

A little deity from Mangareva in the collections of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Rome

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Abstract

Wooden carvings from Mangareva, in the Gambier Islands, are rare. This article describes a unique wooden deity that is housed in the collections of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in Rome. The origin as well as the probable wood from which this deity is carved is identified and a radiocarbon date for the carving is presented. This is followed by a brief discussion regarding the role of such figures in Mangarevan society, along with a discussion about the collection of ethnographic objects by European visitors during the early post-contact period.

Introduction

Located 1700km from Tahiti, at the southeast extremity of French Polynesia, the Gambiers comprise 8 high islands and 18 volcanic islets inside a great collapsed crater that is occupied by a lagoon, 30 to 35km in diameter. The total surface area of these lands does not exceed 25.5km² and Mangareva, which covers an area of 15.4km², is the biggest of these islands. Today, most of the population is grouped in the village of Rikitea (Atlas de la Polynésie Française 1993: 15). Archaeological research places the peopling of the Gambiers around the ninth or tenth century AD (Orliac 2003: 154; Conte & Kirch 2005: 183).

This collection of islands bears the name of a British admiral; it was given to them by Captain James Wilson, commander of the missionary vessel which discovered the archipelago in 1797. Mount Duff, named after this vessel, reaches a height of 441m; it is the highest peak of Mangareva (Atlas de la Polynésie Française 1993: 15). After their discovery by James Wilson, the Gambiers were visited in 1824 by Captain F. W. Beechey and in 1834 by J. Moerenhout. That same year, the evangelization of the inhabitants began with the arrival of Fathers Honoré Laval and François d'Assise Caret accompanied by the catechist Colombar Murphy. It was during this period and at the end of the nineteenth century that a small group of wooden carvings was collected, including several depictions of deities.

Ethnographic Objects from Mangareva

The ethnographic objects collected on Mangareva are mostly adze blades, pestles, nacre hooks, *tapa* (beaten-bark cloth), shells, knots and cords. Wooden carvings are extremely rare, with the exception of two drums (Orliac 2010) and two offering stands (Orliac 2006), which are preserved at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris and the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) in St. Petersburg, as well as three fragments of drums that are preserved in the collections of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (SSCC) in Rome (Orliac & Orliac 2003). Other wooden carvings are restricted to three *turuturu* staffs (insignia of authority; British Museum, London, and Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford), a “*rongo* staff” (also called an “insignia of authority” in the inventory of the SSCC) and two *eketea* (forked staff with anthropomorphic characteristics; SSCC Congregation and Vatican Museum, Rome). Anthropomorphic depictions are extremely rare. All of these works were presented to the public in 2009 at the Quai Branly Museum, Paris¹ (Peltier 2009).

Among the fascinating works on display, all of them quite large (around 1m), there was an atypical little sculpture about 20cm in height. It came from the chest that Father François d'Assise Caret, a missionary from the SSCC, known as Picpus, sent from the Gambiers, on 20 April 1836, to the abbé Coudrin, superior general of the Congregation at Braine-Le-Comte, in Belgium. This “pagan deity” was accompanied by ten other objects, all numbered in black ink, and by a list identifying each of them.

A Little Deity Figure

In contrast to the other anthropomorphic depictions, this little sculpture (Figures 1 and 2) is in a poor state of preservation because on Mangareva it was attacked by wood-boring organisms, which riddled its body and head with holes and destructive tunnels. Its extremely hard wood was also split. Despite all these destructive wounds, the almond-shaped eyes, characteristic of Mangarevan art, are still very identifiable on the little round, faceless head, whose skull has a big split on the right side. The stomach is rounded, the



Figure 1. Statuette of the god Rongo (Inv. G 161), Gambier archipelago, island of Mangareva. 20cm x 4.8cm x 3.9cm. Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Rome (Photo courtesy of the Louise Leiris Gallery, Paris).

two arms, barely traced, are broken at the elbow level. The right leg and foot are intact but the left leg is broken below the knee. In the back there is a large split along the spine.

This object is carved from a red wood, and despite its poor state of preservation, some samples were taken to identify the tree selected by the sculptor and to obtain a radiocarbon date. Although the samples were small, the microscopic study revealed that it was probably wood of *Pemphis sp. cf. acidula* (Orliac 2002b) from the family of the Lythraceae, a small tree that can reach 5m in height. It is very common on atolls and on sandy and rocky shores (Papy 1955: 179, 201), and is called *mikimiki* on Mangareva. It is widespread in Micronesia and Eastern Polynesia, except for Hawai'i. Its very hard wood is used in Polynesia to make pieces of canoes, large hooks for shark fishing, harpoons and spears (Whistler 1980: 46). The choice of the wood of this tree is astonishing because it has never been identified in any carving of Mangarevan deities; all of the anthropomorphic sculptures in London's British Museum, Paris' Quai Branly Museum, the Museum of La Rochelle and the Musée Henri Martin in Cahors are carved from the wood of *Thespesia populnea* or *Calophyllum inophyllum* (Orliac 1999, 2002c, 2004).



Figure 2. Photo from the collections of the Congregation around 1925. In the center (in front of the arrow), posed on a piece of a drum from the Gambiers, is sculpture G161. It seems tiny next to the other Mangarevan deity (on the right of the image) which today is preserved in the Vatican Museum (Photo courtesy of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts (SSCC), Rome).

The wood sample was analyzed by Beta Analytic in Miami (Beta 265275), yielding a radiocarbon determination of 290 ± 40 BP, which is calibrated at 2 standard deviations to AD 1480 to 1660.

The microscopic study of the state of the object's surface shows numerous carving marks on the legs, torso and buttocks. The traces of a yellow colored material are also visible. It is highly probable that this coloring material was obtained from the rhizome of *Curcuma longa* (Purseglove 1972: 523) (sometimes known as "Pacific saffron"), a zingiberaceae that was much prized by the Mangarevans, and previously called *ranga* or *rega*; this vernacular name designated not only the plant itself but also the culinary preparation after the cooking of the tuber (Buck 1938: 214). In Oceania, this fast-growing plant had magical properties that were often linked to the fertility of the soil (Purseglove 1972: 523); in particular it was used for painting the body during rites associated with the birth of children, marriage, death and agriculture (Orliac 2002a: 203; Pétard 1960: 84; Purseglove et al. 1981: 532).

The presence of a coating of *Curcuma* on the object coincides with the identity of this deity that was given by Father Desmedt, the archivist of the congregation; because

this sculpture has on its left buttock the mark “n 8” and according to Father Desmedt, this number is that of one of the three depictions of the god Rongo on Father Caret’s list (Buck 1939: 464). On this list, numbers 5, 6 and 8 “are three idols of Rogo² who is represented by the rainbow and who brings rain to nourish the breadfruit trees” (Buck 1938: 462-463).

This attribution is also that of Father Laval (1938: 305): “when the missionaries arrived ... the most venerated gods were....Rogo, the rain god in the form of the rainbow.” This god, who favored the growth of saffron (*ranga*), had the power to make rain fall and ensure abundant harvests (Buck 1938: 422). He was symbolised by mist and the rainbow, which were also the attributes of the Polynesian gods of agriculture (Buck 1938: 422).

The Role of Deities in Mangarevan Society

Honoré Laval specifies that the number of deities and their offspring was incalculable and that the archipelago’s cults were characterized by an enormously complicated polytheism (Laval 1938: 296). However, the Mangarevan pantheon could be divided into two categories: the superior gods (*etua-nui*) whose origin was so remote that they were called “gods with no beginning” and the secondary deities, who included the descendants of Tangaroa, the gods of unknown origin, deified ancestors and deified fetuses (*mota’u*). Each of these deities had their own priest or a family which venerated them (Laval 1938: 297).

The depictions of these deities were carved by the *taura-rau* (priests and experts in their art) who were “people skilled in working wood. They carved the statues of the gods, their offering tablets and raised their huts on the *marae*” (Laval 1938: 319).

Some deities of Mangareva were kept in the “temples of the idols which were bigger than the ordinary dwellings... The rafters remained bare and ended with a statue adhering to them which depicted some god or other dressed in the *maro*, and positioned so as to carry the beam on its head. Certain proportions were maintained in these statues” (Laval 1938: 243-244). Others were displayed in sanctuaries, because according to Moerenhout (1942: 98), on the *marae* there were altars “on top of which there were pieces of coral laid out arranged in a basket, in which there were fish and other foodstuffs; and at one of its ends there rose a wooden image three feet high.” This statuette’s state of conservation leads one to think that it was not kept in the “house of idols” but clearly in the open air, on show in a sanctuary.

Conclusion

The destruction of the “idols” of the Gambiers took place at Akamaru on 16 April 1835; the other islands followed next (Buck 1938: 462; Lesson 1844: 160-161). In March of the same year, Matua, the king’s uncle and great *taura* (priest) had already delivered “the temple of the idols” to the missionaries

who cut off the four sculptures placed at the extremities of the roof’s rafters; King Ma-putea preserved these sculptures, took them home and declared them *tapu* (Laval 1938: 247). Like King Ma-putea, Kopunui was the last Mangarevan chief who opposed the destruction of the depictions of deities (Buck 1938: 262). But, the conversion to the Catholic faith entailed the obligatory disappearance of the pagan gods. Paradoxically, those who contributed to the destruction of these works also made it possible to save a few of them, including this little figure, a unique specimen.

Notes

1. The Mangarevan deities other than the statuette in question here are preserved in the British Museum, the Vatican Museum, the Muséum d’histoire Naturelle in La Rochelle (France), the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Musée Henri Martin in Cahors (France) and the Musée du Quai Branly. This exhibition moved to Musée de Tahiti et des Iles except the sculptures of the Metropolitan Museum and of the British Museum.
2. In early twentieth century accounts of Mangareva, the spelling of Rongo did not include an “n” before the “g”.

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