated other Pacific islands. Their soil is fertile, and consequently plant life is abundant. Add to these advantages the presence of rich sea life in the lagoon and surrounding ocean, and it is evident that the atoll offered a highly welcoming environment for human habitation.

As local traditions have it, the atoll was first populated by emigrants from another island, some said Samoa, who arrived in two canoes under the leadership of a chief called Ko Wave and his priestly father Teakhu.

Genealogical information implies that this event occurred something over 700 years before the present. Archaeological investigations on Nukuoro bear this out, in a general way. That is, dating of the excavated remains - mainly shell and stone tools and ornaments, and faunal bones - places first habitation between A. D. 800 and 1100, and shows that the island has been inhabited continuously ever since. Who these early people were, and where they came from, is not so evident. The archaeological material shows early Micronesian traits whereas, to repeat, the people today speak a Polynesian language and their old culture was distinctly Polynesian in style. This problem seems insoluble for the moment; but it is known that there were subsequent visits by both Micronesian and Polynesians over the centuries. These, and the first Westerners also, as Morrell in 1830 certainly was, seem to have been greeted at times with hospitality and at others, soon after, with hostility.

Nukuoro was first visited by Westerners no earlier than 1806; on the next encounter, in 1830, they introduced iron. Missionary activities began about 1870; thereafter, few ships called in. Johann Kubary, a Polish ethnographer employed by German museums, arrived in 1873, and again in 1877, by which time the native religion was in decline. To him we owe much of the extant information about the people's previous way of life, and most of the existing objects of their material culture. He probably collected at least ten of the Nukuoro figures now known - and which are, in fact, what Nukuoro is celebrated for.

The people impressed early visitors with their fine physique, but it is

not clear how large the population was. An early guess put it at over 500; this figure fluctuated downwards during the 19th century but rose again to 280 by 1970. Evidently it was never so large as to strain the islands' resources. Apart from exploiting the abundant fish supplies and catching some birds, the people cultivated coconuts, breadfruit, and taro. There were no native animals other than the rat. The first settlers had brought dogs with them but these were extinct by 1500, having presumably also been consumed as food.

The population living on Nukuoro island itself was divided into five clans. In keeping with the traditions of their origins, the leaders were secular and religious: a chief, who by the rule of primogeniture could be either male or female, and a high priest who had more far-reaching authority than the chief. The clans had religious buildings and cult objects of their own, but the major religious complex was in the center of the village (fig. 1). It consisted of a large rectangular building (amalau) with a pitched roof and matting walls. In front of it was a stone platform (marae). Religious rites included tattooing (patterns on the arms for men, a triangle on the pubis for women), feasting, and canoe races.

The cult objects (tino) commemorated two types of divinities, who were either mythical beings (tupua) or deified ancestors (aitu tanata). Some of them were natural objects: stones, animals, or coconut shells. Others were the extraordinary male and female figures carved in wood, among the most impressive stylizations of the human form ever created, that concern us here. They were kept ranged against one of the short walls of the amalau, decorated with flowers, and wearing crown-like headdresses like those worn

by priests (fig. 2), and probably painted. None of this finery now survives.

It could be remarked with justice that in their present state, stripped of their ornaments, we cannot visualize these figures as their owners intended. On the other hand, we certainly see what their creators did when they had finished their work. What did they see then, and what do we see now?

To begin with they are few in number. In his 1994 study of the no more than 30 Nukuoro figures, all that were known at the time, B. de Grunne lists two groups, seven large (125-217 cm. high) and the rest small (35-58 cm. high). It might be more realistic, however, to subdivide the first group into figures above or below 150 cm., when those above could legitimately be called statues. The third group was probably kept in the lesser temples, of which at least eight existed, or in homes.

There is nothing like them in all the rest of Oceanic art. A faint resemblance to them occurs in two small figures from Takuu in their poses, but the Takuu figures are both cruder and more naturalistic (a quality which other, highly stylized and widely divergent, figures from that island, and others in the same group, do not share). The Nukuoro figures cannot be related to the other rare human figures from other parts of Micronesia, such as those from Belau.

All the figures are of a single type which can be described quite simply. The stance is rigidly upright. The head is ovoid, tapering to a point at the chin, and poised on a short, upright and columnar neck rising from sloping shoulders from which depend long arms. The broad chest slopes forward to a strongly defined horizontal edge; below it the torso recedes

slightly back and narrows to a triangular pubic area. The genitalia are barely indicated, if at all, though the vulva and female breasts are in a few examples of the small figures. The flat back curves outwards slightly to define the buttocks, the outer side of which is also flattened. The short legs are set on a base.

Within this convention, tightly adhered to as it is, there are still very minor variations. Any facial features at all are only shown in very rare cases, like some minor anatomical points. The arms of the large figures are always straight and do not rejoin the body, and have rudimentary indicated hands with outward-angled palms; on several small figures the hands join the body just above the hips at a right angle. The bases vary from blocks for the large figures to low plates or discs for the small ones.

A remarkable feature of the figures is the uniformity of their proportions. A sample of four, large and small, shows that (not including the base) approximately the head and neck occupy about 19-22% of the total height; the torso 52-60%; and the legs, including the overlap with the torso at the hips, 26%. The breadth across the shoulders in relation to height also evinces a certain regularity: Kawe's is 37%, the greatest, but most others are in the 30-33% range. From the conformity of these measurements, one can only conclude that there existed a definite canon of proportions that was consciously applied by the sculptors.

This rigorously simplified prototype, enhanced by the perfectly smoothed and regular surfaces of the wood, resulted in the hands of the best sculptors (and a few failed) in images of the purest classicism. The nearest comparisons that can be made to them are the greatest works of Cycladic

sculpture or, in the modern world, to the work of Brancusi - who actually made a drawing of a small figure at present in the Musee de l'Homme.

The place of the present figure in the corpus of Nukuoro sculpture can be established by comparison of its specific iconographic elements with those of the other large figures. These, adopting de Grunne's order, can be summarized as follows:

1 Figure (presumed to be) of Kawe (or Kave) de hine aligi, a goddess, h. 217 cm. Auckland Museum 38740, gift of G. Cousens, 1878. The head has a tiny projecting nose and ears. The gender is evidenced by large triangular breasts, undercut at the tips to indicate nipples. A sunken rectangular band extends across the body just above the pubic area. The flattened buttocks protrude slightly. The short legs have only roughly formed, toeless feet, with no base.

2 Figure, the god Sope, h. 168 cm. (the museum's measurement: de Grunne gives the height as 172 cm.) Berlin VI 46 934, probably Kubary, 1877. Remains of blackening over three-quarters of the chest. Traces of a lightly engraved ring at the base of the neck. A sunken rectangular band extends across the body just above the pubic area. The pubic triangle continues downward to a slight point as a penis. Slight protrusions on the legs as kneecaps. The figure stands on a rectangular block on which the feet appear as separated, with the toes engraved on the front vertical side.

3 Figure, Ko Kawe, h. 163 cm. Hamburg E 1894, probably Kubary, 1877. Blackening over the head, neck (?), shoulders and chest. Lightly engraved herringbone patterns on the upper arms. A rectangular band extends across the body just above the pubic area. The pubic triangle continues downward to a slight point as a penis. Slight protrusions on the legs as kneecaps. The buttocks protrude slightly, and are flattened in a sub-circular shape, with a separating groove. The figure stands on a rectangular block, also partly

blackened, on which the feet appear as separated, with the toes engraved on the front vertical side.

[The name of this figure, as reported by Kubary, presents a problem. He states that Ko Kawe was a goddess, something that the penis and the male tattoo patterns seem to contradict.]

4 Figure, h. 132 cm. Hamburg E 1895, probably Kubary, 1877.

5 Figure, Tehi Tapu, h. 127 cm. Hamburg E 1895, probably Kubary, 1877.

The head has small protruding pierced ears, and a knob on the back of the head. This is the only figure in the group that shows the facial features - eyes, nose and mouth - clearly marked by a closely set grouping of small horizontal slits. Lightly engraved herringbone patterns on the upper arms. The navel is given as a small perforation, and the knees are indicated by slight horizontal grooves. The figure stands on a rectangular block on which the feet appear as separated, but no toes engraved.

6 Figure, h. 127 cm. Hildesheim V 0767, before 1906.

7 Figure, h. 130 cm. Houston A 8418. No definite history. Unlike all the others, this figure has a rough, unsmoothed surface.

Given the restricted size of this corpus of large Nukuoro sculptures, and indeed of the Nukuoro corpus as a whole, the unexpected emergence of a hitherto unknown figure on the grand scale is an event of importance for the study of Oceanic art, quite apart from its obvious, immense aesthetic value.

We may consider first its biography, of which we know very little. For the time of its creation, it seems to be the only one that has been offered for C14 testing, but as usual with recent wood the results are tentative,

though suggestive. The earliest date offered, with 50.8% probability, for the age of the wood is 1667-1789. This would allow a possible date for its being made comfortably before the discovery of the island.

Its later history is bound up with that of J. L. Young, a New Zealander who spent many years of the late 19th century as a trader and businessman in the western Pacific. He left home in 1865; by 1876 we find him in Micronesia as an agent for Thomas Farrell, the lover of "Queen" Emma Forsayth, who built with Farrell an enormous plantation empire based on New Britain. In 1878 Young is known to have acquired two small Nukuoro figures that he sold, with much else, to the Bishop Museum in 1920; and he was in Nukuoro in 1879. (He may not have been to the island thereafter, though his papers mention ships returning from it: but he was constantly in other parts of Micronesia.) It was presumably in one of these years that he got this figure, which remained in the possession of his family after his death in 1920.

Finally there is the question of authorship. It is known from Kubary's records that the figures deteriorated over time, and had to be replaced. Considering the size of Nukuoro and its population, there can not have been many sculptors working at the same time. The massive image of Kawe (no. 1) has no parallel in its general style and may therefore be left out of the question except for one point - the sunken abdominal band. But a few others are very much closer in their iconography.

Comparing this figure to those of the others on the same scale, one finds that it is second in height only to Kawe, overtopping the Berlin "Sope" figure (no. 2) by a few centimeters. Next, in terms of height, is the



"Ko Kawe", only 11 cm. smaller. Figures 4 to 7, however, are as much as 30-40 cm. less.

The overall size ratios of the three figures are as follows (the exclude the foot-blocks):

This figure: head-neck to total: 20%; torso: 57.5%; legs 35%; breadth 27.5%;

Sope: head-neck to total: 22%; torso: 57%; legs 31%; breadth 31%;

Ko Kawe: head-neck to total: 22%; torso: 56%; legs 31%; breadth 29%.

These percentages, showing that all three figures are within the dimensional ranges of Nukuoro sculptures, while close to each other are precisely because of that fact not in themselves conclusive proof of identity. It is the combination of other details that may establish that. In all three of them, the male sex is very clearly - in Nukuoro terms - represented. The very marked angularity of the chest is similar in all. The rectangular "band" above occurs in all three, cut back in this and the Ko Kawe figure, though not as strongly in Sope. The sturdy legs are all slightly flexed. All three have small round kneecaps in relief - a very unusual detail. Finally, all of these figures have the darkening of the upper body, probably due to some form of anointing, that seems unknown on other figures. Taken together, these features point to the possibility that these three large figures were the work of a single hand.

We can always have a sense of regret that it is far too late for us to learn even the name of this sculptor (or as it may be sculptors, if that was the case) or anything about him. But we do know that there was one man who created this figure, and in doing so achieved a masterpiece.

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