



THE SCULPTURES OF ATAURO ISLAND

Atauro Island is part of the Lesser Sunda Islands often referred to as the 'forgotten islands' and is home to a distinctive art and material culture tradition.²¹ The art of the Lesser Sundas has the same Austronesian origins as Oceanic art of the Pacific, and developed shared stylistic elements due to encounters and interactions with pre-existing Melanesian cultures for more than 3,500 years.²² A dominant form of creative expression has been the sculpture of ancestor figures reflecting the spiritual belief systems that underpin the cultures of this region.

Similarities in style between Wetarese sculptures and Atauro sculptures are evident.²³ The austere and elongated Atauroan ancestor figures depicted in standing postures however, differ from the more ubiquitous hunched figurine found in the region, such as on Tanimbar, Kai and even Flores Islands. Indeed, scholars have identified two distinct styles of Atauro sculptures: 'While the two styles are not necessarily distinguished by more or less realism, in the Western sense, one

is marked by straight limbs and sharply defined facial features and characteristic of the islands of the south Moluccas, the other style comprises forms that are more rounded, softer and elongated.²⁴ Atauro Island's proximity both to Timor and the southern Moluccas Islands resulted in the art of Atauro being a 'speculated style' that evolved in the context of a Timorese and south Moluccas aesthetic.²⁵ Exemplifying these two styles are the pair of figurines on page XX and the figures on page XX.

Before the arrival of Christianity, Atauroans worshipped their ancestors as the pre-eminent spiritual authorities. Today, a syncretic culture exists, as the majority of Atauroans are Protestant, unlike the Timorese population, who are largely Roman Catholic following the establishment of a Catholic mission in 1949.

Nearby Kisar Island was an established Protestant stronghold during the 19th Century.²⁶ Dutch Calvinist missionaries arrived on Atauro in the 1930s to evangelise and convert the population while Protestant American missionaries also were active on the island during the 1950s.²⁷ Baptist influences from Alor, Lira and Kisar were also noted by Durate.²⁸ The elimination of many older elements of Atauroan culture is attributed to the presence of the Protestants.

The practice of figurative carving was discontinued in Macadade during the early 1970s when the Protestant Church implemented a ban requiring all adherents to the Christian faith to forego any form of ancestor worship. The sculptors of Macadade recall that many sculptures were burnt at this time although some people subverted this ban by hiding older sculptures in a sealed cave where they remained for several decades. They retrieved these sculptures circa 2005, after Independence was granted to Timor-Leste in 2002. The bans imposed in Macadade by the Protestant Church interrupted the transmission of sculpting skills between generations. Today, it is only the older men of the village who have retained the sculptural skills and occasionally carve figurines.

Note: Language key: Adabe (AD), Tetun (T)

Ancestor figures, female and male

Artist unknown
Atauro Island, Timor-Leste
19th or early 20th c.
Wood and fibre
xx H x xxx W cm
Fowler Museum, University California Los Angeles, X81.L22A & B
Gift of the Rogers Family Foundation
Image courtesy of Fowler Museum, University California Los Angeles

This pair of figurines exemplifies the angular, abstracted figures of Atauro Island. This style may have developed from an earlier, widespread archaic style, which was rounder and more naturalistic. Their lanky straight arms droop forward from their hunched shoulders in contrast to their partially bent knees, yet each limb features simplistic block-like hands and feet. Protruding rounded eyes and ears are contrasted with aquiline noses and horizontal brows and mouths. A twined cord from which they were once suspended continues to link masculine and feminine together.

Duality reflected in sculpture

Concepts of duality, such as sea and earth, above and below, underpin Atauro society as exemplified by the fertility sculptures – the feminine, *Lepu-Hmoru* and the masculine, *Baku-Mau* (see page XX). More recently, these masculine and feminine fertility deities have been absorbed into Christian beliefs as representations of the Virgin Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus Christ. Mau-Bonok plateau in Maquili was the site where *Lepu-Hmoru* and *Baku-Mau* were installed in the style of grave-markers in honour of the founding ancestors. Positioned upon stone mounds at an angle facing each other, in a configuration reminiscent of the bow and stern of a boat, they marked a site for ritual practices. A sliced coconut shell occasionally was placed upside down on the tip of the elongated hat, possibly symbolic of feeding the deity and ensuring fecundity.³⁹ These sculptures customarily were replaced with newer sculptures and at one time *Lepu-Hmoru* was depicted with 50 nipples.⁴⁰ On other occasions, *Baku-Mau* has been depicted with either an erect phallus or with his child, (see page XX). As recently as 2005, Mau-Bonok plateau was a site of ritual activity associated with these deities.⁴¹

The classic *Lepu-Hmoru* and *Baku-Mau* figures (see page XX) provide the basis for a more contemporary style of figurine, or more accurately described as a bust, that is made today in an increasing range of variations. The incorporation of fish, turtles and crocodiles often suckling the woman's breast or laying in a position suggestive of copulation, replaces human genitalia and progeny in these busts, suggesting a relocation of fecundity back into the untamed natural world (see page XX). This is especially apt as the recent proliferation of stories of the crocodile, *lafaek* (T), as the founding father of the Timorese people and creator of the island itself, gives added significance to the incorporation of crocodiles into contemporary Atauroan sculptures (see page XX). These figures increasingly feature more naturalistic facial features and include a carved, tiered base, yet are clearly innovations based on the original *Lepu-Hmoru* and *Baku-Mau* figures.

In addition to 'grave-markers' of fertility gods that were installed outdoors, other sculptures were customarily stored inside the ceremonial and lineage house known as either the *ruma pera'ik* (AD) or *ruma leluli* (AD), *uma lulik* (T). The ceremonial and lineage houses stored sacred objects for use in rituals performed for the ancestors, such as the veneration of secondary deities. Typically, these houses were constructed from a frame of four-cornered pillars and the four crossbeams that joined the top of each pillar. The 'masculine', south-west pillar of the ceremonial house was the site of the sacred rack, *ruma tara* (AD), where ancestral relics and sacred objects were hung.⁴²

Sculpted wooden statuettes, *itara* (AD), that represent the lineage ancestor customarily were hung from the *ruma tara* in gendered couples of male and female. When *itara* were not in use, they were strung over a rafter with the use of hand-made twine, twined or plaited from palm leaves, *Borassus flabellifer*, known as *tua hiron* (AD), *akadiru tahan* (T). The smoke and

[Left] **Sculpture**
Atauro Island, Timor-Leste
19th century – early 20th century
Wood
245 H cm
Musée Quai Branly, 70.2013.40.2
Image courtesy of the Musée Quai Branly

[Right] **Sculpture**
Atauro Island, Timor-Leste
19th century – early 20th century
Wood
220 H cm
Musée Quai Branly, 70.2013.40.1
Image courtesy of the Musée Quai Branly

This elegant pair of ancestor sculptures, *Lepu Hmoru* and *Baku Mau*, were once inserted into the earth and supported with stone mounds. As representations of the founding ancestors the feminine deity, *Lepu Hmoru*, and the masculine deity, *Baku Mau*, were revered as a manifestation of unified cosmic dualism.





soot caused *itara* to develop a black and dark patina as fires were burnt routinely inside ceremonial houses to prepare food for the ancestors and the keeper of the house. This practice of binding the figurines served the purpose of physically keeping the figurines together, while metaphorically maintaining the balance of masculine and feminine entities.

On occasion *itara* were also hung outdoors on the *iteas*, a pronged wooden stake inserted into the ground at the entrance of the lineage house which itself was also representative of a totemic guardian ancestor. The *iteas* served as a site or 'altar' for offerings and sacrifices to invoke rain to ensure good harvests.⁴³ The status of each house was determined by the number of *itara* it contained; one pair of *itara* suggested the house of ordinary people, while three pair signified the house of aristocrats or *mata blolo*. In cases of theft, the *itara* were offered betel, areca, corn, fish and wine after which the figurines were placed in a woven basket, *lele'u* (AD), *lafatik* (T), and then set at the threshold of the house to locate the culprits.⁴⁴ A prayer accompanied this *itara* rite:

*They came to take possession of my things,
They came to steal my chickens.
Go look for them then.
Drink wine, eat rice,
Also eat fish,
Chew areca and betel.
Go look for them,
Bring back the people who came to steal,
Go ahead.*⁴⁵

Pair of figures, *itara*
Atauro Island, Timor-Leste
Early 20th century
Wood, cloth and fibre cord
14 H x 22.5 W x 7 D cm
Musée Quai Branly, 70.2001.27.405.1-2
Image courtesy of the Musée Quai Branly

The use of cloth with sculptures

The practice of using clothing to cover the genitalia of the sculptures may date from the arrival of Christianity. An ancestor figure, *itara* (AD) (see page XX), dated early 20th Century is one of the earliest known examples of Atauro figures to feature a loincloth, *hak* (AD), *hakfolik* (T). The cloth that binds this figure is hand woven, in keeping with the loincloths that formerly were woven from locally grown cotton and were several metres in length.⁴⁶ *Tari hak* or *hás* (AD) were loincloths made from bark of the ficus, *nuno* (AD), tree and its roots. Alternatively, the female figures wear *rapin hirik* (AD), a unique style of wrap worn around the waist and which was woven on a simplified version of a back-strap tension loom from finely sliced *Corypha utan* palm fronds.⁴⁷ During the mid-20th century wearing the *rapin hirik* was abandoned in preference for imported Javanese hand-made batik and factory printed sarongs, *lipa* (T), in the same way that the *tari hak* were replaced with Western trousers and shorts for men.⁴⁸ Many sculptures from Atauro feature discarded remnants of commercially printed batik cloth (see page XX). The accumulation of a dark patina on older sculptures also indicates that cloth was used to cover the genitalia on late 19th to early 20th century sculptures. The presence of cloth lessened the darkening of the wood as it protected the covered area from being exposed to soot and smoke from fires lit inside lineage houses (see page XX).

[Following page]

Ancestor figure, *itara*
Artist unknown
Atauro Island, Timor-Leste
Early 20th century
Wood, fibre and cloth
49.53 H x 9.52 W x 9.52 H cm
Dallas Museum of Art; The Art Museum League Fund, 1981.15
Image courtesy Dallas Museum of Art

The use of softly curved lines to create this figure, *itara* (AD) are epitomised by the almond-shaped eyes, generously curved ears and rounded crown adorned with a top-knot. The loincloth, *hak* (AD), *hakfolik* (T), worn by this figure replicates the long pieces of cloth, up to four metres in length that were once worn by men on Atauro Island.

Ancestor figurine, male

Artist unknown

Atauro Island, Timor-Leste

Early-mid 20th century

Wood, rosewood (*Pterocarpus indicus*), *nara* (AD), *ai naa* (T)

14 H x 3 W x 3 D cm

Private collection of Michael Abbott AO QC

The almond-shaped eyes carved in relief are distinctive features of this ancestor figurine, *itara* (AD). This style of almond-shaped eyes would have been a recognised trademark of a specific sculptor. More commonly, eyes were suggested by the shadow cast by an overhanging brow (see page XX). The elongated nose, flat hair knot, nipples and protruding relief ears are classic features for figurines of his period.



Ancestor figures, female and male

Artist unknown

Atauro Island, Timor-Leste

Mid-late 20th century

Wood, devil tree (*Alstonia scholaris*), *teteu* (AD), *ai hanek* (T)

Female: 26.5 H x 5 W x 5 D cm

Male: 30 H x 6 W x 5 D cm

National Collection of Timor-Leste, NCTL00234 and
NCTL00235

This simple pair of ancestor figurines demonstrates the use of sharp angular lines and flat planes in Atauroan sculpture. Yet the gently protruding rounded stomach of the female figure suggests that she is pregnant, symbolising masculine and feminine union.



Pair of ancestor figures, female and male

Korneli Alves, aka Kore Hahi

Villa Maumeta, Atauro Island, Timor-Leste

Mid-late 20th century

Wood

Female: 89.2 H x 11.8 W x 12.3 D cm

Male: 73 H x 10.7 W x 7.5 D cm

Museum and Art Gallery Northern Territory, SEA01541 and
SEA01544

This elegant pair of ancestor figures encapsulates the upright and elongated proportions employed by Atauroan sculptors. Their long slender arms remain attached to their torsos so as to ensure the limbs would not easily break. This strengthening device also serves as a reference to the arm bands that were depicted in earlier sculptures (see page XX).

The female, attributed with the name 'Ausa', wears a three-tiered hat, and towers over her male companion, named 'Maurua', who wears a single tiered hat suggesting that she was of a higher social status than the male. Nonetheless, their facial features and expressions are virtually identical, as are their proportions, ears, hands and feet.



Mask

Kai Nai

Atauro Island, Timor-Leste

Mid-late 20th century

Wood, presumed white hardwood (*Wrightia javanica*),
initim (AD), *ai lalar* (T)

36.5 H x 16 W x 7.5 D cm

Charles Darwin University Art Collection, CDU3152

This unique mask has retained the original shape of a vertical block sliced of a tree trunk. The texture on the surface of the mask was created by the sculptors chiselling off the outer bark and wood. The defined nostrils is an unusual inclusion to the typical elongated nose. A moustache counterbalances the dominance of the hollow eye sockets and the narrow nose above the small mouth opening and the protruding lower lip.

Masks, *saet ai pan* (AD), were used occasionally as deterrents to thieves who were tempted to steal crops. A mask would be hung in branches at the boundary of fields and crops to scare intruders away. Masks also protected the identity of people during warfare.

This mask has a band that was placed around the back of the head when it was worn. The band is attached with twinned fibre to the sides of the mask.



Man carrying children

Antonio Soares
Maquili, Atauro Island, Timor-Leste
Late 20th century
White hardwood (*Wrightia javanica*), *initim* (AD), *ai lalar* (T)
with cloth
51 H x 11.5 W x 10 D cm
Maria do Céu Lopes da Silva Collection, CF0048

This contemporary figurine depicts a man carrying his two children. As an exemplary example of contemporary sculpting skills created by a master Atauroan sculptor, this sculpture was hewn from one piece of wood.

The man wears a hat, *sepeu* (AD), which consists of seven tiers, indicative of his status as an aristocrat of the highest order. His facial features together with those of his children are naturalistic. His limbs are curved to display his muscular form, however inclusion of the *sepeu*, a classic element from Atauroan sculptures, indicates how contemporary sculptures continue to incorporate elements from the past.



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Front cover: Ancestor figurine, male. Artist unknown. Atauro Island, Timor-Leste. Early-mid 20th century. Wood, rosewood (*Pterocarpus indicus*), *nara* (AD), *ai naa* (T). 14 H x 3 W x 3 D cm. Private collection of Michael Abbott AO QC.

Back cover: Ancestor bust, *Lepu-Hmoru* (detail). José da Costa. Hhua le'en ceremonial house, Luliopon, Maquili, Atauro Island, Timor-Leste. Mid-20th century. Wood, Australian red cedar (*Toona ciliata*), *lero* (AD), *ai saria* (T). 127 H x 11 W x 13.5 D cm. National Collection of Timor-Leste, NCTL00745.

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