



Head of a 'staff god'

On display**Title/Description:** Head of a 'staff god'**Born:** 1850 - 1950**Object Type:** Figure**Materials:** Wood**Measurements:** h. 794 x w. 70 x d. 154 mm**Accession Number:** 188**Historic Period:** 18th Century - Late, 19th century - Early**Production Place:** Cook Islands, Oceania, Pacific, Rarotonga**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

' . . . we observed a large concourse of people coming towards us, bearing heavy burdens. They walked in procession, and dropped at our feet fourteen immense idols, the smallest of which was about five yards in length. Each of these was composed of a piece of *aito*, or iron-wood, about four inches in diameter, carved with rude imitations of the human head at one end, and with an obscene figure at the other, wrapped round with native cloth, until it became two or three yards in circumference. Near the wood were red feathers, and a string of small pieces of polished pearl shells, which were said to be the *manava*, or soul of the god. Some of these idols were torn to pieces before our eyes; others were reserved to decorate the rafters of the chapel we proposed to erect; and one was kept to be sent to England, which is now in the Missionary Museum' (Williams, 1837: II5-16).

Thus Reverend John Williams describes the surrender in 1827 of what he refers to as the 'national idols' of Rarotonga. No historical information exists for the present superb sculpture, but it may well have been one of those 'torn apart' and is one of twelve large 'staff god' heads so far documented in collections, all of which have been broken near the point where the long shaft formerly entered the large roll of bark cloth. The complete example which was sent to the Missionary Museum measures about thirteen feet in length and is now in the Museum of Mankind, London (see Buck, 1944: 3 Io; Barrow, 1979: 85). Two further complete but smaller 'staff gods', measuring c. 8 ft and 10 ft respectively, are in the Otago Museum (Oldman, 1943: pl. 2) and the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh (Idiens, 1982: pl. I7). These and other fragments which survive show that what Williams termed an 'obscene figure' is a naturalistic phallus terminal (Buck, 1944: 323—5; Oldman, 1943: pl. 3).

These images belong to the pre-European period of Rarotongan culture, prior to Williams' first missionary visit in 1823 and the subsequent swift conversion of the population. From a sculptural viewpoint this image reveals a masterly skill in the carving of the very hard 'ironwood' (*Casuarina*

equisetifolia), using stone, shell and tooth tools, and possibly rudimentary metal tools obtained from European ships which visited the area before the arrival of the missionaries.

Reliable information concerning the identity of these 'staff gods' and their role in Rarotongan religious practices is lacking, but their general form, considered in the light of knowledge of other Polynesian cultures, suggests the following possible interpretation. Polynesian gods and hereditary chiefs (who were their earthly descendants) possessed a special efficacious quality, usually termed *mana*, which was capable of bringing about abundance and success in important activities. However, the ability of chiefly *mana* to produce these results was dependent on the maintenance of an appropriate relationship between gods] chiefs and the people, notably through the proper observance of ritual procedures, the details of which differed in the various Polynesian societies. Manufactured objects, like 'staff gods', served as a focus for these rituals and often symbolised in material form the most important philosophical tenets of the society. With respect to these 'staff gods' it can be said that certain hardwoods, including ironwood, were conceptually associated with gods/ chiefs and their productive powers and were carved by men into images, canoes and weapons. Correspondingly, bark cloth was associated with the people generally and in particular with women, who manufactured it.

It is therefore suggested that these 'staff gods' represented in symbolic terms, and at two levels, an ideal relationship between two different yet complementary elements, a combination considered to be essential to life and prosperity. At one level the association of the phallic wood image with the bark cloth binding was a reference to male and female sexuality and to procreation. At another level these 'staff gods' symbolised the productive potential of the partnership between gods/chiefs (hardwood) and the people (bark cloth), a partnership which in everyday life was manifested in mutual offerings and co-operation, the polygamy of chiefs, and their role in co-ordinating all important activities.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 16-17.

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1953. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
