The Sculptures of Atauro Island

Joanna Barrkman
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Introduction

I first met Antonio Soares in 2002 in Dili. I was having a morning coffee at the Tropical Bakery Café, which at that time was a haunt of the many expatriates who had flooded Dili following the arrival of the United Nations Peace Keeping Force in 2000. Antonio sat patiently outside the café entrance, at a respectable distance, waiting for each malae, (the Tetum word for ‘foreigner’) to leave the café. As the morning coffee drinkers left the café one by one, he would pull himself up together with his hand full of sculptures and his laden back-pack and launch into his sales pitch. Antonio is a formidable salesman. Before long malae would begin to survey his sculptures and before they knew it they were bargain with Antonio to buy one of his many sculptures. It became part of my morning coffee routine to observe Antonio at work. I can testify that Antonio struck some good deals outside the Tropical Bakery Café during 2002.

Over time I too became one of Antonio’s customers as I became increasingly familiar with the sculptures that he was selling. I discovered that he was sculptor himself and resided at Maquili village on Atauro Island. He routinely made the journey from Maquili, across the Wetar Strait to Dili where he spent days wandering from café to hotel in search of customers.

Antonio is one of a small cohort of sculptors from Atauro Island that I have observed at work in Dili over the past decade or more. These sculptors maintain a small but consistent presence on Dili’s esplanade with the establishment of a roadside stall located in front of the Dili Beach Hotel. Known as Grupu Kultura Manukoko, their co-operative formed in 1997 and consists of approximately 20 sculptors. They spend their days under the shade of the trees on Dili’s esplanade whittling and sculpting an eclectic array of sculptures, from grand to minute in size. They eagerly greet passers-by and customers that seek them out.
In 2009, Timor Aid, a non-government organisation focused on cultural development and heritage preservation co-ordinated a workshop in Dili with members of Grupo Kalatura Manukoko and senior sculptors from Makadade and Maquil, Atauro Island and myself. The workshop was generously funded by Ms Jennifer Phipps, an Australian art curator, who also attended the workshop. Together with the sculptors we discussed the craft and identified some of the statues in the National Collection of Timor-Leste and in the private collection of Maria do Céu Lopes da Silva.

During the workshop the sculptors were fascinated to see sculptures that had been collected by the Provincial Museum of Timor-Timor during the 1990s when the Republic of Indonesia established a local museum. In the case of the private collection of Maria do Céu Lopes da Silva it was acquired from late 1999 onwards, following the end of the Indonesian occupation. At that time large numbers of Atauro sculptures flooded the local market, as people sold whatever they had in to the influx of foreign peace-keepers and aid workers attempting to secure desperately needed funds for their survival. The Maria do Céu Lopes da Silva fortunately bought as many sculptures as possible due to her affinity with the art form having been born and raised on Atauro Island. The workshop served several purposes. It enabled several collections in both public and private hands to be recognised as being valued by their inclusion in local cultural collections. For me, it affirmed the importance of this unique and isolated sculptural practice which against all odds continued to exist in this remote Southeast Asian island.

The larger context of this workshop was that during the Independence struggle in Timor-Leste much material culture was damaged, sold or removed illicitly from the country. In addition to war, sweeping social change in the region married with an indifference to traditions has also seen the demise of material cultural heritage and its associated intangible heritage. According to Ramos-Horta, “Thankfully, a small number of memories were immortalised by our ancestors in wood, stone and metal… But even these ‘concrete’ memories are grievously impaired. In recent years they have dwindled in number as they have literally been cut down by the forces of neglect, war and social progress.”

This reduction of material cultural heritage continued in the immediate post-occupation era. During 2000 the trade of Atauro sculptures also involved the sale and marketing of contemporary carvings promoted as ‘old’ carvings to the influx of foreign peace keepers and aid workers. This selling of fraudulent works was in part a response to potential buyers envisaging that the age of the works they intended to purchase, thus implicitly indicating to the vendors that older sculptures were more desirable. Passing off sculptures as being older than they were was also a reaction to middle-men buying sculptures for resale as part of the artfart trade in Bali. Raids on ceremonial houses and the removal of statues also have played highlighting the value of sculptures locally. Motivated by a desire to secure good returns for their sculptures vendors often indicated that a sculpture was older than it actually was, but this did not last long as sculptors opened began to produce work in full-view of the public in order to meet the market demand. Consequently, soon after 2000 good quality contemporary sculptures began to command their own prices.

However, references to ‘fakes’ and sculptures being made ‘out of culture’ persist but as Moss indicates: ‘The word fake should be avoided, except to denote an object clearly represented as something it is not, especially as it may disparage fine replicas and other contemporary art being sold as such, which are significant in the economies of tribal peoples. This is an important issue for the continuance of cultural resources in the Lesser Sunda Islands.’ Others suggest that contemporary sculptures are ‘tourist art’, merely derivative of authentic traditional sculptures. However, cultures are always in transition and the fact that Ataurans continue to sculpt is testimony to an enduring art form and to their ingenuity to respond to market desires world in which they live. The importance of economic returns for labour also cannot be underestimated when Atauro Island is one of the poorest regions of Timor-Leste where malnutrition and infant mortality rates are staggering high.

The demand for old Atauro sculptures can be traced back to the earlier interest shown by the international art market in the material culture of the Lesser Sunda Islands in the early 1970s which resulted in textiles, sculptures and jewellery being collected to a point ‘...that by the 1990s the islands were almost drained of their old treasures.’ The ‘wholesale disgorging’ of Atauro sculptures by European collectors co-incides with this era, a time when the political and economic pressures of Indonesian occupation in Timor had strong impact. In the early 1970s a number of Atauro sculptures ‘...came to the attention of collectors and dealers. The style became very desirable as it had been previously unknown in the wider art market.’ Other accounts suggest, ‘For a brief period around 1980 the small island of Atauro, near Timor, was surprisingly freuxnd, the source of some twenty-five to thirty-six ancient figurines.’

1. Jennifer Phipps (2001:34) notes a Milluaneus-based curator, art collection and patron, Fernando Gomes (also visited Timor-Leste in 2001 and became convinced in supporting national cultural practices in the country, including the workshop with Atauro sculptors at Timor Aid in 2001 during Jiljeta. Jennifer was an advocate for this workshop. Her work was a passionate advocate for the art of Australia, Southeast Asia and Oceania, Western Relations, Research Assistant, also participated in the workshop.
2. The Trinidad-Rodriguez in Beacham (coll), and & R. Building of the Indonesian Papua Timor. (Timor Aid in 2001 was initiated by the Republic of Indonesia in 1995 with over a k in August 1995. Up and managed, Nine chairs. The workshop was collected for the national museum of Indonesian ethnography, folklore, material, historical, natural and aids the theme. Still the marbles are collected by the National Museum in Singapore which created the Indonesian National Museum in 1939.
3. Wine in the beverage Lopes purchased sculptures from Atauro Island in 1995-1996 and later became an art critic. His influence in a notable gallery the island and to exhibit for collection.
4. A brief period around 1980 the small island of Atauro, near Timor, was surprisingly freuxnd, the source of some twenty-five to thirty-six ancient figurines.

Figure 1: Antonio Soarres In-text photo captions will need to run across the page beneath the relevant image and may include a sentence / credit. 

5. Laurence A.G. Moss, 1994: 91
6. Nascimento, Alfons, 2003: 101-102, Ta. In the early 1970s and early 1980s political and economic pressures caused by Indonesian’s annexation of the former Portuguese colony of East Timor forced Ataurans, triggering a wholesale disgorging of stone statues in painted ancestor figures from the island. The profusion of ancestor figures (both old examples and modern replacement figurines) that subsequently appeared on the international art market tended to obscure the importance of the island’s more unusual pieces.
7. See Paul Beuhel and Djangke Dorian, 1980:236. See for descriptions for Plate 32, a year’s worth of figures: (und.)
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Male figurine

Artist unknown
Atauro Island, Timor-Leste
Early – mid 20th c.
Wood
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 sculpture. As it is customary to simply allude to the eyes with the use of an overhanging brow (see p. XX) this style was possibly a recognised trademark of a specific sculptor. The elongated nose, flat top knot, nipples and protruding relief ears are classic features for figurines of his period.