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# Tribal ARTS

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**FEATURE**

From Sacred to Souvenir  
The Squatting Figure as a Motif  
in Micronesian Art

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**FEATURE**

Arts of Bahr-el-Ghazal (Part 2):  
Funerary Sculpture of the Avokaya,  
Morokodu, Nyamusa, Beli, Lori, and Azande

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Manipa's World  
Enggano: Origins, Culture, and  
Art (Part 2)



# From Sacred to Souvenir

## The squatting figure as a motif in Micronesian art

by Barbara Wavell

The Micronesian squatting figure is a true tribal art mystery. For the last 100 years this interesting sculpture has been a popular genre figure in the western Caroline Islands, but does it represent the last vestiges of a disappearing religious tradition, or is it simply a tourist motif, perhaps introduced from another cultural area by a capricious colonial power?

Early references in literature describing Micronesia by Spanish, German, and American sources occasionally refer to rare traditions of figural sculpture. These observers, when specific, more often describe standing figures than squatting ones. These today are often dismissed as carvings produced specifically for the tourist market of the post-WWII era, but the absence of the squatting figure in early descriptions in no way repudiates the antiquity of this motif. The first direct references appear in the works of Japanese ethnographers from the pre-war period. The information they collected hinted that the squatting figure motif might be part of an ancient tradition. Why then wasn't this type of sculpture described or collected by German ethnographers who had studied the region earlier, or by

the Spanish who had visited Micronesia as early as the sixteenth century?

The South Pacific is conventionally divided into three major cultural regions: Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia. The word Micronesia literally means "tiny islands," and the two thousand islands of this region are spread across a vast expanse of ocean. At 225 square miles, Guam is the largest of these islands. Many of the land masses in this area are mere atolls, but a few are high islands. Some are of coral and limestone, while others are more recently volcanic in origin. Situated with Melanesia to the southwest, the Philippines and Southeast Asia to the west, and Polynesia to the east, Micronesia is a melting pot of cultural influences.

The southwestern corner of Micronesia is anchored by the Caroline Islands, where the squatting figures in question were produced. This huge island group is flung across nearly 2000 square miles of ocean due north of New Guinea and historically has included the islands of Palau, Yap, Truk, and numerous small land masses in between. Today the Carolines are split between the modern political bodies of

the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Belau. Based on linguistic studies, Micronesia is thought to have originally been populated primarily from Southeast Asia; however, some Caroline Islanders show Polynesian influences with their straight hair and golden skin, while others show the influence of Melanesian migrations with darker skin and curly hair.

Magellan encountered the inhabitants of Guam and Rota in 1521 and claimed the former as a colony of Spain. It became a strategic stopping place for Spanish galleons and began to be settled by Europeans during the 1700s. British, German, Russian, and American traders, whalers, and explorers made voyages to Micronesia in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In 1855 the Vatican resolved a territorial dispute between Spain and Germany by granting sovereignty of Micronesia to Spain. Germany purchased Micronesia back from Spain in 1899 when the Spanish Crown needed funds to offset the expense of the Spanish-American war. During WWI Japan gradually occupied Micronesia and was officially entrusted with the territory after a 1919 League of Nations conference. The United

**Fig. 1: Palau or Tobi**  
Japanese period or before.  
18 x 13 cm. Hardwood with shell inlay.  
Private collection.  
Photo by Scott McCue.







States took charge of the region after WWII and administered it as a Trust Territory until the last decades of the twentieth century, when most of the island groups disbanded into autonomous political entities. It is interesting to note, however, that even today a 37 cent US stamp will take a letter anywhere within the former Trust Territories.

Micronesian art as a whole has been largely neglected over the years by specialists because of a scarcity of early examples and a perceived lack of dramatic figural sculpture. However, it is now recognized that most of these island groups produced carved figures—most often standing but sometimes sitting or squatting—which are often found in male/female pairs. Standing “Mog Mog dolls” from Truk are distinctive and are carved from light wood with painted details and applied ornaments. Palauan standing figures are made in a variety of styles and may be carved from heavy dark wood

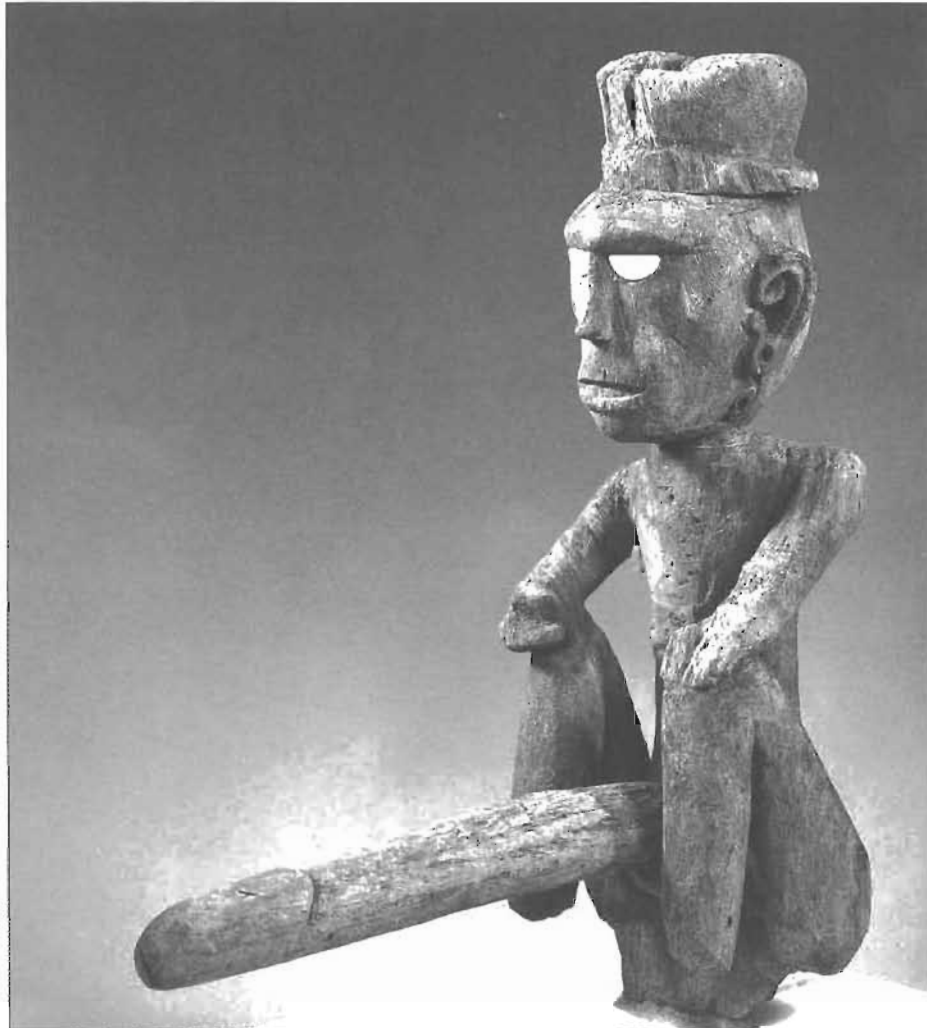
such as dort or from lighter wood such as breadfruit. Like the squatting figures, they usually have inlaid pearl shell eyes. These figures incorporate traditional stylistic details, but have developed in response to the tourist market. Yapese standing figures in male/female pairs are also carved of light wood, with painted tattoo patterns and with grass skirts and loincloths added in traditional materials. These were collected extensively during the German period and are in many museum collections throughout the world. The continuity in their style reflects the conservative and traditional nature of Yapese society. Verna Curtis, who helped start and operate craft co-ops in Yap and Truk from 1951 on, advises that only certain individuals from specific family groups or of specific social status were permitted to carve a given design of figure. Certain types of carving were therefore considered a form of intellectual property.

The genre of the squatting figure is most often associated with Tobi (now called Hatohobei), although it occurs in different variations throughout the western Carolines including Palau, Ulithi, Ngulu, Lamotrek, Woleai, Yap, Sonsoral, and Satawal, as well as farther east on Satawan in the Mortlocks. Most squatting figures that have been collected range from over two feet (rare) to less than two inches in height and have inlaid eyes of mother of pearl. Eye shape varies from rounded to triangular, while body style varies from smooth to blocky. Some are carved from dense hardwood, while others are crafted, often crudely, from pithy softwood. Some rare examples show signs of age, handling, and a care in carving that places them in the realm of fine and perhaps even devotional art. Many examples, however, are either crude or more commercially finished and appear in artistry and patina to be craft carvings produced for the tourist market. In some cases,

**Fig. 2 (below): Palau**  
Collected by Kramer, 1912.  
H: 49.5 cm. Wood with shell inlay.  
Collection of the Linden Museum, Stuttgart:  
#76317.



**Fig. 3 (left): Tobi or Palau**  
Said to have been collected c. 1930 on  
Easter Island where it had washed ashore.  
H: 16 cm. Hardwood with shell inlay.  
Collection of Ed Smith.  
Photo by Scott McCue.



standing figures in the same style were also produced in areas where squatting figures originated.

Squatting figures fall into a variety of stylistic subgroups that are defined largely by region. Figures from Tobi, for example, tend to be sculpturally competent with either rounded or pointed ears and rounded, “half moon,” or teardrop-shaped eyes. Figures from Ulithi, on the other hand, are rougher, blocky, with rounded ears (or none at all) and triangular eyes. Ngulu “frogman” figures are also blocky with large breasts and bellies, and painted eyebrows. Illustrations and descriptions in twentieth-century publications allow us to loosely attribute them in this manner, but there is considerable overlap, and recorded provenance is sometimes more of an impediment than an aid. Carvers often immigrated from smaller to larger islands like Palau or Guam but continued to carve in traditional styles. Objects acquired on a given island were usually attributed to that location, when in fact



**Fig. 4: Satawan**

Japanese period or before.  
26 x 16 cm. Hardwood with traces of resin  
to hold shell inlay.  
Author's collection.  
Photo by Scott McCue.



such carvings were either made by immigrants or traded in from smaller outlying island groups. To make matters more complex, in the mid-twentieth century individual carvers began to develop distinctive styles which were then copied in other areas.

The scant historical evidence that has been recorded hints that the Micronesian squatting figure may once have been associated with spirit canoes and the practice of ancestor worship. The inhabitants of Pur, Tobi, and Sonsoral believed that the realm of the dead was a great canoe to which their souls transferred upon death. Squatting figures are known to have been used as an element of Tobian canoe burials in the past, perhaps to ensure

successful passage to the underworld. It is not known how far back this practice dates. Used as household ancestor figures, they may have represented deceased relatives who could be propitiated to intervene on one's behalf. A personal informant, a Palauan woman whose father had considerable association with Tobians, relates that squatting figures were used in canoe magic. In this magical context the squatting figure was perhaps used to absorb evil spirits, or lure them away, when the model canoe in which they were placed was set adrift. One squatting figure illustrated here (fig. 3) is said to have been purchased on Easter Island after being found washed ashore. This verbal history lacks corrobora-

tion, but if not apocryphal, certainly supports the canoe burial hypothesis.

James Frazer, in his "The Belief in Immortality and the Worship of the Dead," makes an interesting reference to a related practice in the Mortlock Islands. An image of a deceased chief or nobleman who had especially distinguished himself was carved from breadfruit and seated in a large war canoe in the canoe house. The image's legs were outstretched and it was adorned with a necklace and girdle. Permission was sought from the image in order to use the canoe, and in times of warfare it was renewed. Interestingly, a type of squatting figure has also been collected in the Mortlocks. Such

Fig. 1 (front and back from first page):

Palau or Tobi

Japanese period or before.

18 x 13 cm. Hardwood with shell inlay.

Private collection.

Photo by Scott McCue.



Mortlock figures often have distinctive eyebrows, which clearly echo those of the Mortlock *tapuanu* mask. One example of this type from the Smithsonian collection is illustrated in Adrienne Kaeppler's *Oceanic Art*.

Any historical chronology of the literature on squatting figures must focus on Tobi, since it is generally accepted that one of the most popular incarnations of the motif, whether indigenous or otherwise, developed there. Early Spanish documents make brief references to the existence of crudely carved figural sculptures in the western Carolines. These descriptions lack detail, and no examples of squatting figures are known to have been specifically described or collected during

this period. Horace Holden, an American who was shipwrecked on Tobi in 1835, appears to be the earliest well-substantiated Western contact in this area. He makes no specific reference to squatting figures. He did witness canoe burials, but his descriptions are sketchy. He does state that "Rudely carved figures are placed in different parts of the building and are supposed to personate their deity."

Anneliese Eilers, who produced meticulous documentation of the 1909 German expedition to Tobi as well as the history of German contact in the region, also makes no specific reference to squatting figures. It must be noted, however, that the German expedition to Tobi lasted only eight days, and

that during the visit religious leaders on the island were extremely suspicious and secretive in their attitude toward the Germans. However, Eilers does describe a sacred canoe house that held a cult boat hung with votive offerings in which standing figures were arranged at intervals. This cult boat was used to bring the deity into the canoe house to converse with the priest. Spirit canoes of this sort were also prominent in the Yap district and Truk, both areas where squatting figures were produced. The Germans also saw figures being produced for trade on Tobi, but these were described and photographed as standing rather than squatting. Herr Fritz, the magistrate of Saipan, visited





**Fig. 5 (left): Tobi**

Collected in the early Trust Territory period.  
Ex Eugene Fosberg estate.  
28 x 15.5 cm. Hardwood with shell inlay.  
Author's collection.  
Photo by Scott McCue.

**Fig. 6: Tobi**

Japanese period or before.  
27 x 17 cm. Hardwood with resin to secure  
shell inlay.  
Private collection.  
Photo by Scott McCue.

**Fig. 7: Palau or Tobi**

Japanese period or before.  
H: 14 cm. Hardwood with shell inlay and  
varnish.  
Private collection.  
Photo by Scott McCue.

Tobi on the vessel *Seestern* on December 17, 1906, and provided the following description of the carvings Tobians were offering for trade: "They also brought remarkable pieces of carving streaked with white paint for exchange. These carvings consisted of men with hats and pipes, a complete steamship with compass, rudder, signal pipes and other details, 'unfinished work' however based on good observation." This description suggests that the Tobians were more comfortable offering carvings of foreigners and foreign objects in their efforts to exchange their crafts for European trade items. Despite this, Eilers describes the Tobians

as: "Extremely conservative with regard to their traditional customs and implements and, on religious grounds, they disapprove of all innovation. Everything that comes from abroad bears, in their opinion, the seeds of misfortune. Significant is their fear of anthropological, photographic and phonographic recordings." A respiratory disease is known to have killed around 200 Tobians following contact with the Germans. The attitude Eilers describes may well have resulted from an association between the visits of foreigners and the outbreak of disease, perhaps coupled with the repressive effects of earlier contacts with missionar-

ies. Whatever the explanation, it is not an unreasonable assumption based on what we know that the Tobians were motivated to conceal items associated with their most sacred beliefs from foreign eyes. It was with great difficulty that the wife of German ethnologist Augustin Kramer was able to sketch the sacred boat described above.

While no squatting figures are specifically noted from Tobi during the German period, a significant and early example (fig. 2) was collected by Kramer on Palau. It is now in the collection of the Linden Museum in Stuttgart. The figure is male, is sculpturally more fully articulated than is typical of the genre,

**Fig. 8: Palau**

Japanese period.

left to right: 17 x 9 cm; 16.5 x 8.5 cm; 20.75 x 10.5 cm; 16.5 x 9.5 cm. Hardwood with shell inlay.

Author's collection.

Photo by Scott McCue.



and has an enormous phallus projecting laterally from between its bent legs. On its head rests a hat, which appears to be European in design although it could be native. The eyes are inlaid with shell. The genitalia tend to be defined in several traditions of squatting figures, but none known approach this example.

The Japanese, who took over the administration of Micronesia in 1919, looked different from the white-skinned Europeans who had preceded them and were generally more tolerant of Micronesian traditional beliefs. Although they allowed Christian missionary activity to continue, they also added a Japanese dimension relating to the practice of Shinto with its shrines and veneration of ancestors. These practices were more in keeping with Micronesian traditional religion than those of Christianity.

Atsushi Someki was a Japanese artist and self-appointed ethnologist who visited Micronesia in

1931. He described the Tobi "dolls" he encountered as ancestor figures, which the Tobians kept in special places and in their homes. Someki felt that the artistic merit of the Tobian figures was limited, and preferred standing Trukese mog mog dolls as well as the (probably standing) figures carved on Woleai. Someki found only one carver on Tobi in 1934, called Oakama, who could still carve fine examples of the traditional Tobi doll. He noted that the Tobian chief Mokonukuro could also carve them, but not as skillfully. Someki recorded that Tobi dolls were being carved on Palau but considered them expensive and felt that even those carved by Tobians who had moved to Palau could no longer be considered authentic.

Kenji Kiyono (1855-1955) was a Japanese ethnologist who visited Palau late in his life in 1941. He sought to understand the cultural origins of the Japanese people by studying Micronesian culture.

Although he discovered that the squatting figures said to have originated on Tobi could be readily purchased on Palau, like Someki he considered these little better than copies. According to him, only one traditional carver (probably Oakama) was left at the time of his visit. He relates other information, although he is not specific about his sources. He notes that Tobi informants related to him that long before, both large and small statues were carved on the island. Near the large figures the islanders placed the smaller ones, which they prayed to and treated as divine. Early Spanish missionaries had succeeded in suppressing the production of the large figures, but the small figures continued to be carved. According to the Tobians, the original figures were carved in soft wood, while later examples began to be produced in hard woods. This change may have been a function of the availability of better tools for wood-



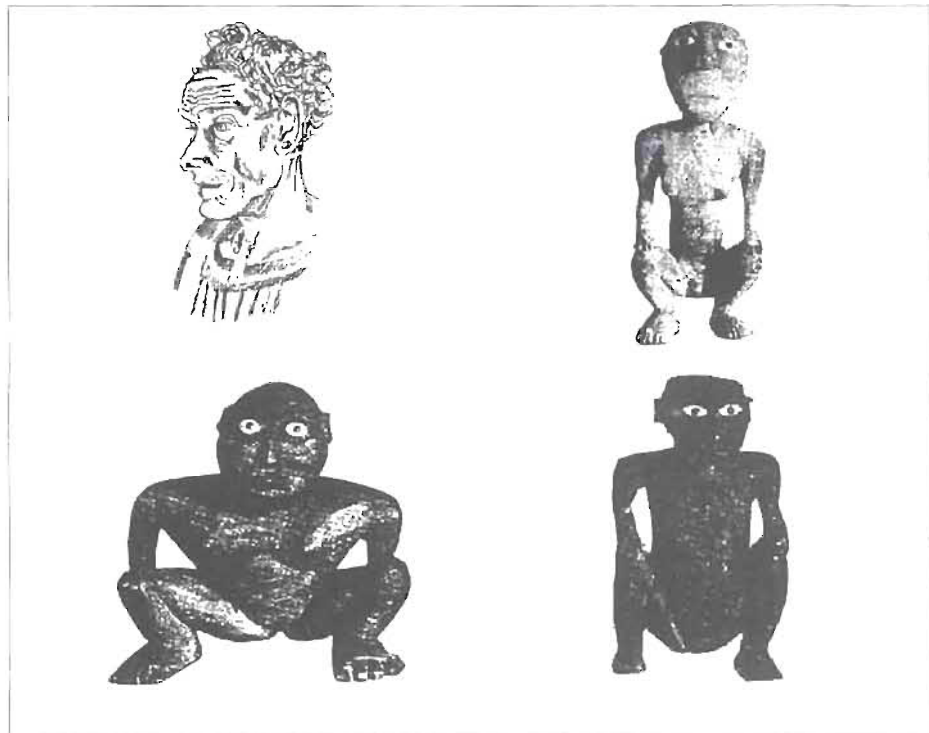
working following European contact. The original figures were found in pairs, readily identifiable as male and female. Genuine Tobi dolls were also identified by their eyes, which tended to point upwards on the tops of sloping foreheads. If these older figures were indeed carved of soft wood, they would quickly degrade in the moist climate, which may provide at least a partial explanation for their absence today.

Kiyono observed that Tobians used their canoes for coffins, cutting them and sealing them up, after first placing a pair of figures inside (presumably one male and one female) to function as guardians to accompany the dead. The coffins were then put out to sea. One squatting figure collected by Yoshio Kondo in 1936 and now in the collection of the Bishop Museum is accompanied by a catalogue note reading, "said to be buried with chiefs in lieu of humans." Kiyono readily admits that the details of canoe burial practices have been obscured by the influence of Spanish missionaries.

Kiyono also observed that the Palauans traditionally carved a squatting figure, which could be differentiated from the Tobian figure by the fact that it had tattoo marks. Also the female mons on a Palauan figure was represented by a triangle pointing downward, similar to those seen on the *dilukai* figure which was traditionally hung over the entrance to the Palauan *bai*, or men's house. Tobi figures, however, generally have the mons pointing upwards—it is represented by a sort of "w" shape where the clitoris is delineated in the center at the upwards point.

The descriptions of Someki and Kiyono imply that at least some Tobian figures were once relatively crude in form, similar to Ngulu and Ulithi figures. In contrast to this information, certain superbly rendered examples appear to be among the oldest of those sampled in existing collections for

Fig. 9: Plate from 1945 edition of *Micronesia: Its Nature and Artifacts* by Atsushi Someki showing figures from Tobi.



this study when compared to others known to have been produced in the Japanese period. What cannot be questioned is the fact that the Japanese were attracted to these squatting figures and trained Palauan carvers to make them in the same classes in which they taught them to carve storyboards. The smooth, finished sculptural style seen on more recent examples may have evolved in response to Japanese aesthetic standards. A period of popularity and high production for the squatting figure began during this time and ultimately resulted in a proliferation of identifiable styles, sometimes associated with specific carvers. None of these, however, can be considered fully traditional.

Micronesian sculpture continued to be produced in the American period, which began after the Japanese capitulation in 1945. By then, the original cultural significance and appearance of these figures had become

obscure. During the first years of the American period, Micronesia was almost entirely a restricted military area and there was very little tourism. Despite this lack of outside contact, the squatting figure continued to be carved, not just as a copy of an existing form but as a vital folk art form. The US government purchased a certain number of crafts to encourage island economies, but it advised carvers to spend more time on individual carvings rather than producing large quantities, since it was only willing to acquire a limited quantity. This may have had the effect of improving the quality of the carvings, but the number of squatting figures produced declined significantly.

One notable and prolific carver was Patricio Tahimaremamo, who during the 1960s produced squatting figures with distinctive "Batman" ears. Today, squatting figures continue to be carved in western Micronesia in styles distinctive to particular artists.



**Fig. 10: Tobi or Palau.**

Collected in the early Trust Territory period.  
Ex Eugene Fosberg estate.  
14.5 x 7.5 cm. Hardwood with shell inlay.  
Private collection.



**Fig. 11: Possibly Satawan**

Collected in the early Trust Territory period.  
Ex Eugene Fosberg estate.  
11 x 8 cm; 14 x 7.75 cm. Hardwood with  
shell inlay.  
Private collection.



Most squatting figures found in United States museums, such as the Bishop Museum or the Smithsonian, date from the Japanese period or after. Earlier examples are very rare, even in German collections.

The squatting figure as a motif is not unique to Tobi or even western Micronesia. It is seen in figures ranging as far afield as Polynesia, Indonesia, Melanesia, and elsewhere. As an ancestral archetype, this stance has been said to symbolize both birth and death. Micronesian squatting figures may reflect both of these themes. Burial practices in the region traditionally involve the knees of the body being drawn up, and the large bellies of many of the female figures as well as the typically prominent genitalia of both sexes evoke fertility. Certainly, the prevalence in distribution throughout western Micronesia and the very specific similarities between squatting figures on different islands are so

clear that it is almost impossible to dispute a common relationship, although we have only the barest hints of what that might have been.

Such outside influences as missionary activity, displacement, and pressures resulting from contact with outside cultures can motivate peoples within a traditional culture to conceal the original significance of an object or religious system. As outside influences erode ancient beliefs, objects associated with them may be destroyed, abandoned, or sold to outsiders devoid of their original cultural context, often causing their meaning to be lost before it can be recorded. While art styles and motifs can act as a focus for cultural identity, they can also become modified when they are used as an economic resource. During the German, Japanese, and American periods, large numbers of Tobians and other Micronesians were transferred to Palau and other islands

following storms and storm related famines. A generation of Tobians grew up exposed to urbanization and Christianity and apparently became increasingly willing to purvey images once sacred to and perhaps secret within their traditional culture. As outside influences grew stronger, whatever true forms and ritual functions that may have been associated with the Micronesian squatting figure became almost entirely obscure.

In 1968 a crude, blocky stone carving of an anatomically correct squatting figure was uncovered by Dr. Peter Black on Tobi. The figure is squatting and is grasping the base of its large, broken phallus with both hands. His informants on the island were reluctant to provide information. An elderly Tobian finally stated that the statue was not old and had been made for sale to the Japanese, who had found it too erotically explicit to purchase (which seemed patently



**Fig. 12: Ngulu**

Early Trust Territory period.  
15.5 x 6.75 cm. Hardwood with shell and pigment.  
Private collection.

**Fig. 13: Ulithi, probably Fassarai Atoll**

22.5 x 10.5 cm. Hardwood with shell, pigment.  
Private collection.  
Photos by Scott McCue.

**Fig. 14: Standing Figure from Tobi or Palau**

H: 24.5 cm. Hardwood with shell inlay.  
Collection of Mark Wiesman.  
Photo courtesy of Taylor A. Dale, Santa Fe.



unlikely to Black). The people of the island were nevertheless anxious to have the figure preserved and studied. When Black took the figure to nearby Koror and confronted a number of Tobi individuals with it there, he received a very different story. Elderly informants, particularly women, related that the squatting figure was "one of a set that Yango (the first chief of the island) had carved to border the 'yard' of Ramonparuh's (the 'mother of the island') house." Ramonparuh is the mythological discoverer of Tobi. Black was further told that the Germans had removed the other figures, although Eilers' text did not confirm this. He speculates that the structure where the figures stood was in fact either the menstrual house or the house of the "chief of women." No other information was available, but the initial attempts on the part of the Tobians to mislead Black are perhaps significant.

While there were brief visits from missionaries beginning much earlier, the Catholic Church was not formally established on these small islands until quite late in the colonial/historic process—1928 for Ulithi and 1931 for Tobi. We can safely assume that the existence of the Church on these tiny islands essentially spelled the end of the traditional religious practices, particularly insofar as they involved the use of overtly sexual imagery such as the Linden figure and the stone figure discovered by Black. Japanese documentation compiled while knowledgeable informants were still available as well as Black's account provide a crucial window into the pre-Christian belief systems of Micronesians. These references to the squatting figure are tantalizing and distressingly inadequate. Nevertheless, this once-sacred souvenir continues to intrigue us with echoes from an earlier time.

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**Fig. 15: Lamotrek**

Early Trust Territory period.  
13.25 x 8.75 cm; 13.25 x 9 cm. Softwood  
with pigment.  
Private collection.  
Photo by Scott McCue.

**Fig. 16a: Ngulu**

Early Trust Territory period.

15 x 7 cm. Hardwood with shell inlay.

**16b: Yap**

c. 1960.  
23 x 9.5 cm. Hardwood with shell inlay.

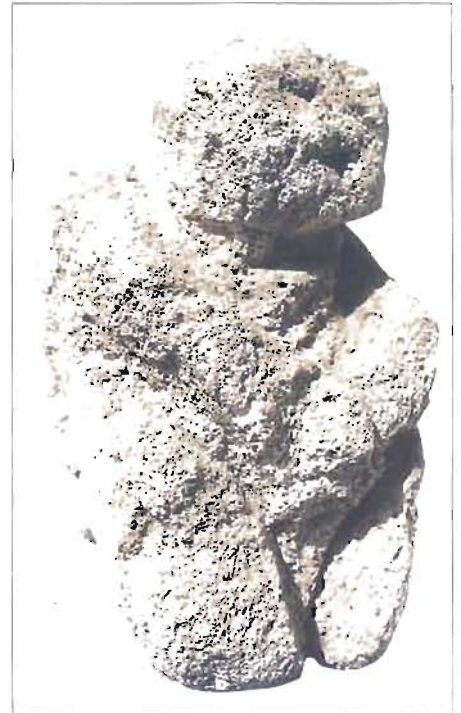
**16c: Ulithi**

Trust Territory period.  
16 x 9.75 cm. Hardwood with shell inlay.  
All Private collection.  
Photo by Scott McCue.



**Fig. 17: Tobi**

Collected by Peter Black on Tobi in 1968.  
H: 38 x 23 cm.  
Indurated coral sandstone.  
Photo courtesy of the Belau Museum.  
All rights reserved.



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**Fig. 18: Satawal.**

Wood with resin and multiple layers of oil-based paint.

H: 21 cm.

Photo courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art, New York.



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